

Future Church: A Lutheran Sacramental Ecclesiology for the Twenty-first Century

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On February 1, 2021, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) announced a new initiative, Future Church, designed to engage one million “new, young, and diverse people” to our denomination.¹ This initiative challenges existing stakeholders to leverage their resources toward sharing God’s grace in new and innovative ways that allow more people to “know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice, and love.”²

The initiative names three priorities. First, it seeks to cultivate a welcoming church that activates diverse people groups not currently well-represented in our denomination. It also envisions a thriving church that roots itself in confessional Lutheranism while developing ways to make our historic message of grace “radically relevant” in a changing world.³ Finally, Future Church seeks to unite our denomination under a shared vision and purpose that catalyzes our efforts to attract new members and be the church the world needs in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Future Church responds to growing concerns that the ELCA is trending toward extinction. The ELCA’s membership is the fourth oldest of all major American denominations. Our average age is nearly 67 years old.⁴ In the past ten years, this average has increased by 6.4 years—the largest increase in mainline Protestantism.⁵ In 2019, the ELCA’s Office of Research and Evaluation projected that our denomination would have less than 67,000 members by 2050 coupled with an average worship attendance of only 16,000 people.⁶ If these trends were to continue, it is likely that individuals

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attending seminary to become rostered leaders would not be able to retire in our denomination.

In light of these grim statistics, there is little doubt that the ELCA needs initiatives like Future Church, initiatives that compel stakeholders to alter their vision of the institutional church and engage in prophetic imagination concerning how the church might manifest the hope of Christ in our world today. As we discern this emerging vision, we must do so without compromising our historic Lutheran identity. Our denomination can be *both* compelling *and* confessional. We can *both* attract one million new members *and* retain current ones. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be the people who work to reverse membership trends and cultivate a church that meets the demands of God’s people in the world today.

To revitalize our denomination, we must have a common understanding of what it means to be the church, especially concerning how the church orients itself in the world. This process demands that our denomination reclaim its sacramental identity by fashioning a sacramental ecclesiology that unites existing stakeholders by emphasizing the communal nature of the church. This sacramental ecclesiology can promote an active faith that manifests decline/.

1. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Mission and Vision,” accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.elca.org/about/vision>.

2. ELCA, “Mission and Vision.”

3. ELCA, “Mission and Vision.”

4. Ryan Burge (@RyanBurge), Twitter, May 10, 2021, https://twitter.com/ryanburge/status/1391750907638034439?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet.

5. Ryan Burge (@RyanBurge), Twitter, May 10, 2021, https://twitter.com/ryanburge/status/1391750907638034439?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet.

6. Dwight Zscheile, “Will the ELCA be Gone in 30 Years?” *The Faith Leader*, September 5, 2019, <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/>

the grace of Christ in ways that meet the complex spiritual needs of diverse people groups.

The church of the future will require diversity. There will be variety in worship, leadership structures, and theological discourse. However, in our quest for diversity, we must not become a disparate network of congregations united only by our ties to an existing hierarchy. We must embrace “diversity in unity, the spirit of collegiality, and participation and co-responsibility at every level of the church as a people of God....”⁷ We must reject the Lutheran impulse toward sectarianism and embrace our shared sacramental identity. The church is communal. The church is the body of Christ on earth and, as such, the church functions as a sacrament.

A distinct Lutheran sacramental ecclesiology integrates the work of Catholic theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet with the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both Chauvet and Bonhoeffer argue that the church’s identity is constituted through the liturgical-sacramental act of worship. Chauvet contends that the church, in its role as the symbolic mediator of Christ, functions as a sacrament. Bonhoeffer, by contrast, argues that the church, in its role as the symbolic mediator of Christ, functions as “church-community.” I will extend Bonhoeffer’s argument by illustrating why a Lutheran sacramental theology should view the church as the penultimate sacrament, an extension of the ultimate sacrament—Christ himself. I will also discuss the ethical implications of a Lutheran sacramental ecclesiology, including how this re-envisioning might shift the ethical considerations of the institutional church and its individual members in ways that promote the manifestation of God’s grace in new and innovative ways, ways that work toward enacting the reign of God here and now.

