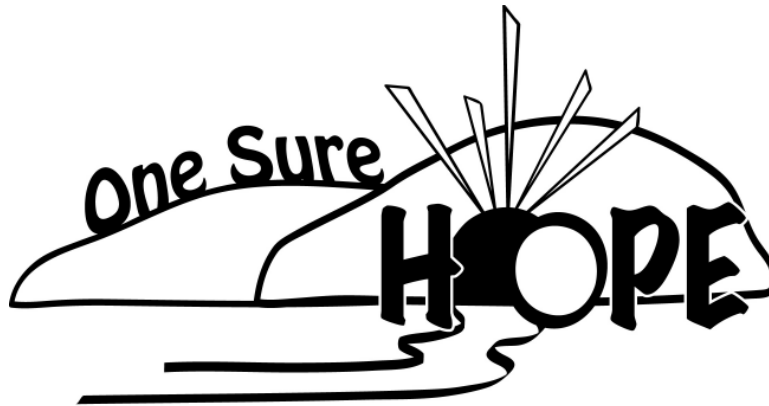


“One Sure Hope” – Growing Together in Christ

“Revitalization” or “Rejuvenation” Efforts in Southern Illinois District

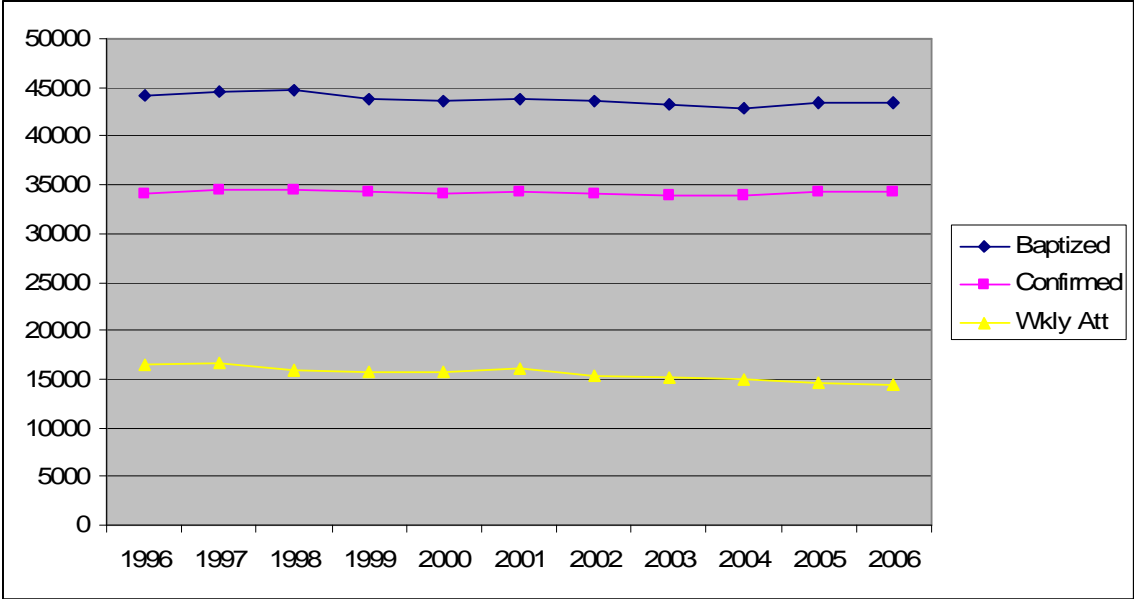
[Presented to the Participants of the Carload Conference]



November 2008

Our Present Situation in SID

One aspect of our present situation can best be summed up by the following graph and subsequent information:



These numbers represent the aggregate of all the congregations of the SID.¹

	Baptized	Confirmed	Wkly Att
1996	44143	34015	16500
1997	44649	34421	16724
1998	44715	34492	15984
1999	43794	34220	15649
2000	43703	34139	15918
2001	43814	34289	16056
2002	43678	34175	15388
2003	43180	33829	15225
2004	42921	33823	14898
2005	43465	34221	14577
2006	43364	34179	14466

Of all the congregations in SID, only 16 registered any increase at all in church attendance over the 11 years listed. All the rest registered declines over the course of the 11 years. (If you wish to know where your congregation stands, check your records or ask President Mueller privately. It would not be healthy to publish specific information too broadly.) Several declined significantly, but 80 congregations registered some decline. There are many reasons for this decline – a few of our communities are experiencing decreases in population, but for the most part our communities are growing, albeit slowly. In some cases there has been

¹ Gleaned from the parochial reports of the congregations turned in to the District Office.

congregational conflict. In most cases it is simply a matter of demographics – the people we bury because God has taken them home to heaven tended to attend church more regularly than those who are coming in to replace them.² One can argue with the specifics of these statistics, of course, but the main observation is that, though the population of most of our communities is NOT in decline, our over all church attendance IS. What is the situation in your congregation? Your community?

Yet, even as we seek reasons for this, we also remember our Lord's promise, for Jesus has not left His Church. When Peter confessed Him, saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:16-19). This is Christ's own promise. It cannot fail. Everything we do in His Church flows from and is powered by His promise, "I will build my church." However we approach the question of strengthening our congregations it must be in faith, trusting in Christ's promise, trusting the keys Christ has given to His Church, built on the rock of Peter's confession of Him as "the Christ, the Son of the living God." (16:16).

Revitalization in Synod

The Synod has set a goal of "revitalizing" 2000 parishes by 2017³. What does "revitalization" mean? Does it mean that they were dead and now need to be "revitalized," made alive again? How can we say that a congregation that has the Word and Sacrament is dead? We struggle with the proper term.

We have tried out several terms – **Refocus on the Mission**, or perhaps, simply, **Focus on the Mission**. But the Bible tells us we are to "*fix our eyes on Jesus...*" (Hebrews 12:1-2) So may be it should be, **Focus on Jesus**, or possibly, **Focus on the Gospel**, or **Focus on the One Who Seeks the Lost**, or something like that.

Others would reapply the term **Reformation**. The church needs a **Reformation** in the Gospel. Indeed the Lutheran Church is always **reforming** (at least it's supposed to be). Reformation would be a good term, but it already carries some specific freight. Another word that might apply would be **Rejuvenation**. Do any of our parishes need to be "rejuvenated" in the Word of God?

² Of course, all these numbers depend on the accuracy of the numbers reported by congregations. Where we have had to extrapolate, we have estimated high. Therefore, if we were somehow to increase our accuracy, it is more likely that we will find that the situation is worse rather than better.

³ 2007 Resolution 1-01 states: "*Resolved*, That the LCMS in convention adopt a goal of praying and working for the mission revitalization of at least 2,000 existing LCMS churches by 2017; and be it further

Resolved, That the LCMS through its districts, congregations, Lutheran Hour Ministries, the Lutheran Church Extension Fund, LWML, and LCMS World Mission through its national team, support the mission revitalization efforts as a major component of *Ablaze!*

Both **revitalization** and **rejuvenation** imply a reawakening of the church's spiritual life. In an address to the Synod's Fiscal and Visitor's Conference in River Forest, IL, September 1936, Dr. Friedrich Pfothenhauer⁴ noted that the spiritual life of the members of the Synod was in regression. He complained:

That spiritual life among us has declined is evident from many and various observations. The main Sunday divine service is carried out in a shoddy fashion and as a consequence the Christian training of the church in the family is neglected. Once flourishing parish schools are shrinking, in many cases without due cause. Many are satisfied with Sunday school and inadequate confirmation instruction, instead of making every possible effort to have Christian schools. Attendance at the divine service is of secondary importance for many, particularly in the summer months when the automobile allows the whole family to go places other than church. The ways of the world are ever more prevalent among us.⁵

Pfothenhauer goes on to observe that "we must guard against trying to elevate this spiritual life with means which cannot accomplish what we seek."⁶ Some would raise the spiritual life of a church body by emphasizing missions more, or looking for greater sanctification in the members, or perhaps tighter church governance with greater power for the officials of the body will do it.⁷ None of these have the power to change hearts and minds.

