



The Church in a Virtual Age
Missouri District Pastors' Conference

October 23-25, 2022

Margaritaville Lake Resort – Osage Beach

Sectional Guide

- Plenary I** **Monday, October 24** **9:30-10:15 a.m.**
“The Challenge of Online Religion”
Rev. Dr. Richard Serina, Associate Executive Director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations
- Plenary II** **Monday, October 24** **10:30-11:15 a.m.**
“The Lutheran (Ecclesiological) Distinctive”
Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann, Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis
- Plenary III** **Monday, October 24** **12:45-1:30 p.m.**
“Lutheran Confessional Ecclesiology: A Response to Online Religion”
Rev. Dr. Richard Serina
- Plenary IV** **Monday, October 24** **1:45-2:30 p.m.**
“The Church’s Witness to a Virtual World”
Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann

Sectional A: Tuesday, October 25 8:45 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.

Sectional	Title	Facilitator
A-01	The Pros and Cons of Communion Prior to Confirmation (“Early Communion”)	Rev. Jeffrey Dock
A-02	Glittering Vices: A Sermon Series for Lent	Rev. Dr. Mike Fieberkorn
A-03	How to Level Up Your Live Stream	Rev. Andrew Gimbel
A-04	Wellness Resources to Help You Be Well	Steve Gruenwald
A-05	Raising Faithful Young Disciples of Jesus Christ in an Effective PARTNERSHIP of the Congregation and Home	Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson
A-06	Investing for the Long-term: Ministries Keeping Money in the Corner Bank Creates an Unstable Financial Future	Ralph Simon
A-07	Alliance Defending Freedom Partnership with the Missouri District	Missouri District Staff

A-01: The Pros and Cons of Communion Prior to Confirmation (“Early Communion”)

Rev. Jeffrey Dock

Eight years ago, I instituted the practice of communion prior to confirmation (sometimes called “early communion”) at my two parishes. As this practice becomes more common across the Synod (albeit with a wide variety of implementations), a chance to sit down and discuss the advantages and disadvantages may prove helpful to pastors across the district. I’ll specifically focus on what led me to encourage my congregations toward this practice, what I’ve observed in my own situation (pros and cons), and the process I specifically use.

Hopefully, there will be a good discussion on the views of other pastors and their early communion own practices (or lack thereof) and the reasoning behind it.

Rev. Jeff Dock has served as a pastor in Northeast Missouri since his ordination 11 years ago and as Circuit Visitor for the past 4 years. He has two loving congregations, a great wife, 4 pretty good kids, and is sort of OK himself. Sort of.

A-02: Glittering Vices: A Sermon Series for Lent - Rev. Dr. Mike Fieberkorn

This sectional explores the topic of the church's tradition of reflecting on inner vices (often referred to as the "Seven Deadly Sins") and calls our attention to their presence in the passion narrative of our Lord Jesus Christ. This reflection subsequently allows for the development of a sermon series for Lent with a single vice as the topic for the sermon and its associated text in the passion narrative. Participants will briefly explore the nature of each vice, will locate its place in the narrative, and will receive a sermon packet for use and/or reference for the upcoming Lenten season.

Rev. Dr. Michael T. Fieberkorn is a 2013 graduate of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, and earned his doctorate in 2021. His dissertation centered on Luther's reframing of the church's vice and virtue tradition in light of Reformation theological convictions. Dr. Fieberkorn has been a pastor now just under a decade, serving congregations in Quincy, IL, and now Harvester, MO. Prior to being a pastor, he was an Air Force Officer, graduating from the Air Force Academy in 2003. He still serves as an Air Force Reservist in the Acquisition career field. Mike is blessed to be the husband of Angela, and the father of three beautiful children: Jacob (16), Kayla (13), and Logan (9). He enjoys reading and writing, watching football, and going for walks.

A-03: How to Level Up Your Live Stream - Rev. Andrew Gimbel

In this virtual age, live streaming has become a key piece of many congregational ministries, from live streamed worship services to Bible classes, from social media to podcasts. Our congregations and ministries have the opportunity to get some great content out there to the world! This sectional will talk through some of the practical nuts and bolts details of ways in which congregations can improve their streaming and digital content in ways that maximize the precious resources they have (e.g. time, volunteers, and money). Specifically, we will look at 1. Getting the right equipment in place 2. Using good software (OBS) 3. Expanding offerings based on what the congregation is already doing. This session will be geared primarily towards congregations that rely on a pastor or other church staff member who is largely responsible for live streaming and/or digital content. (i.e. "we don't pay somebody to do this").

Rev. Gimbel has been blessed to be serving at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in O'Fallon since 2009. As one who always has been comfortable with technology in many DIY and self-taught projects, he has been involved in the technology board at Holy Cross since its inception in 2014, including the launch of live streaming in 2018. Rev. Gimbel also led a livestream webinar for the Missouri District in spring of 2020 as distancing orders were sweeping across the state. Andrew is married to his wife, Laura, and they are blessed with four children: Miriam (12), Lila (10), Willa (4), and Holden (1). His family occasionally remarks about how many cords and cables he needs to buy and keep at home.