Foundational terms

In discussing the church’s sacramental nature, it is essential to define three key terms: sign, symbol, and sacrament.

Sign: In popular theological discourse, “sign” and “symbol” are often used interchangeably. While almost all symbols are signs, each term has its own definition and unique applications.⁸ A sign is an object that represents something beyond itself.⁹ For example, smoke functions as a sign, because when there is smoke, there is also fire.¹⁰ In this case, the smoke represents something beyond itself. It represents fire.

Symbol: “Symbol” is derived from the Greek word *symballein*, which means “to throw together.” A symbol is distinct from a sign because a symbol is not merely semantic or representative (that is, “A” means “B” or “A” represents “B”). Instead, “A” is “B” as in “the wholeness of A expresses, communicates, reveals [and] manifests the ‘reality of B.’”¹¹ Because symbols have the power to

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manifest a new reality, symbols can transport believers from their flawed reality to the *eschatological reality* of the coming reign of God.¹² Symbols transport the church into a distinct, otherworldly realm. In the eucharist, the symbols of bread and wine transport participants into the world of Christianity (that is, the world of the first century). For Lutherans, Christian symbols (bread, wine, water) make visible God’s saving work in the world.¹³ These symbols nourish the soul and empower the Christian to reflect, albeit feebly, Christ’s triumphant feast of victory.

Sacrament: Lutherans understand sacraments using a threefold definition. First, a sacrament refers to “something Jesus commanded us to do.”¹⁴ Second, it involves the use of “a physical element—something we can see, touch, and sometimes taste.”¹⁵ Finally, a sacrament is “connected with God’s promise, the word of God, which gives faith.”¹⁶ Confessional Lutheranism classifies the sacraments as the *means of grace*, or the way in which God offers forgiveness, life, and salvation. As Luther remarks, God makes Godself known to humanity through nothing other than the “spoken Word and the Sacraments” (*SA III.VIII.10*).

Simply put, “sacraments give grace.”¹⁷ They give grace by means of Christ’s self-gift to the church. In the Eucharist, for example, participants approach the altar empty, in desperate need of God’s grace. Our emptiness means that our participation becomes less about cognition or “right thought” and more about the experience of grace. Participation requires that one opens oneself up to God in order to be ontologically transformed by the reception of God’s self-giving love. Though we arrive empty, we leave the

1998), 141.

12. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1995), 246.

13. See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

14. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “What is a sacrament for Lutherans?,” January 2013, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/What_is_a_sacrament_for_Lutherans.pdf.

15. ELCA, “What is a sacrament for Lutherans?”

16. ELCA, “What is a sacrament for Lutherans?”

17. Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 231.

7. Cheryl Peterson, *Who is the Church: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2013), 8.

8. Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (New London, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), 45.

9. Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 45.

10. Cooke, 45.

11. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press,

table (or the font) as a transformed “receptacle of the Word and a temple of the Spirit.”¹⁸ Humans, in allowing God to transform their earthly existence by means of the reception of Christ’s self-gift, become God’s hands and feet in the world. Participants leave equipped to enact God’s purposes in our current reality.

As Schmemmann claims, however, the individual is not the only entity who experiences transformation via the sacraments.¹⁹ Sacramental participation also transforms the church by allowing the church to fulfill its sacramental role. Through its participation, the church becomes a sacramental symbol of the life to come. The church becomes the place where God’s people can be “transfigured by grace so that all things may be consummated in God.”²⁰ The church becomes the place where God’s mysterious saving action is realized. In its participation in the discursive elements of the sacramental-liturgical act, the church mediates God’s grace to the world and becomes the penultimate sacrament, an extension of Christ.