⁴ Dr. Friedrich Pfothenhauer served as a traveling missionary called by the Synod from 1880-1887, as a pastor in Minnesota from 1887-1911, President of the Minnesota District from 1891-1908 and President of the Synod from 1911-1935. He was a tireless missionary and a respected pastor as well as President of the Synod.

⁵ Ansprache Dr. F. Pfothenhauers gehalten vor der Fiskal- und Visitatorenkonferenz in River Forest, Ill., am 3 September 1936 in Concordia Theological Monthly, Vol. XV, no. 3, March 1944, pp. 174-179, *Address of Dr. F. Pfothenhauer to the Fiscal and Visitors' Conference in River Forest, Ill, on September 3, 1936. Translated by Matthew Harrison.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ More Pfothenhauer: An attempt has been made to elevate spiritual life in the home congregation while rousing the church to missions and directing her sight to the misery of the churchless and especially the poor non-Christians. To be sure, the work of mission is a glorious and invaluable thing. But to speak and act as though it were through participation in the work of mission that the word of God must be made living and powerful, is simply wrong. To forsake at home the confession of the external word and the heavenly doctrine while, rambling afar in the opinion that the church must be saved and enlivened with mission, is *Schwarmgeisterei*. Another confusion was that of the Pietists. In order to elevate spiritual life, they taught that spirit and life flowed out of our personal life of sanctification. The more holy a person, the more spirit. But we can't produce spiritual life. We live from that which God gives. When spirit and life are made dependent upon our work, from this false doctrine all of God's word and action are devoured and nullified. It is a wretched experience that the pietistic compulsion to works and for a method of sanctification devalued God's word, pure doctrine, truth and the gospel, and opened door after door to an indifference to doctrine.

Others would heal Joseph's injuries with a tighter church governance. They say, if our Presidents, visitors, and commissions had more authority, if they could proscribe things to congregations and the congregations had to obey, then life would be brought to these dead bones. Without question if such a yoke were laid upon the necks of the children many external works would be produced. Indeed, it wouldn't even be that difficult to get the money to begin flowing. But that would in no way elevate spiritual life. In fact, it would suffer a terrible retrogression. The gospel tolerates no hierarchy... Indeed, today everyone thinks he can help the church somehow! Music, liturgics, all sorts of things are proposed as medicine for young and old.

Instead, Pfothenhauer urges his hearers, the Circuit Visitors (the term today is “Circuit Counselor”) and District Presidents of the Synod:

When it comes to the elevation of spiritual life in our midst, let us therefore dear brothers, completely forsake the above mentioned means and steadfastly maintain that the Word of God alone can elevate spiritual life. This is taught with absolute clarity by the Word of God. Our Savior says, “The words which I speak to you are the Spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63). St. Peter wrote, “You are born again not of perishable but of imperishable seed, namely the living word of God, which endures for ever.” “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” I Peter 1:23; 2:2. St. James admonishes, “Receive the Word with gentleness, which is planted in you, which is able to save your soul,” (1:21). From these passages it is clear that it is the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit produces spiritual life in the dead hearts of men, and then maintains and increases this spiritual life. The Word of God has this wonderful power because God in and through this very Word works according to his powerful strength and the overwhelming greatness of his power.⁸

How will this happen? Only by diligent and constant study of the Scriptures. Only by focusing on the Way of Salvation in Jesus Christ, by confidence in the declaration of justification, and by living in the Word of God.⁹ Indeed, the “chief requirement of a capable district president and visitor is not that he be great with finances and a capable administrator, but much more that he be a profound theologian and experienced student of the Scriptures.”¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Pfothenhauer writes: Spiritual life comes about, and will be maintained, through faith in Jesus Christ, through confidence in the declaration of justification, which God has created through the redemptive work of Christ, and proclaimed in the Gospel. And this spiritual life is realized immediately through holiness and piety, and through living in the commandments of God. St. Paul writes, “I live, but it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. For the life I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20). Through faith a Christian is bedecked by the Holy Spirit with the forgiveness of sins and all the deeds and piety of his Savior. He needs no other adornment, in order to appear worthily in the presence of God and the holy angels. He rejoices in this and is willing and ready in such blessed adornment to serve both God and neighbor.

God grant that we not think that we can solve the many problems which we see in our midst by forcing all sorts of activity [*Werktreiberei*]. That won’t do it. Good pious works never make a good pious man. Rather a good pious man does good pious works. Evil works never make a man evil, rather an evil man produces evil works. The more faith in Jesus Christ grows, the more lively faith recognizes the love of God in Christ, all the richer will be the harvest of faith in every sort of good work, also precisely in the great works which our Synod performs. You will grow in zeal for the preparation and sending of preachers and teachers, and be seized by the right view of missions, so that you do not go about the work downcast but with joy. We see what the right view of mission is where the apostles Peter and John say to the Sanhedrin, “We can not but speak of what we have seen and heard,” (Acts 4:20).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Here’s more Pfothenhauer: With the Word of God there is quite a different proficiency than with human knowledge. A man can accrue human wisdom through his own contemplation, investigation and observation. Thus through his own ability a wise and diligent doctor can find the means through which he can strengthen and maintain the physical lives of those entrusted to his care. It is quite something else with spiritual life. How it comes about and is increased is a complete mystery to human reason. If reason wants a say in such matters it can only babble foolishness. All instruction is only and solely to be found in the Word of God. And since you, as officers of the Synod, were elected for the purpose of assisting in the elevation of spiritual life in our midst, you can accomplish this only if you constantly and diligently study the Scriptures.

Venerable brothers, if you live in God's Word, and allow His witness to be your constant "Councilor" (Ps. 119:24), then you are prepared to elevate the spiritual life of the pastors and the congregations which are commended to your care. Then you will also be eager to do this, and in diligent discourse with the members of your visitation district. You know that the Synod expects that you make the rounds in your circle every three years. Unfortunately, that only happens in a few cases. See to it that in this matter your increase is evident.¹¹

Developing a mission program will not of itself raise the spiritual level of a church. Missions is a **fruit** of faith worked by the Word of the Gospel. Before we are sent into a life of mission and good works (Article VI of the Augustana), we are brought to repentance and faith by the Word. That's why the articles on God (AC I), original sin (AC II), Christ (AC III), justification by faith alone (AC IV), and the means of grace (AC V) come before Article VI.

Therefore, any effort toward revitalization, or whatever we call it, will need to be focused on the Word of God and the means by which God brings us His grace. Our center needs to be Christ and His work among us through preaching, teaching, studying and proclaiming His Word. Christ locates Himself in the water connected to the Word and in the body and blood for us. He is our "One Sure Hope." The only real life is found in receiving His life. That's why the better term may be "reformation" or "rejuvenation," an emphasis on the renewal of parish life.¹²

People by nature try to squeeze life out of created things and look to the natural order for all the good gifts that come only from communion with the Triune God. The Gospel of Christ, on the other hand, frees us from this idolatry in which we are ensnared by our sin and brings us into the joy of the worship of the one, true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in Whom alone is life. The highest worship of God is to believe His promises and to receive His gifts.¹³ Where the Word of God is, there is life, and life forever. Worship centered in the Gospel and focused on the Triune God produces evangelists, that is, people who bring the Gospel to others as they go about their daily vocation and invite them to hear the Word of Life. For the church evangelizes to draw people into the worship where God gives life. Jesus said, "...*true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him*" (John 4:23). The Father seeks worshipers so that He may give life in His Son and through His Spirit.¹⁴ Pastors – you are intimately involved in this because God has determined to use His called preachers publicly to communicate His life-giving Word. That's why we encourage one another in stronger preaching, pastoral care and visitation.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Jesus said, "You must be born again" or "born from above" as He described to Nicodemus what must happen personally (John 3:3). Churches, too, are "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5), because God makes disciples as we baptize and teach (Matthew 29:19-20).

