
Currents FOCUS

Passions of a Lifetime

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This article represents excerpts from my writings over seventy years. Contexts change, issues change, even my name has changed. However, I discovered the essence of what I believe has not. The reader will find significant threads from these samplings from my fourteen books, chapters in books, articles, columns, public letters, a high school term paper and graduation speech. I chose four main areas: Education, Leadership, Diakonia, and Justice with three excerpts of writing within each section.

EDUCATION

The Importance of Education 1955

Education is one of the most important sources of culture. All people should have some learning, that the entire nation should be literate.

Today methods are used whereby students on every educational level receive training according to their ability. But in the nineteenth century students were punished for being of low intelligence. If a student was at the foot of the class for three days he would receive a whipping. Whippings for tardiness were given when children had to be starting their walk to school as early as 5:30.¹

Through their reading, children were taught the value of being able to read. History and geography were taught in United States schools beginning about 1850. Although teachers taught mostly facts they did help impart a feeling of nationalism in the Union.

Many deeply religious people were of the thought that human intellect shouldn't be stopped. Honest investigation of thought should not damage the truth.²

Education Ministry in the Congregation 1983

Curriculum is God and God's people together at a certain place and time in history. All else is resource. The questions are, "Who are the people?" and "How are the people teaching and learning

1. Norma Jean Cook, "Literary Works Which Have Influenced American Culture," a 105-page term paper written for high school American History Class, (Mason City, Iowa, 1955), 5, 6, 8.

2. Cook, "Literary Works," 96.

We need to create a setting in which we can be present with one another. Once that environment and trust is established, a teacher can use one of any number of teaching methods.

from one another? What are the formal educational offerings for each age group? What informal learning takes place when people gather, such as at choir rehearsals, and church council meetings? What is the teaching and learning in the ways people care for each other, the ways they worship, and in the way they live out the Christian life?³

First of all, we need to create a setting in which we can be present with one another. Once that environment and trust is established, a teacher can use one of any number of teaching methods. In this book we discuss the theology of methodology as we choose from eight ways of teaching: Presentation, Worshipping Community, Discussion, Inductive Study, Individualized Learning, Confrontation and Clarification, Experiential Learning, and Journal Keeping.⁴

Un-reflected experience slips away. Remembering and working with our own past experiences provides growth possibilities. We all are engaged in teaching and learning in almost every activity of life. Once a person begins to notice, to observe, to listen, and to reflect, new ways of learning open up. This is different from authoritative teaching in which the teacher is assumed to have all the knowledge and simply tells the learner what to think. Education Ministry in the congregation needs to help each person, whatever their gifts

3. Norma J. Everist, *Education Ministry in the Congregation*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 13.

4. Everist, *Education Ministry*, 17-19.

and abilities, know themselves in response to God's revelation in communion with the body of Christ.⁵

The Church as Learning Community 2002

Too often in the local congregation we separate ourselves into two categories, the teachers and the learners. Actually, each individual needs to be a teacher in order to be a learner, and a learner in order to become and continue to be a teacher. An idea is not really ours until we have shared it. In the Christian learning community where all become speakers of the Word as well as hearers, where the three-year-old is teacher and the seventy-six-year-old is learner, the Word comes round once more, as a gift.⁶

We need to create effective learning environments to be different together. The leader holds the responsibility for setting the learning environment. Once the learning environment is established, however, the community helps maintain a disciplined atmosphere. There is a difference between the discipline we enforce and the discipline we maintain. Rather than spending untold energy trying to stop disruptive behavior or domination, thereby risking destroying the very relationships we wish to build, we can use that energy, to creatively and cooperatively establish maintainable, healthy learning environments where all can equitably participate.