The church: Symbolic mediators of Christ

At its core, the church faces a philosophical quandary: since Christ is no longer physically present, who becomes representative of God in the earthly realm? The answer—the church! As the church participates in a complex process of symbolic mediation, God grants the church the authority to operate in God’s stead. Since language is generative and produces culture, symbolic mediation—the transfer of authority from Christ to the church—must be mediated by language.²¹ This mediation occurs “by the way of the senses” through symbolic language, or the language of the sacraments.²²

Symbolic language allows the church to enter a distinct cultural realm. This realm is not defined by the present but by an otherworldly materiality that one cannot experience on the earthly plane. Symbolic language also allows the Christian to experience the eschatological advent of the coming reign of God. Through our participation in this otherworldly realm, the church is compelled to manifest our eschatological identity in our interactions with the world. The church transforms to become symbolic mediators who transmit Christ to our communities. This work is rooted in the “not yet” of sacramental time. Participants are not only concerned with temporal glory but also with a heavenly reality that foreshadows our eternal union in Christ.

Simply put, symbolic mediation allows the church to operate in the absence of God. Unlike Thomas or the original disciples, today’s Christians cannot touch Christ’s physical body or view his stigmata. Instead, “we can touch [Christ’s body] only as the *body symbolized* through the testimony the Church gives about him, through the scriptures reread as his own word, the sacraments performed as his own gestures, the ethical witness of the

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communion between brother and sisters....”²³ Thus, the church’s sacramental identity, the means by which it reveals Christ to the world, is constituted through the discursive act of liturgy, the shared sensory experience that unites disparate people into the one holy and apostolic church. Our worship allows us to become “the *living letter* where the risen Christ eschatologically takes on flesh and manifests himself to all people.”²⁴

Since the church can only fulfill its role as a symbolic mediator through sacramental-liturgical discourse, the church, and thus the Gospel, is communal. It is through being a subject in the liturgy that one experiences “the presence and action of Christ.”²⁵ The gathered liturgical assembly “constitutes the fundamental ‘sacramental’ representation of the presence of the absence of God.”²⁶ In Christ’s absence, the church becomes the place where we formally receive God’s means of grace. As such, the church functions as a sacrament, the primary means by which one comes to understand and experience God’s saving action.

In Lutheran thought, Bonhoeffer comes close to recognizing the church as the penultimate sacrament but does not declare it outright. Rather, Bonhoeffer envisions the church as “Christ existing as Church–Community.” For Bonhoeffer, people do not exist solely as individual entities. Instead, Bonhoeffer writes, “...there would be no self-consciousness without community—or better, that self-consciousness arises concurrently with the consciousness of existing in community.”²⁷ Thus, the church transcends one’s individual interests and exists within collective communities. In

18. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 53.

19. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 151.

20. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 151.

21. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 82.

22. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 90-91.

23. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 170 (italics original).

24. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 264.

25. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 184.

26. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 188-189.

27. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 70.

the church, one receives one's identity by means of Christ's self-gift to the world. The reception of this gift requires that one exists as a "collective person," or as the symbolic manifestation of Christ in the world.²⁸

Thus, for Bonhoeffer and Chauvet, Christ's absence is not a threat because Christ continues to be made manifest in the world by the church. The Holy Spirit empowers the "church-community" to transmit God's grace to all whom they encounter. This transmission occurs through participation in the sacramental-liturgical act. It is "in the assembly" that "the church-community pledges itself to God, according to God's will; and here God pledges to be present within the church-community."²⁹ In worship, God makes God's presence known. An "absent" God becomes visible to the gathered assembly, and in response, the assembly reflects God's grace in the world.

The difference between Bonhoeffer and Chauvet appears largely semantic. It is even possible that if Bonhoeffer were alive today, he would join Chauvet in his outright affirmation of the church as sacrament. Regardless, if a sacrament, as defined by the ELCA, is 1) "something Jesus commanded us to do," 2) "connected with God's promise," and 3) contains "a physical element—something we can see, touch, and sometimes taste," then the church, as it exists as an extension of Christ, functions as the penultimate sacrament.³⁰