¹³ Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (Apology of the Augsburg Confession: 1, II, 49). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p. 114.

¹⁴ See the conclusions of our document, "Understanding What Makes Worship Lutheran," p. 7.

Our Responses to the Situation in Southern Illinois (a bit of history)

Is there truly a need for a renewal in spiritual life and witness in our congregations? Our decline in church attendance would seem to indicate, in most cases, that we have to answer that with a reluctant “yes.” Of course, there are many factors, many trends, many reasons, etc. But the bottom line is that fewer people are in the pews of the parishes of Southern Illinois today than just a few years ago. And that would seem to indicate that fewer people are growing in the Word of God. At the very least, we have an unhealthy trend.

What have we done in Southern Illinois in response to these trends? We have always engaged in ongoing visitation of pastors and congregations, especially where there are problems and conflict. More specifically, we have developed the **Peace in the Parish** district consultation process – an extensive consultation by a district team over the course of four days, followed by a written report with recommendations for the congregation to follow. This process, first developed by Dr. James Qualben, has been used in a number of congregations in SID, e.g. Nashville, Hope-Granite City, Jerseyville, Staunton, Hoffman, Centralia, St. John-Red Bud, St. Mark’s in Steeleville. Where the congregation has followed through on the team’s recommendations, the process has led to positive growth in the Word of God and in mission to the community. President Mueller has also led **congregational planning retreats and consultations** himself in congregations such as Holy Cross, Collinsville, Trinity, Nashville and Zion, Staunton.

In response to the conflicts arising after 9/11 we developed the Augsburg Confession Study to draw the pastors more closely together theologically. This study, though as of this writing still incomplete, has been used positively in most of the circuit winkles. At the present time, AC 1-8 has been completed, but the circuits are waiting for President Mueller to finish the next phase of AC 9-13.

At the same time (mostly in 2003-2004), the Board of Directors developed a comprehensive vision for the future expressed in the following 8 Prayers summarizing what we pray God will do through us in the Southern Illinois District to fulfill His mission among us:

1. O Holy Spirit, work in us through the Word so that all our workers and members will grow in faith in Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, study of Scripture and Confessions, and in other ways make diligent use of the means of grace. (***Growing in Faith***)
2. O Christ, our Savior, enable us to increase our support for the mission efforts of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod to proclaim the saving Word of God. (***Increasing Support for Synodical Missions***)
3. O Christ, our Savior, through the Word of God, deepen our relationship and help us grow in our mission partnership with our brothers and sisters in the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. (***Growing in Partnership with the LCSA***)
4. O Christ, our Savior, help every congregation and school in our partnership see that You Yourself work through each congregation and school as a missionary outpost in a pagan

world, engaged in vigorous Word and Sacrament ministry, with each member sent by God to bring You, O Christ, to others by means of Your Word. (*Missionary Outposts*)

5. O Christ, our Savior, strengthen congregations, schools and our church workers in firm confession and bold outreach. Strengthen every congregation and school in the Word of God so that it will feed its members, support its workers and faithfully proclaim that Word to all. (*Confession and Outreach*)
6. O Christ, our Savior, draw the District closer together, both theologically and in our relationships with each other by providing opportunities where Your Holy Spirit through Your Word may unite parishes and pastors in the confession of the faith as it is purely expressed in the Book of Concord of 1580. (*United in Confession*)
7. O Christ, our Savior, give us the means to help congregations plant churches and schools through the proclamation of the Word of God. (*Planting Churches and Schools*)
8. O Christ, our Savior, work through us to expand the specialized ministries of the District in partnership with congregations (e.g. Prison Ministry, Campus Ministry, Ethnic Ministries, our Mission School, Older Adult and Youth Ministries), so that the Word of God is clearly proclaimed and taught through all these agencies of the District. (*Expanding Ministries*)

These prayers for the future were presented at a special convention of the District September 11, 2004 at which we laid out the fiscal challenges facing the District. That special convention also called for, among other things, more ongoing visitation of the congregations regarding missions and stewardship.

As that visitation effort was picking up steam, in 2006 the Regular Convention of the Southern Illinois District adopted resolutions calling for **extensive visitation** of all the congregations of the Southern Illinois District regarding worship and communion practice. During the remainder of 2006 the Circuit Counselors, Vice Presidents and President Mueller developed two study documents¹⁵ to help prepare for this visitation. **Two significant decisions were made regarding how the visitation is being carried out.** First, we are including discussion of the congregation's mission as part of this visitation (a series of questions was prepared for this purpose). Second, it was decided to carry out the visitation in three phases; Phase One, carried out mostly in 2007, was a visitation of the pastors only for the purpose of spending time in Bible Study, prayer and mutual encouragement. Phase Two involves visitation of the pastor together with lay leaders of the congregation, usually Board of Elders and/or Church Council. As of mid-2008, we are approximately half finished with this phase. Phase Three will involve a visit to the pastor and voters assembly of the congregation. There are a handful of pastors yet to be visited in Phase One. The second phase has been under way since the summer of 2007 and, God willing, will be completed by the time of the convention in 2009. The third phase will take more time, but we pray can be completed by 2010.

¹⁵ "The Practice of the Lord's Supper in a Christian Congregation" and "Understanding What Makes Worship Lutheran," both prepared by Pr. Herbert Mueller in 2006 with the help of the circuit counselors and vice presidents of the Southern Illinois District. Both were prepared for the ongoing visitation in which we are engaged.

With this visitation, in addition to encouraging the study of communion practices and worship practices, we have also been asking significant questions of each congregation regarding its mission. Every congregation has been encouraged to view its community as a mission field. Every congregation has been asked to pray that God would double the number of adults baptized and/or confirmed. Our Convention Theme in 2006 was “Jesus Gives Life at 100+ Mission Outposts” in order to emphasize that every congregation can see itself as a mission outpost. What does this mean?

Jesus – Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, crucified and raised from the dead for us. Jesus is alive among us today, alive to give His gifts, alive to give us His Spirit.

Gives – Life is a gift of Jesus Christ, from beginning to end. Jesus gives life. It is not earned or deserved, but it’s a free gift of God’s grace. Jesus gives His gift through means, the Word and the Sacraments. The Spirit comes through the Word of Christ to give faith. Faith simply receives the gift and clings to Jesus. It’s all by grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, received through faith alone.

Life – Jesus’ gift is real life, His resurrection life. His Spirit in the Word breathes life into our dead bones. Killed by the law, He raises us to life. His forgiveness restores us to the Father’s family. The old nature is drowned every day, so that our new nature in Christ rises to serve Him. His life does not end with the grave, but through His resurrection, physical death is the door to eternal life. And this not only for “the soul” but for our whole being when we are raised, body, soul and spirit, at the last day. The only real life is in Jesus.

At – The life of Christ is located in a particular place. The Spirit does not fall upon us unawares in a dark alley somewhere. Jesus gives life **at**... Where? Wherever His Word is preached in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to His institution. These are the marks of the church. Where the Word of Christ is found, there Jesus gives life. There is no Wordless Spirit, nor is there a Spiritless Word of God.

100+ - We have 97 congregations in Southern Illinois, plus three high school associations. That makes 100. But it’s 100 **plus**. That means we pray for even more. Actually, there are more than 100 locations: we have prison ministries, campus ministries, ethnic ministries and more. These are places at which you will hear the Word.

Mission – What is our mission, given by our baptism? “*To declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light...*” (1 Peter 2:9). This is actually two-fold. We are called to praise the Blessed Holy Trinity, remembering that the highest worship is to receive His gift of life. We are called to draw others into that worship so that they also receive the only life that’s real.

Outposts – By His Word Jesus gathers us into congregations, each one of which is an outpost of heaven in a pagan world. Where has God put your congregation? That’s where you are called to worship and to draw others into the worship that receives the life of Christ. Weekly, the baptized are drawn into the Divine Service, enlivened by Christ Himself, and sent out to serve, to love, to draw others into the life Jesus gives. Who are the people around you who need the life of Christ? He has put you and your congregation right there, where you are, to serve them!