Aspects of setting the environment are the physical factor, the time factor, the relational factor, the intellectual factor, and the emotional factor. Maintaining safe learning environments becomes increasingly difficult in a society where there are more guns than people. It remains to be seen if news of shootings becomes rare, either because shootings subside, or, more chilling because they become commonplace.⁷

Members of the body of Christ need one another to faithfully carry out their call to mission in the world. Learning leads to mission and mission leads to learning. Vocational discernment is an educational task. The contemporary use of "vocation" is job or profession. Some people, therefore, say they don't have a "vocation." However, the Latin original concept of *vocatio* is *to call*. Theologically here are five images of the body of believers at work in the world: 1. Ministry of the Baptized. Ministry has its origins in baptism. As each person is plunged into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that one is washed, forgiven, renewed and liberated for vocation. 2. Priesthood of all believers. Priesthood underscores that vocation is rooted in the forgiveness of sins. 3. *Laos* in Ministry. *Laos* means people. The English term "laity," though etymologically rooted in *laos* commonly means being a nonprofessional, not very knowledgeable or unskilled. Using the

5. Everist, *Education Ministry*, 181-186.

6. Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 23. (This book is still being used in seminaries twenty-three years later.)

7. Everist, *The Church as Learning Community*, 61-91. (Now, twenty-three years later it is clear, school mass shootings have become more common.)

The church gathered for worship becomes the church scattered in many directions. Not everything we do each day is automatically ministry but any role or arena in daily life has the potential for ministry.

word *laos* may help all people to reclaim their place in the church serving in the world. 4. Ministry of the Whole People of God. "Whole" can mean "complete, all, everyone," especially with our disabilities, as we minister in a world that is broken, unhealthy, and dangerous. 5. Ministry in Daily Life. No matter how unequal in gifts, status, or resources, each person's day is twenty-four hours long. The church gathered for worship becomes the church scattered in many directions. Not everything we do each day is automatically ministry but any role or arena in daily life has the potential for ministry.⁸

What does religious education mean in a pluralistic society? Education in the mode of American civil religion has two serious flaws: erasing indigenous people who were "discovered" and dehumanizing people brought here in slave ships. The ecclesiology of ACR excludes. Pluralism is the educational encounter and inclusion of multiple stories. There can be no public without providing education for all—advocating for basic literacy and equal educational opportunities at all levels of schooling.⁹

LEADERSHIP

High School Graduation Speech 1956

With world-shaking problems of the Cold War, racial segregation, atomic power and political issues, we are called not to judge, not to condemn, but to ask, "What do you want us to do with tomorrow?"

People keep saying, "Tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow is youth's world, and youth must make it better." Tomorrow, however, will not be better if we wait until tomorrow to improve it. Tomorrow will be better only to the extent that we are inspired to improve it and are successful in leading people to accomplish that purpose.¹⁰

Transforming Leadership 2008

Without trust a leader cannot lead. Trust-building means intentionally fostering a climate of open communication where people take the time to listen to each other. This may seem simple, but

8. Everist, *The Church as Learning Community*, 289-296.

9. Everist, *The Church as Learning Community*, 322, 342-343.

10. Norma Jean Cook, High School Graduation Speech, (Mason City, Iowa, 1956), Original manuscript.

congregations often have established unhealthy patterns of talking “at” each other or “about” each other.¹¹

Love the people. Trust does not rest on a singular event but is built through a succession of trusting experiences. Some people may believe that a “safe” environment lacks risk. On the contrary, congregations where trust is solid will have the courage to engage in courageous ministry in places in need of justice and love.

Are people among whom we minister trustworthy? Yes and no. It may seem naïve to trust people, especially if we have recently been burned. To place ultimate trust in any one human being underestimates the sinfulness of the human condition. We do, however, have a trustworthy God. When we are let down, even abandoned, God is here. By resting in the arms of this God of covenant faithfulness, we are free from all that would enslave us, so that we can exercise trust.¹²

“Ecclesial” comes from the Greek word, *ekklesia*, which refers to the “gathered people.” We hear the wisdom of twelve ecclesial foundations: 1. The Church is both local and universal. 2. The Church is both saint and sinner. 3. The Church needs liberated leadership. 4. The transforming Church gathers all people around. 5. The living saints are our neighbors. 6. The Church is set apart to be sent forth: Vocation. 7. The Church is something to give away: Mission. 8. Self-negation blocks real courageous service. 9. The Church is a company of strangers. 10. The Church is a suffering servant. 11. A global Church will face idolatrous promises. 12. The Church is not a claim but a gift.¹³

In considering leadership, we need to focus on power and partnership. The oppressive systems of sexism, racism, classism, nationalism and other “isms” are interrelated. In most sectors of public life women and men and people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds are now visible together, often sitting side by side at the news anchor desk or on church councils. However, issues of patriarchy, white privilege, economic entitlement, control and oppression remain. Full partnership is elusive, but it is possible.