For one, Jesus commands the church to be Christ's representative on this earth. The Great Commission commands that Jesus' followers "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 20:19). Jesus also intends that his followers, in response to knowing Jesus, "will also do the works that [Jesus does]" (John 14:12). The church is also connected to God's promises. The corporate work of the church, the church's sacramental-liturgical act, is the primary means by that one is made alive in Christ and begins to understand Christ's salvific act. Finally, the church contains a physical element—the people. It is not the physical building that reflects the promises of God in Jesus Christ, but it is instead the actions of the people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, who make Christ manifest to the world. This sacramental reality is communicated via the ELCA's tagline, "God's Work. Our Hands." It is the church, functioning as symbolic mediators, that manifests the work of God. It is the church that enacts the *eschatological advent* of Christ's coming reign.³¹

Church as sacrament: Ethical implications

The church's sacramental nature carries several ethical implications that impact our denomination's ability to make Christ manifest to one million new, young, and diverse members. At its core, for the church to embody its sacramental nature, Chauvet argues that the church needs to 1) be rooted in scripture, 2) be transformed by participation in the sacraments, and 3) align its actions to the

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ethics of Jesus.³² Within this framework, the church, through acts of worship, becomes the primary means by which the Christian submits "to the mystery of God revealed in the crucified and resurrected Jesus."³³ The church becomes *the* site where believers are liberated by the Gospel. Participants in the act of worship receive both freedom from sin and the freedom to serve their neighbor.

This freedom demands that Christians reckon with the humanity of those who are different. A sacramental church embraces multiplicity, both multiplicity in terms of identity and multiplicity in the sacramental-liturgical act. It recognizes that there are various modes by which one can receive and reflect God's grace in the world. As such, a church that understands its role as a symbolic mediator maintains a posture of openness. The church opens itself up to God's continuing revelation and resists the way the status quo hardens barriers to sacramental participation and, in turn, prevents marginalized bodies from experiencing God's grace.

The church can only fulfill this mission if it is willing to let go of petty grievances that divide the institutional church into competing hierarchies and align its priorities with the interests of the marginalized. This alignment looks like building intentional relationships with bodies that deviate from the normative script. It means resisting the various "isms" that too often dilute the church's sacramental nature. Alignment looks like becoming intimate with people whom the world chooses to despise (such as LGBTQIA+ folks, people experiencing homelessness, refugees, or people seeking asylum at our Southern border). Alignment looks like eucharistic solidarity—solidarity that demands that Christians view the despised and the deviant as their neighbors, as beloved members of the body of Christ.³⁴

Eucharistic solidarity demands that the privileged build in-

28. Bonhoeffer, *Santorum Communio*, 280.

29. Bonhoeffer, *Santorum Communio*, 228.

30. ELCA, "What Is a Sacrament for Lutherans?"

31. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 141.

32. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 226.

33. Bruce T. Morrill, *Practical Sacramental Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Press, 2021), 11.

34. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race, and being*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 94.

timate relationships with the marginalized. These relationships should be so intimate that the privileged become apprehended by the suffering of “the other” and are moved to confront and address the oppressive cause of the other’s suffering. This work must be done according to the needs and desires of those experiencing suffering. This work also demands that the privileged acknowledge their complicity in crafting oppressive structures and agree to shoulder the suffering of the suffering ones in hope that one day all will experience liberation.³⁵ This alliance, rooted in active listening coupled with the willingness to modify the sacramental-liturgical act in accordance with the needs of the deviant and despised, will allow our denomination to achieve its goals and remain relevant in the years to come.

Unity in diversity

Even as the ELCA embraces diversity, it is essential that we remain true to our distinctive Lutheran identity, an identity rooted in justification by grace through faith in Christ. Modal diversity in the liturgical-sacramental act does not preclude our embrace of this and other central tenants of confessional Lutheranism. We can exist beyond binaries by seeking unity in our diversity. We can be marked by essentialist claims while continuing to construct distinct communities of faith that remain culturally relevant to the people they serve.