Certainly, this visitation process will be ongoing. But how will we move through this visitation process, mandated by the 2006 District Convention, into the greater concentration (called for by the Synod in 2007) on helping particular congregations focus even more sharply on their mission? The following time line can illustrate this progression more directly:

Time Line for Development of Our Plans for the Future

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011 →
Synod & Special SID Convention	Visits	Regular Convention Prepare Worship & HC Documents	Visit Pastors Synod adopts “Revitalization” Goal	Visits SID Leaders Develop “Revitalization” Plan	Visits SID Convention Adopts Plan?	Visits continue Refine & Implement “Revitalization” Plan	Process Continues

Congregational Rejuvenation (or “Revitalization”)

The 2007 Synod set a goal of revitalizing 2000 congregations across Synod by 2017. Several revitalization projects have begun in various districts. President Mueller and Pastor Cliff Adair attended a conference in the Mid-South District in Nashville, TN, in January 2008. Some of the materials used in this conference were, in President Mueller’s and Pastor Adair’s opinion, of mixed value (often because they were from extra-Lutheran sources). Our plan encompassed in this concept paper is to develop an approach we can use in Southern Illinois, an approach firmly based on the Scriptures and the confessions of our church. The purpose of this present document is to outline what such a process might look like.

What Is It? (“Manna?”)

What exactly are we advocating with this paper? Simply a comprehensive approach to help one another hear the Word of God, to see Christ as our “One Sure Hope” at work in our parishes, and to be sent by Christ into our communities. “One Sure Hope” is the theme for our 2009 District Convention, based on 1 Peter 1:3-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:19-20. Every congregation is alive because every congregation has Christ in its midst (Matthew 18:19-20). Every congregation is also made up of sinners, from the Pastor on down, so every congregation needs to grow in how we focus on Christ and on Christ’s work through us. Thus our title:

ONE SURE HOPE: GROWING TOGETHER IN CHRIST

In essence, this is an extension of the visitation effort in which we have already been engaged in SID. We have done a number of “Peace in the Parish” District Consultations in the past. The visitation effort already begun will continue. In this next effort we will come along side congregations that seek help from the district to focus on Christ and on bringing Christ to their communities.

What assumptions do we bring to this work?

Our Assumptions

- 1) **The local congregation is the basic unit of mission in Christ's Church.** This is a positive assumption we share with Paul Borden (author of Hit the Bullseye) and the Mid-South District approach. What are some implications of this assumption? Every congregation is a mission outpost, a place where Jesus gives life, and a place from which we are sent to live for Him and to give His life away, e.g. "Jesus Gives Life at 100+ Mission Outposts!"
 - ❑ Congregations are gathered by God's Spirit in Word and Sacrament through the Gospel when and where it pleases God (AC V).
 - ❑ The real "action" in the Church mandated by God takes place in the congregations as God's people worship, baptize, preach, teach, confess, absolve, gather in the Lord's Supper and, most of all, reach others with the saving message of Christ.¹⁶ Here is where God is faithful to His promises. The Church we confess in the creed, the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church," is seen most clearly gathered at the altar, hearing the Word as sheep know the voice of their shepherd, and incorporating new disciples by the "one baptism for the remission of sins" (Nicene Creed). That's why the congregation is primary. All else we know as church is derived from and is secondary to the congregation as holy believers gathered around pulpit, altar and font. But here (pulpit, altar, font) is also where we are most closely connected to the Church of all ages and all times.
 - ❑ The Missouri Synod (and its local expression in the Southern Illinois District) is a fellowship of congregations united by the same confession of Christ and by our mutual recognition of one another as orthodox confessional Lutherans. We are responsible for and accountable to one another in that confession.
 - ❑ Synod and District exist to support congregations in their mission and to help congregations do together what they cannot do separately. Synod and District grow only as congregations grow.¹⁷ Congregations grow as they proclaim the Gospel in all its purity and fullness for the comfort of souls in Christ.

¹⁶ Augsburg Confession VII – "It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among who the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. ² For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. ³ It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. ⁴ It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

¹⁷ The sixth of C.F.W. Walther's theses "On the Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod" is instructive here: "A sixth major duty is that it not seek its own glory but only *the glory of God*, being intent not so much on its own growth but rather on the growth of Christ's kingdom and the salvation of souls, and therefore, a. not employ dishonest means, but above all be intent on using the Gospel in all its purity and fullness to win souls and keep them; b. seek to produce in its members, not so much zeal for its particular community but rather living faith, unfeigned love, and genuine godliness" ("Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod" – 1879 Essay before the Iowa District – in Essays for the Church, Volume 2, C.F.W. Walther, Concordia Publishing House, 1992, p. 7f.)

2) **Every congregation matters** because every congregation has Christ in its midst.

That means:

- Every congregation, your congregation, is special, valuable, because Jesus is there, crucified for our sins, raised again to give us life. In His Word, Jesus promises, “if two of you agree about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:19-20). This is not just a “warm-fuzzy” statement we make when there’s only a few people in church. This is a flat-out, unconditional promise made by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. When we come together in His name and to hear His Word, He is there, in all His fullness. No ifs, ands or buts!
- Where does God give faith? In and through the Word of God. When we invoke the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are reliving our Baptism in which He claimed us for His own. When we celebrate His Supper, He gives us His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. When we proclaim His Word, Jesus Himself is speaking to us through the pastor to call us to repentance and to forgive our sins.
- Where is the Word proclaimed and taught? In the congregation gathered around Word and Sacrament. By the Pastor and the members as they are sent by Christ into the world, into their daily vocations.
- In other words, we seek in our churches to live out at every turn the fact that God works through the means of Word and Sacrament. Augustana V must inform and shape whatever we do as church,¹⁸ not just because we are Lutheran but because it’s biblical, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).
- Christ is the Life and the Head of every congregation, no matter what size it may be.¹⁹ His Gospel is our treasure and the means by which He builds His Church.

¹⁸ “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this. Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel.” Augustana V – Tappert.

¹⁹ C.F.W. Walther’s thoughts are instructive: “Suppose someone thought, ‘now if the congregation is very large and there are many outstanding men in it, then I’ll be satisfied [to take a call there].’ But what kind of congregations do we have? Many of them consist of seven to ten families. Do they have great power like the congregation in Jerusalem, which had many thousands of members? Or the one at Rome, which also counted its members in the thousands? Yes, it makes no difference. For according to Matthew 18 our Lord adds, ‘Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in the midst of them.’ Accordingly, if only two or three Christians were present, the Lord would be present too, and He proves that the congregation has such great power by **this, that He is in their midst.** And when He is present, it is not a half- or a quarter-Christ, but the entire Savior. Yes, even a small rural congregation of seven families has as much power as all the congregations in America combined, because it also has Jesus in its midst, with all His grace and all the rights and merits He won for us on the tree of the cross.”

(Walther, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1879 Essay to the Iowa District,” in Walther, Essays for the Church, Volume 2, page 28).

3) The Role of the District is to support and strengthen congregations.

- One of the main duties of a district president is to see to it that congregations and pastors are visited so that they can be strengthened in their mission.²⁰
- The purpose of proper visitation is to strengthen both pastor and congregation in the confession of the truth and in reaching out with the Gospel.²¹
- So how does the District help congregations?
 - i. Our SID Bylaws state that one of the purposes of the district is to “provide support and protection for congregations, pastors, teachers and other church workers in maintaining the proper balance between the rights and authority of the office of the ministry and the rights and authority of the congregation.” The district also functions “*in support of its member congregations by providing assistance as congregations conduct their ministries locally...*”²²
 - ii. In our 2006-2009 Visitation, we are emphasizing that Jesus enlivens His Church through Word and Sacrament, at particular locations (wherever God’s people gather in His name), and from which we are sent into the world to give His life away. How is it going in your locale? To ask that question is the main purpose of our visit.
- Any effort on the part of the district to help a congregation is purely voluntary. Beyond the normal visitation regarding doctrine and life, any “program” or activity offered by the district is optional for the congregation. We have only the power of the Word of God and of convincing. In other words, where the Word of God speaks clearly on a matter, there we must bow to God’s will. In all other areas we have the power only to advise and to persuade one another. We cannot demand that a congregation enter into this

²⁰ Synod Bylaw 4.4.4 - The district president shall, in accordance with the Constitution of the Synod, in his ministry of ecclesiastical supervision visit the congregations of the district.

