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Waterloo Ministry and the Future of LTS

William Harrison¹

Thank you to all of you for welcoming me this morning. I want to take some time this morning to reflect on life in Waterloo ministries, the language that we use to describe ministries in which Lutherans and Anglicans cooperate, and what the direction of these ministries means for Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon.

I'm in an interesting position to think about this with you. I'm a rostered Lutheran with a role as president of a Lutheran seminary and membership at Zion Lutheran who brings an Anglican background and a history of publishing on the English Reformation. This morning I'm leading an Anglican liturgy in a Lutheran church, and I'm about to reflect on a reading from Romans that goes to the heart of Luther's insight about justification by faith.

In short, I live the complications of today's relationship between the ELCIC and ACC, and I find strength and hope in that future—and in other parts of our ecumenical life.

We have loaded readings today. Let's pick up John 3, which is possibly both the most famous and most misused chapter in the Bible. I get a kick out of those sports events where somebody holds up the sign that says, "John 3:16." Anybody else seen that? It's hilarious, because only a real insider knows what the sign refers to. It isn't evangelism; it's an identity badge—a variation on a song I learned as a kid: "One door and only one, and yet its sides are two. I'm on the inside. On which side are you?"

John 3 is about eternal life. We tend to get eternal life all wrong—because we get the word "eternal" wrong. We tend to think that eternal life is about living forever. It isn't. Everlasting life is forever. Eternal life is much more immediate. Think I'm just being one of those complicated theologians, messing with your heads? If I am, then so is the Gospel of John, because conveniently, the text itself describes eternal life.

Eternal life is life with God, knowing God's love and sharing God's work. Eternal life is the life into which Jesus invites Nicodemus to be born. Jesus explains in John chapter 17, verse 3, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." In other words, eternal life is about living in loving relationship with God, right here and right now.

Loving relationships always exist in two parts: 1) setting right, and 2) growing together. We can easily get lost in Paul's tight argumentation in Romans, or in thinking about Luther's historical situation, and miss the point about justification.

Justification is about being set right with someone. We don't always live in loving relationships with other people, even those about whom we care most. We don't always live in loving relationship with creation, as much as we might value the beauty of the world. We don't always live in loving relationship with God, who calls us to love the whole of creation, including all people.

Justification is God looking at all of this and saying, "I forgive you. Indeed, I will always forgive you." Justification is that bit in the relationship where I realize that I've gone wrong, that part where I didn't really listen or, worse yet, listened and got angry and hurtful, and the

¹ William Harrison, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, SK. This sermon was preached at Augustana Lutheran Church on 8 March 2020 for Lent 2.

other person says, “I forgive you. I love you.” Justification is the condition that allows freedom in the relationship, because I have the firm foundation of love. It’s what lets us take risks— together.

Sanctification is about growing together. In life with God, as in life with other people, commonly the more time that we spend together the more deeply we know and understand the other. The other goes from being a complete mystery to someone whose patterns I can recognize and even anticipate. Doesn’t mean I understand everything—not by a long shot!— but I begin to know the movements of the other and how to connect to them.

Sanctification is that experience with God. Living with God, and trying to listen, I have begun to figure out something of how God moves—at least, in relation to me, anyway. I hope and pray that as I live with God I’m becoming more like God: more aware of what God calls me to do and more willing to do it, more inclined and able to live in God’s love and share it with the world.

So, you now have definitions for 3 really important theological terms: *Eternal life* is life in relationship with God. *Justification* sets the relationship on a right footing, with God forgiving the things that we do wrong and declaring that God loves us. *Sanctification* is the ongoing relationship in which we become more like God, sharing love with the world.

So what does this have to do with the future of LTS and Waterloo ministries? Two things:

1. It’s the message that we share, the good news that God loves all the world and wants all of us to be in a healthy relationship with God, learning and growing.
2. That relationship isn’t an isolated one. This isn’t about “me and Jesus.” I do not, now or ever, “come to the garden alone,” as one popular song would have it. As with all other aspects of human life, our relationship with God is constructed and sustained in community.