We write as radical feminists. By “radical” we mean going to the “root” of the issues and taking seriously the deathly bondage of all oppressive systems. When we confess our participation in these systems, we take them to the cross. In the power of the resurrection, we are freed for powerful servanthood and Spirit-filled partnership.

There is opportunity for men to ask, “What is it like for you as a woman?” and for women to ask, “What is it like for you as a man? What is it like to always be put in the ‘oppressor’ category?” The powerful need to recognize the important role of relinquishment of power. Shared power is good for both women and men. Because we are each made in the image of God, we are able to

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regard each other in new ways.¹⁴

How do we live in ways that respect boundaries and yet express affection? What do healthy ethical relationships look like? The issue is not just, “What am I allowed to do and prohibited from doing?” Nor is it simply a matter of “self-care.” The questions are about identity, role, and relationships.

Admiration: We may admire a person’s eloquence, wisdom, or appearance. Strangely, we may even admire someone with negative characteristics, such as hubris, but not want to be like that. Unhealthy admiration may be a form of idolatry. We need to be clear whom we choose for role models. I can admire someone I have never met, such as a historic figure. We may admire the courage of a person who lives in poverty as much if not more than a person who lives with great wealth. A relationship can be transformed when I look at someone in a new way and try to see something about that person I can admire.

Affection: We define affection as “to have a fond or tender feeling toward another.” We feel affection for people when we enjoy working with them and simply appreciate being together. Because we are sexual beings, affection has the potential for becoming a sexual attraction. Eros is a wonderful gift in a monogamous relationship, but an inappropriate attraction can lead to endless problems and pain. In the broader sense of the word, mutual affection is life-giving. Affection “on purpose” can broaden our ability to appreciate—not just endure—people. We were created by God to hold each other in affection.

Respect: Respect is a willingness to show consideration or appreciation for someone. Genuine respect is a solid basis for collaborative relationships. Respect begets respect. Respectful leadership can transform whole communities. The temptation is to not respect those whose work or status is “lower” than ours. Leaders need to exercise respect in all their relationships. Sometimes respect can grow into affection, even admiration. Respect is a basic human need. We may hear someone who has lashed

11. Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson, *Transforming Leadership*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 2. (For purposes of this article, I will be quoting material that I wrote in this book. However, Craig and I conversed and truly wrote this book together in full partnership.)

12. Everist and Nesson, *Transforming Leadership*, 4-9.

13. Everist and Nesson, *Transforming Leadership*, 29-37.

14. Everist and Nesson, *Transforming Leadership*, 86-100.

out in anger or violence say, “They didn’t respect me.” Respecting people helps them respect their own gifts, abilities, and roles in the community.¹⁵

Huffington Post Article 2011

I was a contributing columnist for “The Huffington Post” for over five years, writing many posts on leadership. This is an excerpt from one, “A Safe Way to be Different Together,” January 13, 2011.

We were in Arizona last Saturday morning when a man with an enormous amount of ammunition took aim at his congresswoman who was meeting her constituents outside a Safeway supermarket. What is a “safe way” for us to gather in the public world? The first bill to come before the Arizona assembly when it reconvened after the shooting was for people to be able to have guns on college campuses. That would make teachers, leaders, and students more safe?

President Obama’s speech at the Memorial service in Tucson January 12 were wise words from a caring leader. How can we have conversations together in the public world that heal and do not wound?

Monday will be the twenty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Being a national holiday, a day to commit ourselves as leaders to acts of conversation and courage and inclusivity and non-violent change.

January 20th will be the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as president. We need to listen again to his “Ask not what your country can do for you, but for what you can do for your country.”¹⁶

DIAKONIA

Reflections on Becoming a Deaconess 1958 and Beyond

I entered Deaconess Hall in 1958. It was wonderful! We shared prayers in the morning, midday Valparaiso University chapel, took turns leading evening worship in Deaconess Hall and had devotions on our various floors at bedtime. We laughed and studied together.