(a) He shall arrange in advance for an official visit to each congregation of his district at least once every three years and otherwise as he deems it necessary. He may call upon the circuit counselors and vice-presidents to assist him with the triennial visitation of congregations.

(b) In his official visits he shall seek to bring about to the greatest possible degree the achievement of the Synod’s objectives as expressed in Article III of its Constitution.

(c) He shall conduct his official visits in an evangelical manner.

(d) He shall come to the pastor and the congregation as a brotherly advisor, reminding them of the joy of serving in the mission and ministry of the church.

(e) In his visits he shall include fraternal discussion in regard to worship and Communion attendance; participation by the congregation in missions and the work of the church at large; the congregation’s evangelism and education endeavors; its cultivation of sound stewardship principles; all aspects of compensation for professional church workers; the need for maintenance of purity of doctrine; the strengthening of the bond of Christian fellowship; and the provision of resources, opportunities, and assistance so God’s people can grow in their faith, hope, and love.

(f) The jurisdiction of the district president shall include nonmember congregations whose pastors are members of the Synod. However, for the purpose of official visits in such a congregation the consent of the congregation shall first be secured. The district president may appoint the circuit counselor in whose circuit such a congregation is located to be his official representative.

²¹ See Walther, 1879 Essay, p. 38.

²² SID Bylaws, 2006, p. 3.

or any other program. Having said that, we do seek to draw congregations by attraction to an effort at renewal.

- That's why congregations will be voluntarily drawn into the intensive process, never forced (we can only work with a few at a time with the most intensive efforts). There will be no looking askance at pastors and congregations who do not participate (though by exposure to the Word as they watch others some may be brought along as well). All the workshops and resources will be open to all congregations and all pastors (some will thereby be drawn into the more intensive process). Why? That's because...

4) **Our only power is the Word of God.**

- We say this frequently, but what does this mean? We have quoted extensively from an address by Pfothenauer. We go back to Scripture: "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23-25).
- All of which is to say, only the Word of God brings people to faith. Lasting "results" from programs, emphases, efforts, plans, etc. come only in so far as they bring people into contact with the Word of God. And those "results" come only where and when it pleases God – "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).
- The beating heart of every congregation is the Word of God – pulpit, altar, font.
- The health of every congregation is directly related to how the Word of God is faring in that congregation, how the Word is faithfully proclaimed and received. Pastors need to be ready to grow in their pastoral and preaching skills that they might ever more faithfully live in their ordination vows for the sake of their people.
- This is also why the Word of God tells the Church and her pastors: "Preach the Word, be ready in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). This is why, in our Lord's parable, the Word of God is scattered like seeds thrown this way and that, with great abandon, on the path, on the rocks, among the weeds and thorns, and all over the good ground. Our task is to scatter the seed of the Word everywhere. God is the one who will make it grow.²³ The power is in the Word of God... that leads to another assumption.

²³ See Mark 4:1-20. Consider also the following: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29). Remember, the harvest will not come unless the seed is sown. Paul writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6). God gives the growth, but God also used Paul to plant and Apollos to water. That's our calling – to plant and to water, trusting God's promise to give the growth.

5) Confession and outreach, doctrine and mission, are inseparable, two sides of the same coin.

- ❑ Our confession and our doctrine, drawn from Scripture, keep the focus on Christ and His Gospel. Indeed, the purpose of our confession is to bring the greatest comfort (in the Gospel of forgiveness) to the penitent sinner.
- ❑ As such, we are called to confess this Gospel before the world, liberally spreading the Word of God. In other words, the true doctrine impels us into mission. The faithful confession must lead to outreach, to confessing the doctrine before the world.
- ❑ Therefore, we do not, we cannot, divorce doctrine and mission. Nor can we separate doctrine and mission from the Church's work of mercy and service to the world around us. Neither is possible without the other.
- ❑ That also means we will seek out and use in this process only the best Biblical and Lutheran resources.

Saying all that leads us to our concluding assumption:

6) The Word of God always calls us to repentance and faith. Obedience to our Lord's commission to make disciples by baptizing and teaching is then a fruit of faith and our Spirit-worked response to the Word of God.²⁴

- ❑ If we have the right doctrine and if the power is in the Word of God, why do so many of our churches seem to be languishing?
- ❑ Yes, we can blame some of our problems on the world's indifference to and rejection of the Word of God. But that explains only part of the problem. We cannot confess the sins of others. We are called to confess our own sin.
- ❑ Could it be that we (both pastor and people) do not really believe that the Word of God works? What are some things we might see as evidence of our lack of faith in the power of the Word of God? Gimmicks, excuses, impatience, conflict, giving in to the world, fatigue, lethargy, exhaustion in the face of rural/urban demographics, despair, lack of care for one another – the list is endless...²⁵

²⁴ We have already noted the order of the first few articles of the Augsburg Confession – Article One, God – Article Two, Original Sin – Article Three, Christ – Article Four, Justification – Article Five, Pastoral Office and the Means of Grace. These explain our need for Christ, what Christ has done, how that is all delivered and received. Then comes Article Six, the New Obedience. Receiving by faith all that Christ has done for us, leads to a new obedience to Christ and His Word and command. It's the natural result, the natural fruit, of faith in Christ and His Gospel.

²⁵ In an email correspondence with the author, Pastor Timothy Scharr of Trinity, Nashville, Illinois, offered the following observations for our decline in church attendance and lack of faith in the power of the Word of God:

1) **Christians are increasingly letting the world shape and form their beliefs and values.** The recent *Reporter* featured an article on the values active young people have in the LCMS today. The evidence shows a greater acceptance of universalism, homosexuality and sexual immorality. These views are from active youth; one can only wonder how the typical youth may respond. A solution is to highlight the **distinctiveness of Christianity** and why this is vital. Like many denominations, LCMS people are going through an identity crisis, Until we know who we are in Christ, we will continue to let others mold and shape us.

- To what does this unbelief lead?
 - a. Assuming everyone in our community goes to church.
 - b. Thinking that the Word of God is not going to work on _____ (you fill in the blank).
 - c. Not sharing the Word, keeping it to ourselves.
 - d. Making excuses for the fact that we have not been scattering the seed of the Word.
 - e. Blaming the pastor for his failures. Blaming the people for not listening. Losing patience with one another and descending into conflict.
 - f. When the Word of God does not work on our time table, we start looking for something else that will grow the church. We have to add something to the Word to make it grow.
 - g. Assuming that people can be saved and find life without Christ.
 - h. Desiring to gain members to “help us pay the bills” rather than to draw people into the only life that lasts.

Our Lord Himself calls us to repent. It is not insignificant that Jesus began his ministry with the words, “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Our Lord calls to us, His church, “Turn away from the empty promises of the world and trust me! I have life, real LIFE for you, found in my death and resurrection.”

We, the Church, need to hear again, to repent and to believe again Jesus’ Word: “This is eternal life, that they know You [Father] the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have

2) **Christians are increasingly illiterate when it comes to the Bible.** Amazing as it is when we have more tools available than ever, Biblical illiteracy is increasing in our midst. People think they know the Scriptures but are often clueless when it comes to actually looking things up in their Bibles, or what the stories really mean, or how they point to Christ.

3) **Christians do not believe they have anything worthwhile to offer others.** This grows out of universalism and the misguided belief that everyone is saved anyway. It also flows out of the identity crisis that belittles what the Lutheran church confesses in Christ and longs to be accepted and welcomed by as many others as possible.