Too often, over the years, Christians have treated the notion of a relationship with God as something that I own as an individual, or that particular denominations own because of their specific insights or styles of worship. The reality is that we aren’t really growing in right relationship with God if we aren’t growing in right relationship with other people, including other Christians.

But the point goes farther than this. We actually learn to be in right relationship with God from others, including (but not limited to) other Christians. To the extent that we limit our relationship with other Christians, we are limiting our capacity to grow in God’s love. Along the way, we are in danger of limiting ourselves right into the grave, as our communities grow smaller and smaller.

This goes double in a world where neither procreation nor immigration are helping us to increase numbers. Birth rates worldwide started to shoot up in the 1650s, after the 30 Years’ War. They peaked in the 1960s and are now plummeting. For North Americans, this means an aging population sustained largely by immigration from countries that don’t send us people who are either Lutheran or Anglican.

Numerically, we are shrinking rapidly. Anglicans have heard from Neil Elliot, who points out that a continuation of current trends to their logical end will mean no Anglican Church of Canada by 2040. The ELCIC faces similar challenges. In 1986, the ELCIC was founded with 202,425 members in 665 congregations. Currently, it has fewer than 115,000

baptized members (a number that may be higher than average Sunday attendance) in 525 congregations. Note that our membership is dropping significantly more quickly than the number of congregations, a fact that is reflected in the stress that parishioners everywhere feel as they work harder simply to stay in place. In 1965, the United Church had over 1 million members; now they have fewer than 400,000.²

On top of this, education is changing. At LTS, we teach our students in intensive courses. They come to our building and are with us for one or two weeks of classes. Then they return to their homes and continue to work on assignments, often connecting to us electronically. Sometimes they do courses online or participate in classes through the screen on the wall. We no longer have a residence; currently, only one of our students lives in Saskatoon.

For our seminaries, the best option, both theologically and practically, is to work together as much as possible. Here at Augustana, people are likely to understand exactly what we're up to. Lutherans sustain their identity, bringing important theological insights, experiences as an immigrant church, and connections to a worldwide federation. In the same way, Anglicans bring their insights and history, including their sacramental emphasis, engagement (for better and worse) with Indigenous peoples, and connections to a worldwide communion. And United Church people bring their focus on peace and justice, history in the Canadian context, and developing international partnerships. All of these connect us together and feed all of us, helping us to grow in God's love and work in ways both old and new.

Of course, we have shared these things and many others for many years of life in the Saskatoon Theological Union. The difference today is that now we will be living together. Changes in the university's use of space mean that we can now consolidate our operations in the St. Andrew's College building, starting in this fast-approaching summer. We will share the same floor, and our books will be together in the same library space.

This affects the relationship, fostering a new intimacy and enabling us to find more ways to cooperate. Our students will have more opportunities to study and worship together and to socialize as a group. Our staff and faculty will participate in more decisions together and will meet informally in the hallways and library.

For all of us, this means once again reflecting on the good news of Christ Jesus, as our relationship with God and one another is further deepened. Where past differences have raised challenges, we have been reminded of God's loving forgiveness. As we forge new arrangements for the future, we live into God's world-transforming love.

The current LTS slogan is, "Be Challenged," because we are called to face the realities of a challenged world and challenged church while living in God's love. We believe that our growth together is part of eternal life for us; it reminds us of God's justifying forgiveness of all that is past and God's sanctifying transformation of all that is now and all that is to come.

We place our trust in God's love. There we find true life, eternal life. Amen.

² Note that these numbers are from 2020, when the sermon was preached, and are higher than 2024 numbers. The ACC has seen an accelerated decline since 2019, down to a bit less than 295,000 on parish rolls (<https://anglicanjournal.com/membership-decline-steepens/>). The ELCIC currently claims 93,000 baptized members on its website (<https://elcic.ca/congregations/>). In 2021, The UC claimed just under 353,000 members. All of these numbers are higher than average Sunday attendance, however that might be calculated.