I did a summer internship at the Lutheran Deaconess Association office in Ft. Wayne. Early on Pastor Krentz suffered a heart attack, so the office secretary and I took care of the daily operations of the LDA. Deaconesses could not marry until the late 1950s. I graduated in 1960. All the women from our class married within a few years, continuing to serve. Not that women were different; the church had changed the rules. I married Burton Everist in 1962.

At that time, upon graduation, deaconesses were assigned by the LCMS directly to their first call. I was assigned to Ascension congregation in St. Louis. During my four years there I also

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became the first deaconess to attend seminary, seeking an M.A. in Religion. All on one day in May 1964, Burton and I adopted a son, Mark, in the morning, I went to work at Ascension in the afternoon, and in the evening, I graduated from Concordia Seminary.

After living in Detroit where Burton was an inner-city pastor, we moved to New Haven, Connecticut, again to the inner-city. My diaconal ministry was un-salaried neighborhood community organizing. One day, however, I went up the hill to Yale Divinity School and enrolled. After graduating with an M.Div., I was invited to teach part-time at Yale.

Because I would be teaching future pastors, I considered ordination myself. I sought the counsel of the Deaconess Northeast Area Conference. My sisters said, “If women are now being ordained, some should come from the long line of deaconesses who have been serving since the New Testament church.” With their encouragement, I sought ordination and was ordained at Yale Divinity School in 1977.

This may have been the first time globally that a deaconess was ordained to Word and Sacrament ministry. However, people began to say, “Now that you are going up to higher things ...” I did not agree with that description and said, “When you are changing history, you should name your action.” I remained in the deaconess community. A long line of pastors and a long line of deaconesses alternately laid on hands at my ordination.¹⁷

Ordination of Deaconess Norma Everist 1977

Deaconess Norma Everist was ordained into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament September 18, 1977, at Marquand Chapel, Yale Divinity School. Here are excerpts from notes on the service:

Mutual ministry sets the tone for this Service of Holy Communion, recognizing the variety of our gifts, our oneness in Christ and the diverse forms of ministry present among us. This service is well peopled with participants in many Christian occupations.

15. Everist and Nessian, *Transforming Leadership*, 119-123.

16. Norma Cook Everist, “A Safe Way for Us to Be Different Together” in “The Huffington Post” which was founded in 2005 in New York City. January 13, 2011, pp. 1-2. (The Huffington Post is now owned by BuzzFeed and is now “Huffpost” a website and blog.)

17. A written record on the history of my early days as a deaconess from 1958-1977.

We have been well loved by a gracious God. In the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus we are set free to be partners in ministry. In Christ we are free to serve.

Deaconesses consecrated by the Lutheran Deaconess Association since its founding in 1919 have all taken a vow of servanthood for a lifetime and have been nourished by community. It is as an expression of that diaconal ministry that Norma this day, in response to the call of God and God's Church, is ordained to the specific ministry of Word and Sacrament. Although she is the first woman of this community to be ordained, her ministry takes its place beside those of her sisters, each committed to reaching out, to serve with specific gifts.¹⁸

A Theology of Diakonia at the Margins 2024

Meeting Christ the servant at the open tomb, we go forth to all places in the world, serving on behalf of the church. Rooted in a theology of the cross and resurrection we are called to diakonia among those in need, particularly the marginalized. We are part of a diverse, historic, and global diaconal community. The church dares to notice, to not pass by, to grow in skills of caring and working for justice with and among marginalized people, and to learn from them.¹⁹

We need to be grounded in Scripture. We need to be able to discern the needs of the world and theologize in that context so that the Gospel relates clearly to that situation. In every age, the diaconate needs to claim its calling and to help the church claim its calling to speak, serve, and act in the world.²⁰