4) **Too many Christians seek permission to sin rather than how they may best serve the Lord.** Simply put, many ask the wrong question and resist the correct ones. Every pastor faces questions from members such as, “Pastor is it okay if I *skip church, put family above all things, save my money for personal use rather than contribute a portion to the Lord, live with my boyfriend/girlfriend without marriage, and many other such things to fill in the _____.* These are variations to the temptation from Satan: “Did God *really* say?” An affirmative, permission seeking answer is what people expect. A much fewer number of believers ask how they can best live out their faith on a daily basis.

5) **Too many Christians live by the creed “Ignorance is bliss” when it comes to learning more about the faith we confess.** Some, perhaps many, believe that if I do not know something that God wants, desires or wills for my life, I will not be held accountable for it on Judgment Day. Just keep my faith simple, such as “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.” Don’t clutter my mind with anything else the Bible says, let me be content with what I learned in my first year of Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. This is evidenced by poor attendance at the Divine Service or any Bible Study but the overflowing crowds that attend children’s Christmas programs and anything else where their child will be featured. However, be warned, if the church schedules their child in too many things the parents will simply drop them off and resume the “Church is not for me” posture.

sent” John 17:3). We need to hear the Lord speaking to us as He did to the seven churches of Asia, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, Words of Law and Gospel. To Ephesus, for instance, He said, “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent...” But He ends with the promise, “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:2-7). Studying the Word of God together, examining our life by the Word of God, the Spirit of God leads to repentance (always in God’s timing). And then when we hear the Gospel promises, the Spirit increases faith and forms our life in Christ. In other words, only God rejuvenates a parish. Only God gives life.

Renewed, refreshed,²⁶ restored, forgiven in Christ, we live in faith and in obedience to Christ’s command, “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). With Spirit-given faith in the Word of God and the power of the Gospel, we now seek to sow the seed of that Word wherever and whenever we can. But everything we do in this regard is in response to the grace of God by which we are saved and flows from our renewed faith in the power of God’s Word and Christ’s Gospel. Living in repentance and faith, we are led to say, with St. Paul, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes...” (Romans 1:16).

What Are the Basic Steps of Our Process?

- 1) The circuit counselors and vice presidents together with President Mueller (the Board of Spiritual Care and Supervision), in consultation with the SID Mission Board, will develop a group of consultants for the process, as well as resources for study.
- 2) Because congregations are the basic unit of mission (and each congregation is self governing within its own circumstances), this is a voluntary process. Therefore a congregation will participate only after an overwhelming vote in favor of the process, after a detailed presentation to the voters. Individuals are, of course, missionaries, but the mission happens through congregations as the body of Christ gathered in one place.
- 3) The process begins with a comprehensive review of the congregation and community.

²⁶ When we call each other to repent, we are simply urging one another to be Christians, for the essence of faith is to despair of our own works and place our whole confidence in the work of Jesus Christ for us. When we talk about repentance, we are not “beating up on” one another, but simply pointing to Jesus, as Peter proclaimed, “*Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that **times of refreshing** may come from the presence of the Lord*” (Acts 3:19).

- ❑ Congregational self study
 - ❑ Survey of both the congregation and the community
 - ❑ Review by the District team of all aspects of the congregation's life. We will develop materials that will help us in this regard, building on the work of others.²⁷
 - ❑ There may be a listening event to hear from both pastor and people (similar to our consultations with "Peace in the Parish") as part of this thorough review.
 - ❑ The process for this comprehensive review will be designed by the consultation team working with the pastor of the congregation.
- 4) The District visitation team prepares a detailed report including:
- ❑ Recommendations for action (basically a call for obedience as a response to Christ and His Gospel – not so that we can be saved, but because we have been saved by Christ)
 - ❑ The team comes back for a town meeting (open forum) event to review the report and recommendations
 - ❑ Congregation and pastor are gently called to repent of any sins thereby exposed – particularly sins of unbelief in the power of the Word of God.
 - ❑ Congregation and pastor are assured of Christ's forgiveness and of Christ's presence in our midst. He is our "One Sure Hope." Jesus Christ is alive and is present with us in concrete fashion through His Word and Sacrament. Therefore, Christ is at work in your parish that you may grow together in Him!²⁸
 - ❑ Remember Jesus' promise, "I will build my church!" (Matthew 16:18).

²⁷ The Montana District and President Terry Forke are developing a similar review process. Basic elements of the Montana plan for review include the following broad and flexible focus areas:

Preaching, the content and delivery of sermons. Doctrinal faithfulness, textuality, churchliness, fit to the hearers.

Administration of the Sacraments in keeping with Christ's institution and in respect to the agreements we have made as members of Synod.

Worship: the faithfulness, form, beauty, sacredness, message and accessibility of the worship services for members and non-members.

Catechesis: the provision of Christian instruction for non-members and members of all ages.

Community in the Church: Care for the members by the members. Hospitality, humility, neighborly sacrifice, opportunity for service within the congregation.

Church in the World: The relationship of the congregation and Pastor to the larger community, both in terms of distinctions and in terms of mutual support and interaction.

Vocation: How members are taught to live the faith.

Facility: the accessibility, beauty and function of worship spaces.

Visitation and Human Care: the intentional and occasional activities of the Pastor and the members to take the Gospel to those who cannot or are not gathering for Divine Service. The efforts by the Pastor and Congregation to serve the human needs, especially of members, but also of others in the community.

²⁸ Repentance often has a bad name among us. We agree with our general need for repentance, and we can easily point to specific sins in others who we believe need to repent, but it is often hard to admit and confess our own failings and sin. Our Baptism, however, reminds us that such attitudes are so short-sighted. The fact that we have been buried with Christ and raised to life with Him in our Baptism means there is actually great joy in repentance because repentance is the path of forgiveness and renewal in Christ. Baptism "indicates that the Old Adam in us should by *daily* contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should *daily* emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Small Catechism, Baptism IV)

- 5) Pastor and congregation consider and pray about the report and recommendations for six weeks.
- 6) Pastor and congregation commit themselves to the process together with a special meeting and worship service. This commitment is a fruit of repentance and faith. In other words, this commitment arises from Christ's commitment to us, as Paul writes, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:5-7) And again, "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ" (2 Thessalonians 3:5).
- 7) Pastor and lay leaders commit to working in a learning group for three years.
 - ❑ The pastor commits to working with trusted brothers to grow in his preaching and pastoral care.
 - ❑ The congregation commits to supporting and praying for their pastor, and to studying the Scriptures together to grow in Law and Gospel, and to grow in the fruit of the Spirit.
 - ❑ The congregation commits, through its leaders, to working together with the pastor in a process of planning and implementing the recommendations of the consultation team.
- 8) The District will meet with pastor and lay leaders for check ups at 6, 12, 24 and 36 months out to hold each other accountable in the Word of God and to help each other work on fulfilling the recommendations of the report. This encouragement in the Gospel needs to be of the same kind as Paul gave to the church in Corinth to fulfill what they had promised (see 2 Corinthians 8:7).

The Life of God in Your Church

As we go about this process, however, we also remember that the new life of God in Jesus Christ is not found in a new program (as necessary as programs may be to organizations), but in repentance and faith, both of which are worked by the Spirit. The life of God is not the result of moral instruction and moral living, but of God's gift of a new relationship with Him in Jesus Christ.

The beating heart of your congregation is the life of Jesus Christ – His life lived for us and offered up for us on the cross. His life triumphant in His resurrection. His life freely given in His body and blood, in the forgiveness of sins, in the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

You are alive because you are in Christ. You are alive because Jesus gives life to you and to all who believe. You are alive because Jesus gives life to you through your congregation,

your pastor's work and your fellow members' witness to Jesus. You are alive in Christ because He has made you alive in His Spirit.