These essentialist claims should be rooted in the four “marks” of the church. By extending Bonhoeffer’s image of the church as “church-community,” Nessian argues that the church as “the collective person of Jesus Christ” has four distinct marks: the church is 1) *one*, 2) *holy*, 3) *catholic*, and 4) *apostolic*. These four marks unite all worshipping communities and allow the church to fulfill its calling as symbolic mediators.³⁶

One: The church is “one” when the believer gains membership in their worshipping community through baptism. Baptism does not consider individual identity markers. Instead, *all* are invited to the bath to receive God’s grace and be welcomed into the universal church.³⁷ Through the act of baptism, the Spirit sows unity and encourages the type of ecumenism that has the potential to repair historic breaches; cooperation is encouraged.³⁸ Through baptism, the Spirit also marks deviant bodies as those that embody Christ. All people, no matter their particularities, are called to the font to be welcomed into the community of Christ. The church’s “oneness” is marked by a common ritual act rather than a monolithic understanding of who is worthy of receiving the grace and love of Christ.

Holy: The church becomes the extension of Christ in the world through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.³⁹ Christ’s sacrifice justifies the church and its members. It sets them apart as “holy.” This holi-

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ness is not gained by individual piety or collective action. Christ is the sole actor. Justification occurs only by grace through faith. This theological reality means that all people, without exceptions, can be made right by the power of Christ. It also means that modal differences do not define our salvation. Instead, even distinct worshipping communities remain united when they collectively acknowledge that salvation comes from Christ alone.

Catholic: The church’s “catholic” identity means that the local congregation is situated within the cosmic identity of the universal church. As such, local congregations are concerned not only for their own well-being but also for the well-being of the church and the entire “breadth of creation.”⁴⁰ This care is not limited to human flourishing. We are called to care for creatures and climate as well as our fellow humans.⁴¹ Our sacramental identity demands that the church practice its catholicity by engaging in collective action with ecumenical partners to alleviate suffering. This collective action is made stronger by our diversity as distinct voices are able to communicate the needs of their community and shape the action by which the church represents Christ in the world.

Apostolic: Finally, the Spirit has gifted the church, just as it gifted the early apostles, with distinct gifts that we are to use to further the flourishing of all creation. Thus, the church is marked as “apostolic.” Christ calls an apostolic church to affirm the sacred dignity of all of humanity.⁴² Christ also summons an apostolic church to use its gifts to ensure that all of creation is treated with humility and respect.⁴³ This work demands a prophetic witness that calls out systems and structures that profane the name of God by failing to recognize each creature’s inherent worth. Diversity strengthens the church’s prophetic work. The Spirit grants each person distinct gifts. Our distinctiveness allows the church to be better equipped to manifest Christ to people with diverse identity markers.

35. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 94.

36. Craig L. Nessian, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 51-55.

37. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 52.

38. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 53.

39. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 53.

40. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 54.

41. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 54.

42. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 55.

43. Nessian, *Shalom Church*, 55.

These four marks reveal that diversity does not divide. Rather, diversity equips the church to better fulfill Christ's apostolic mandate to go and make disciples of all nations. Diversity empowers the church to achieve its sacramental potential by reminding us that we are united by our baptism and our shared reliance on Christ. Despite our differences, the distinctive individuals who compose one universal church, are made free from sin, so that we can be of service to our neighbors by acting out our sacramental identity. This process of justification precludes no one. All are welcomed to receive God's gifts. All can embody the church as Sacrament. All can become symbolic mediators of Christ in the world.

Conclusion

This framework demonstrates that the absence of God is not something to fear. Rather, the absence of God equips the assembly to become the primary means by which the people experience the Risen Christ. By means of symbolic mediation, the absent Christ transforms the church into a participatory body—we become mediators—that embraces the despised and frees the deviant to encounter the salvific act of Christ. The church becomes the penultimate sacrament, a living extension of Christ.

If the ELCA is to achieve its goal of engaging one million new, young, and diverse members, we must lean into our sacramental identity. We must practice eucharistic solidarity by listening to the voices of the unchurched and becoming intimate with the marginalized. We must become so apprehended by their stories that we orient our ministries toward their needs and desires. We must become so apprehended that we are willing to modify our customs and traditions so that Christ becomes manifest in new and compelling ways. A church that recognizes its sacramental identity is the church of the future. May we reckon with the church's sacramental nature, so that we might make Christ known to the ends of the earth!

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