Christians need to be in the world to be the church. A resurrection theology means ministry that is going beyond pity. Marginalized people do not need people's guilt but inclusion, support, and opportunity. It means claiming the power of Jesus Christ to be active. It means advocacy and, yes, risk, even getting into trouble through our activism. Diakonia is not an appendage to the Gospel. Diakonia neither is merely the carrier of the Gospel, nor offered just so people will be ready to hear the Gospel. Diakonia is Gospel action.²¹

Marginalization manifests itself in racism, sexism, ageism, classism, homophobia and more. So-called wealthy nations marginalize nations with fewer resources: "Forget them." Rich nations that ignore poorer nations choose to be ignorant, refusing to learn from the disregarded. Diaconal ministers often have been

18. Service folder for "A Eucharist Celebrating the Ordination of Deaconess Norma Everist into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 1977, Marquand Chapel, Yale Divinity School.

19. Norma Cook Everist, "A Theology of Ministry at the Margins" in Craig L. Nesson and Darryl W. Stephens, editors, *Diaconal Studies: Lived Theology for the Church in North America*. (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2024), 101.

20. Diakonia World Federation is an international and ecumenical community. Among the communities and associations in over thirty-five countries there are three regions: Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean (DOTAC), Diakonia Asia Pacific (DAP), and Diakonia Region Africa-Europe (DRAE).

21. Everist, "A Theology of Ministry at the Margins," 102.

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marginalized by the church because the people served were seen as less worthy. People who are unhoused are named "homeless." Differently abled people were named invalids: "in-valid."

People who are marginalized are not "the problem." Being excluded is the problem. We all participate in systemic sin, the reality is that we have corporate responsibility for sinful actions that hurt people. We need to be able to name the human predicaments—complex, personal, communal, and systemic—in the arenas of daily life. One of the core convictions of Martin Luther was that he believed serving the neighbor through diaconal work is everyone's vocation.²²

JUSTICE

Letter from a Refugee Camp 1967

When everything changes as quickly as it did this past Sunday one's emotions mix themselves together. One feels dramatic, frustrated, fearful, and most of all, tired. I write because I am driven, with the same frustrations as the rioters themselves, to "say something" that the world will not listen to or understand. In four days, the word "Detroit" has become a synonym for devastation. We can hardly bare to look at the heart-tugging picture of children among ruins.

The news media had carefully hoarded the news of riots for half a day in order to avoid panic. We smelled the thick smoke. We tried to sleep and awoke the next morning in disbelief that now 175 square blocks were included in the devastation. And, more unbelievable, our block of wood structures, including our parsonage next to our wooden church, was only a mile from the initial area. Everything was deathly still. Should we leave the city and accept the invitation of Concordia College in Ann Arbor to "house" refugees? But going meant leaving many people behind, the elderly on our block who would not leave their homes, the families on relief for whom losing their small amount of earthly possessions would mean losing all.

When the decision was finally made, we had a new dilemma as we received word that the nearby expressway was now under sniper fire. Negroes are being blamed, even though it is their

22. Everist, "A Theology of Ministry at the Margins," 103-105.

neighborhoods that were burning. Why is it that many Negroes breaking the curfew are slammed into jails but suburban white sights-seers breaking the curfew are not? I will go to bed tonight wondering if tomorrow my inner-city house and our church will still be there. I invite you to my refugee camp. Try to understand.²³

Ph.D. Dissertation:

The Paradox of Pluralism 1988

In the United States one sees a bewildering pluralism. Pluralism in this dissertation is defined as “the state of society in which people, diverse in religion, race, ethnicity, sex, age and ability, maintain that diversity and yet participate in the common society.” If religion is a unified system of beliefs which unite a community, and if religion is that which societies hold to be sacred, there is a problem posed by pluralism.²⁴

Some have argued that social cohesion would be served by the establishment of a civil religion. Robert Bellah in the 1960s said that some believe Christianity is the national faith. Rather, he believed that there exists alongside of and clearly differentiated from particular faiths an elaborate and well-instituted civil religion in the United States. This American civil religion excluded those who were brought here and sold as slaves and ignored the about 550 tribes who were already here, compounding the ambiguity of their identity by the concept of Columbus’ “discovery.”²⁵