When we say that "Jesus Gives Life at 100+ Mission Outposts," we look for each parish to become more and more the body of Christ. We have received in Christ our true Head. "Now you are [*together!*] the body of Christ, and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27). If Christ is the Head, and we the body, then we are sent into the world as members of the body to extend His ministry of love and service to the world.

The life of Jesus given for us implies that we take worship seriously. If Christ is our Head and we His body, we nourish ourselves at the font, the lectern, the pulpit, the altar, wherever the Word of God is found. Here Christ gives Himself to us that we may give away the life of Jesus by serving others and drawing them into the life we have received.

The new life Jesus gives implies that we are always ready to teach the Word of God, "ready always to give an answer to everyone who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15). Led by the Spirit, we search the Word of God together to discover and to grow in the will of God for our life together. No one is too young or too old to be taught, but everyone is drawn into the Word.

The life of Jesus connects us to one another in love. We are not alone, but we receive His life – together! We are "thankful for your partnership in the Gospel, from the first day until now..." (Philippians 1:5). We stand together in a new relationship to God in Christ. We seek to strengthen one another in the faith by our words and our actions, helping each other enjoy the good gifts of God.

The life of God in Jesus means that we take prayer and worship seriously. We teach families to pray together. We provide many opportunities for worship and prayer and study of the Word. We provide holy absolution and holy communion as often as they are desired.

Jesus gives life also in order to send us into the world, for the sake of the hungry, the needy, the lost, those who do not yet know Him. Jesus gives life so that we also present ourselves as "living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God" in Him. We are a community of servants sent into the world in our various vocations to serve God by serving others.²⁹

²⁹ Various thoughts in this section drawn from A.C. Piepkorn, The Church, pp. 116-118

To What Will the Pastor and Congregation Actually Commit?

When the congregation commits to this intensive three year process (see #6 above), what do the people actually agree, by God's grace and blessing, to seek to do?

- 1) The congregation commits to a spiritual and scriptural approach to life and decision making as the body of Christ – 1 Corinthians 12.³⁰ In every way, we will seek to walk with Jesus and to “fix our eyes” on Him.
- 2) The congregation commits to resolving conflict biblically.
 - Matthew 5 and Matthew 18³¹ – Whether it's your fault or his, the Lord tells you – You Go!

³⁰ In a recent report to a congregation as part of the “Peace in the Parish” process, President Mueller, on behalf of the visitation team, wrote:

The relationship between the Pastor, the congregational chairman and the chairman of the Board of Elders must be a relationship characterized by and surrounded by prayer and study in the Word of God. These three – Pastor, congregational chairman, Board of Elders chairman – need to meet together regularly to establish and maintain their relationship in the Word of God and in prayer. Whatever else you talk about, you MUST spend time in the Word of God and in prayer. The purpose of this will be to make sure the three of you develop a team centered in Christ. Do not allow your relationship to become in any way adversarial. Therefore the three of you will also need to study this present document together so that together you will decide how to proceed with the implementation of our recommendations. Work on it together until you agree how you will proceed with each of the recommendations below. Bring your plans to the Church Planning Council for refining and implementation.

Remove from your thinking any distinction between “business” matters and “spiritual” matters. In the church there is no difference. Every issue is spiritual or has a spiritual dimension. In other words, every issue touches on our relationship with God and/or our relationship with each other as blood-bought souls. What does this mean? Whatever the issue, the Pastor and Vicar are called to help everyone consider every issue under the guidance of the Word of God and with our relationship with God and each other in mind. When the Word of God speaks clearly on something, pastor and people alike are called to trust God's Word over any human ideas (for an obvious example, no matter how many may be offended by the Biblical teaching that Christ actually gives His true body and blood in and with the bread and wine, St. Mark's cannot take the position that the bread and wine in Holy Communion merely represent the Lord's body and blood.) On the other hand, even when the Word of God gives no instruction on a matter (what color should we paint the hallway, to give an equally obvious example) there is still a spiritual dimension to the question. In issues such as this, the minority, in love, gives way to the majority, and everyone is called to treat each other with respect and love. Even “secular, business” decisions need to be made with the understanding that we are blood-bought souls, united in Christ. We are called to communicate clearly with all and to deal with everyone in love. Any and every decision also needs to be made with an understanding of the primary mission of the church to bring the Gospel to others!

Church meetings themselves need always to be primarily spiritual, no matter what the topic(s) being discussed. Every meeting needs extended time in the Word of God and in prayer. A possible outline for a meeting of the Board of Elders, the Church Council, the School Board, the faculty, etc. should be 1) Opening prayer, 2) Scripture with devotional thoughts centering in Christ, 3) Sharing of spiritual and physical needs of those present and of members, together with a brief review of the issues to be discussed at that meeting, and then 4) An extended time of prayers for the needs of the congregation and the needs of the leaders of the congregation (all the items discussed in #2 and #3). 5) Then go into your business agenda, taking time to pray about decisions as they come up. All of this will help build an atmosphere of mutual accountability and trust.

³¹ “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

- We are called to “walk worthy of our calling,” to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

- 3) The congregation commits to being in the Word of God together with the pastor.
 - The Pastor will be in a learning community of pastors, working together to “hone the pastoral craft.”
 - The leaders will be in a learning community, specifically learning how a Lutheran congregation grows by the use of the means of grace.
 - How will the congregation be committed to intentional, intensive Bible Study?
 - How will the members be committed, as the priesthood of the baptized, to regular reading of the Word of God and to prayer (e.g. “The Priesthood Prays”)?

- 4) The congregation commits itself to prayer
 - How will we pray for workers in the harvest (Matthew 9)?
 - How will we pray for our pastors and leaders (Hebrews 13)?
 - How will we pray for the Word of God to speed on in our midst (2 Thess. 3)?
 - How will we pray because God has promised to hear? (Matthew 7, Luke 18)

- 5) The congregation commits prayerfully to seek to connect with people in the community (the precise forms for how this will be done will vary by the community) so that God might give opportunity to bear witness for Christ and all that Christ has done.
 - How will we bring Jesus to the people around us? Better: how will Jesus use us to connect with the people around us?
 - How will we develop our visitation efforts within our congregations in this effort?
 - How will we live out the Word of God through Peter, “Always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within you, but do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). The Word of God is never idle or dead but effective and living.³² Individual Christians bear individual responsibility for speaking the Word of God within their vocation wherever God takes them.
 - As Lutherans we have one great love and purpose: we seek to connect people to Jesus Christ and His saving Word and life-giving Sacraments so that they also will receive the only life that is true, and truly LIVE in Him.³³

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15).

³² “On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart and its meditations. For these words are not idle or dead, but effective and living.” (LC I:101).

³³ “All who would be saved must hear this preaching, for the preaching and the hearing of God’s Word are the Holy Spirit’s instrument in, with, and through which he wills to act efficaciously, to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve.

The person who is not yet converted to God and regenerated can hear and read this Word externally because, as stated above, even after the Fall man still has something of a free will in these external matters, so that he can go to church, listen to the sermon, or not listen to it.

Through this means (namely, the preaching and the hearing of his Word) God is active, breaks our hearts, and draws man, so that through the preaching of the law man learns to know his sins and the wrath of God and

- How will your congregation draw people into living and growing in the Word of God, so that they might become disciples of Christ through baptism and teaching?

- 6) The congregation and pastor commit to an on-going planning process regarding:
 - Worship
 - Bible Study
 - Education – catechesis at all levels
 - Pastoral Care – including regular and diligent visitation
 - Outreach
 - Stewardship
 - Missions and Acts of Mercy beyond the parish

- 7) The congregation commits to a three year process of accountability in the Word of God³⁴ with the District, following through with evaluations at 6 months, 12 months, 24 months and 36 months out. The focus of both the learning groups and the accountability will be on the following:
 - Helping each other preach Law and Gospel faithfully and in ways that truly connect with people. We have the best doctrine there is – our preaching ought to be the best in town. The pastor commits to strengthening his preaching.
 - Helping to strengthen pastoral care and teaching, as well as growing in our care and love for one another and for the lost in our communities. The pastor and elders commit to strengthening their calling ministry.
 - Helping Pastor and members live out their vocations faithfully together, supporting one another and working as a team for the sake of Christ’s Kingdom. The people commit to praying for and supporting their pastor, speaking well of him and of the congregation, growing in service to one another and to the community, more fully involved in the life and work of the parish, as the Spirit of God gives His gifts.
 - Helping each other plan and lead worship with the very best we have to offer as Lutheran Christians.
 - A congregational commitment to be Lutheran in doctrine and practice (studying the doctrinal articles of the Augustana, the catechism, or other options depending on interest).
 - Helping both Pastor and congregation grow in the fruit of the Spirit so that our parishes live out the fact that we exist not only for ourselves, but for the sake of others. This includes helping the parish to come to understand more fully the community in which it is located as it plans specific moves for the future.

- 8) The congregation commits to helping sister congregations and fellow pastors in the same process.

experiences genuine terror, contrition, and sorrow in his heart, and through the preaching of and meditation upon the holy Gospel of the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ there is kindled in him a spark of faith which accepts the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake and comforts itself with the promise of the Gospel. And in this way the Holy Spirit, who works all of this, is introduced into the heart.” (FC,SD II:52-54).

³⁴ All of the things here described flow from the gifts of God in His Word, by which Jesus promises to build His Church.

An Important Question

If you have read this far, one of the questions that may have occurred to you is this: What is to stop our congregation from working on this parish renewal effort **without** the help of the Southern Illinois District? The answer? Nothing! Any parish could use the general approach outlined here to seek renewal in Christ, our “One Sure Hope,” by means of His Word. Or you may use the ideas outlined here as a spring board for designing your own parish planning and renewal project. Great! Go for it!

Perhaps you wish to use only some of the ideas here, to pick and choose. That’s fine, too. There are no “silver bullets” or easy 10 point checklists (do this and your congregation grows automatically). But we do believe the essentials are as follows:

- 1) Repentance of our sins of unbelief, especially unbelief in the power of the Word of God.
- 2) Hearing afresh the word of Christ’s forgiveness, for the sake of His cross, by means of His resurrection.
- 3) Taking a spiritual approach to decision making, that is, only in response to the Word of God and seeking the Lord’s guidance through prayer.
- 4) Understanding fully and honestly your true situation.
- 5) Applying the Word of God to your situation to help you scatter the seed of the Word and connect people with Jesus.
- 6) Bible Study and teaching (catechesis). But allowing the Word of God to change hearts and minds on God’s time-table, not ours.³⁵
- 7) Seeking, by God’s grace, to grow in the following:
 - a. Preaching clear Law and Gospel that connects with people and their real needs.
 - b. Faithful teaching and good pastoral care (diligent visitation by the pastor and lay people as appropriate).
 - c. A congregational commitment to be Lutheran (studying the doctrinal articles of the Augustana, the catechism, or other options depending on interest).
 - d. Working together, pastor and lay leaders, as a team formed by Christ.
 - e. Doing worship well, with the resources God has given your parish
 - f. Understanding that your congregation exists for the sake of others, not just yourselves.

Of course, if you wish to receive help from the district, just ask! We would be more than happy to provide what we can.

³⁵ From the Formula of Concord: “It is indeed correct and true what Scripture states, that no one comes to Christ unless the Father draw him. But the Father will not do this without means, and he has ordained Word and sacraments as the ordinary means or instruments to accomplish this end. It is not the will of either the Father or the Son that any one should refuse to hear or should despise the preaching of his Word and should wait for the Father to draw him without Word and sacraments. The Father indeed draws by the power of the Holy Spirit, but according to his common ordinance he does this through the hearing of his holy, divine Word, as with a net by which he snatches the elect from the maw of the devil. Every poor sinner must therefore attend on it, hear it with diligence, and in no way doubt the drawing of the Father because the Holy Spirit wills to be present in the Word and to be efficacious with his power through it. And this is the drawing of the Father. The reason why all who hear the Word do not come to faith and therefore receive the greater damnation is not that God did not want them to be saved. It is their own fault because they heard the Word of God not to learn but only to despise, blaspheme, and ridicule it, and they resisted the Holy Spirit who wanted to work within them, as was the case with the Pharisees and their party at the time of Christ.” (FC, SD XI:76-78, Tappert).

To What Does the SID Commit?

- 1) To pray for the effort
- 2) The District Convention will need to support the process
- 3) Provide resources for the process:
 - a. Work with other districts to find resources
 - b. Provide workshops in preaching and pastoral care, perhaps through Lutheran resources such as DOXOLOGY.³⁶ Develop means for pastors to hone their pastoral skills.
 - c. Develop homiletics retreats on preaching Law and Gospel, with trusted peer review of sermons (this would be open to all pastors, not just those in the process). Law and Gospel preaching that engages the hearer is absolutely essential. Develop reading groups in Walther's Law and Gospel, commit to requesting evaluation of sermons by another pastor of your choosing.
 - d. Publish and provide literature and bibliographies for learning groups
 - e. Develop helps for drawing people into instruction classes where they can be catechized and disciplined by the Word of God.³⁷
 - f. Recruit, train and support consultants from within SID.
 - g. Provide assistance for congregations to understand the needs within their congregations and in their communities as they contemplate appropriate or possible ways to live out the church's corporate life of mercy.
- 4) Provide training and support for consultants and others working in the process in SID.
- 5) Appoint a Task Force to work with President Mueller and the Circuit Counselors to develop details of the process.
- 6) Support with the district budget reasonable costs of development and implementation of the project. Seek grants to help support the effort.

³⁶ A new RSO for providing training and help in pastoral care, by Dr. Harold Senkbeil and Dr. Beverly Yanke in Wisconsin. See www.doxology.us/ for greater detail.

³⁷ More from the Formula of Concord: "But since the question is asked concerning the efficient cause (that is, who works these things in us, from where man acquires these things, and how he comes by them), our doctrine answers this way: Man's natural powers cannot contribute anything or help in any way (1 Cor. 2:4-12); 2 Cor. 3:4-12) to bring it about that God in his immeasurable kindness and mercy anticipates us [comes to us first] and has his holy Gospel preached to us, through which the Holy Spirit wills to work such conversion and renewal in us, and through the preaching of his Word and our meditation upon it kindles faith and other God-pleasing virtues in us, so that they are gifts and works of the Holy Spirit alone." (FC,SD II:71, Tappert).

What Resources Are Needed?

- 1) People – consultants
 - Task Force

- 2) Survey Instruments – Pre Consultation Self Study Instrument
 - Consultation Studies

- 3) Money
 - For the Task Force
 - Staff
 - Workshops
 - Resources
 - Study/Learning Groups

- 4) Bibliography
 - Development
 - Gathering printed resources
 - Publication

- 5) Include the Stewardship Task Force and Stewardship Emphasis in this process

- 6) Constitutional Resources

Conclusion – One Sure Hope!

What are the basic elements of this effort? 1) It's voluntary. 2) We are seeking to base everything about what we are doing in the Word of God. 3) Repentance and renewal in the Word of God are essential.

Could a congregation enter such a renewal effort "on its own"? Could a congregation use some (but not all) elements of the package we have outlined? Certainly. Might a congregation decide that they do not need this, or that they believe a different effort would be better for their circumstances? Yes, so long as what they are doing is consonant with the Word of God and our confession. Can we pick and choose? Yes, your congregation might read all this and decide to design a planning process on your own. All of that is fine. Our purpose here is to offer a resource to consider.

Our encouragement is that every congregation examine itself. How is Christ at work in our parish to strengthen us in faith and to reach others? Of what sins do we need to repent? How does Christ apply His Gospel to our maladies?

For those congregations that seek it, we offer this full effort through the services of the Southern Illinois District. May our gracious God give His Word "free course among us, to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people" and thus, to the salvation of many more by the cross of Jesus.

In the name of Jesus!