Pluralism is not antithetical to community. The stranger is the test of the capacity of communities to incorporate diversity. People remain strangers to one another if they are denied access to a common life together. Xenophobia—the fear of the stranger—resides in places where surroundings feel threatening. When an outside threat seems great, one may begin to mistrust and turn against the neighbor. Expelling the stranger seems necessary. People do not simply expel the deviant to make the neighborhood, in their view, better, but because people are afraid that the “other” might come to matter. The dominant groups treat minorities unjustly particularly if they believe they may lose their dominance.²⁶

Pluralism is a reality, and the problem of creating community is acute. I call for a strengthening of specific faith communities and a more full participation of all faith communities in a just, safe public square. Religious expression in this society will be pluriform, through a variety of symbols, rituals, holy days, music and art. They all will exist in this nation, but the nation is not god or a chosen nation among nations. The nation needs to be a

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healthy place to be different together.²⁷

Strengthening diversity is necessary. By providing multiple connections between private and public spheres and places for public encounter the potential for a just pluralistic society and communal life is enhanced. The Church, while tempted to seek separation or succumb to assimilation is called to a vocation of hospitality to the stranger and equitable interdependence.²⁸

The First Amendment and Christian Nationalism 2024

The first Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is very important. It begins, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The ELCA position is: This is a pluralistic Nation. We have Separation of Church and State, or we might say, “religion and government.” We have Institutional Separation and Functional Interaction. We prize our own freedom of religion and work together in a nation of many religions. Christian Nationalism is the predominant current manifestation of American Civil Religion.

Here are excerpts from a Letter to the Editor I wrote that was published in the Des Moines Register March 7, 2024. “I am troubled that Iowa lawmakers passed a ‘religious freedom restoration act.’ This bill certainly does not ‘restore’ religious freedom. The First Amendment is meant for all. Specific practices are appropriate within a faith community. However, when a place is open to the public, all must be served so that all have free exercise of religion. To serve everyone is not a ‘burden.’ Religious freedom refers to people of all religions in this pluralistic nation.”

The First Amendment does not give us freedom to discriminate on the basis of our beliefs. In this United States of

23. Norma Everist, Letter written to family, friends and churches from Concordia College, Ann Arbor, MI, during the Detroit riots (revolution) in 1967.

24. Norma Cook Everist, “The paradox of pluralism: A sociological, ethical and ecclesiological perspective on the church’s vocation in the public world.” Dissertation presented to the faculties of the Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1988, pp. 19-20. Not included in these footnotes are the books and articles used in the dissertation.

25. Everist, “The paradox of pluralism,” 60-84.

26. Everist, “The paradox of pluralism,” 140-143.

27. Everist, “The paradox of pluralism,” 348.

28. Everist, “The paradox of pluralism,” Abstract.

America, throughout our history, we have excluded certain “kinds of people.” This is injustice. Some cities are now criminalizing homelessness. Becoming a criminal would make it even harder for unhoused people to find a job or to rent a place to live.

An educated citizenry is essential to a democracy. I believe it is important that children and youth of all religions, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds be taught together. Recently Iowa has moved toward some children benefiting greatly by vouchers for private education. The total cost of vouchers this school year will be over \$200,000,000, which therefore takes millions of dollars away from public K-12 schools.

The public school continues to be the place of promise for all. The rise of school violence raises the importance of such guidelines. Arming teachers and other school personnel with guns will not make things better, only more dangerous. Providing a hospitable, trustworthy space that is non-discriminatory and equitable is the goal.

Christian Nationalism is pervasive and is intended to be persuasive. This movement, which promotes the idea that to be a *real* American you must be a certain kind of Christian patriot, is growing with a dangerous intensity. Christian Nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy. The cross is wrapped in the flag. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation. Christian Nationalism is an exclusive ecclesiology which does not include people of many religions.²⁹

Conclusion

These have been my passions of a lifetime. What are yours? As we trace through the years, our thoughts in their historical context will be congruent with their time. We change, but perhaps not completely. I now realize these issues are before us again today.

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29. Norma Cook Everist, “The First Amendment and Christian Nationalism.” Script for presentation at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Iowa City, Iowa, April 2024.