A-04: Wellness Resources to Help You Be Well - Steve Gruenwald

Learn about the programs and resources available to members of the Concordia Health Plan – such as Sword, Omada, WondDr Health, Virta, the EAP, and so much more – to help you be at your best physically and mentally as you serve your congregation.

Steve Gruenwald is the Director of Worker Wellness for Concordia Plan Services. He graduated from Concordia, Chicago with a BA in Lutheran Secondary Education. For 12 years he taught English, speech and drama in Lutheran high schools before joining CPS as a Communication Specialist and editor of Better Health. In 2006 Steve completed requirements to become a Certified Health and Wellness Manager. Steve and his wife, Bev (the Early Childhood Center Director at St. Paul's, Des Peres) live in St. Louis.

A-05: Raising Faithful Young Disciples of Jesus Christ in an Effective PARTNERSHIP of the Congregation and Home - Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson

Christian Smith (sociologist who years ago coined the term, 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism') wrote recently, "All research in the United States today shows clearly that parents are by far the most important factor influencing their children's religion, not only as youth but also after they leave home. Not clergy, religious schools, youth ministers, neighborhoods, Sunday school, mission trips, service projects, summer campus, peers, or the media. Parents." (p.69, *Handing Down the Faith*, Oxford University Press, 2021). Yet, Smith's research also shows that congregations have an important part in this work in formally teaching the content of faith, connecting families in a community, and inspiring parental "religiousness." In this breakout session, Dr. Thompson of Concordia Seminary will share findings from Smith's recent study, as well as the biblical teaching on the vocation of raising children in the faith with exegetical insights and practical application.

Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson is Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Specific Ministry Pastor Program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He has also as a campus pastor, sole pastor, and senior pastor for many years before being called to the seminary. His areas of experience and expertise include pastoral theology, catechesis, member assimilation, small group ministry, youth and family discipleship.

A-06: Investing for the Long-term: Ministries Keeping Money in the Corner Bank Creates an Unstable Financial Future - Ralph Simon

As individuals, financial advisors remind us to "invest in the long-term," not to worry about day-to-day fluctuations in the market, but to trust that over the years, our investments will grow. For ministries, this advice is even more important. Ministries must think in terms of investing for generations. Investing funds in the market is about knowing that an amount invested today will likely grow substantially over many years (far outpacing inflation) and help ensure future generations have the funding to continue their mission. In this session, Ralph Simon explains how the LCMS Foundation helps more than 500 LCMS ministries invest their funds via some of the world's most well-known, trusted and experienced investment firms and fund managers.

Ralph Simon is the Vice President of Investment Services at the LCMS Foundation. He is responsible for increasing the awareness and opportunities of the Foundation's investment services among LCMS congregations, colleges and universities, and other affiliated organizations. In addition, he also assists with identifying planned-giving opportunities and design and structure of ministry endowments. Ralph is a lifelong resident of St. Louis, a fifth-generation Lutheran and a member of Historic Trinity Lutheran Church, where he serves as the congregation president. He can be reached by email at ralph.simon@lfnd.org.

A-07: Alliance Defending Freedom Partnership with the Missouri District Presented by Missouri District Staff

The Missouri District has partnered with Alliance Defending Freedom to provide support for our congregations and schools related. Come learn about services ADF provides and how the Missouri District partnership provides a discounted membership to the ADF Church Alliance.

Sectional B: Tuesday, October 25**9:45 – 10:30 a.m.**

Sectional	Title	Facilitator
B-01	Mentioning the Unmentionables: The Corrosive Threat to Our Life Together and What We Can Do About It	Rev. Chris Heaton
B-02	Christ and His Church – A Six Week Sermon Series	Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan
B-03	Helping Your Military Members Thrive and Survive in the Military as LCMS Christians	Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana
B-04	Orality, Literacy, and Secondary Orality: Medium and Message in the Church and Her Catechesis	Rev. Dr. Craig Meissner
B-05	Why Virtual Opportunities Matter to Your Flock!	Rev. Joe Rodriguez
B-06	I'm Ready to Retire ... Or Am I?	Paul Snyder
B-07	Raising Faithful Young Disciples of Jesus Christ in an Effective PARTNERSHIP of the Congregation and Home	Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson

B-01: Mentioning the Unmentionables: The Corrosive Threat to Our Life Together and What We Can Do About It - Rev. Chris Heaton

This is a presentation addressing the issue of pornography (and related topics) that threatens our families and congregations. There is analysis of the issues, a consideration of Scriptural responses, and suggested best-practices both in the home and in the Church. Related topics are the Christian use of technology, dating, parenting, and ways the Church can engage at the ground level. The fundamental question this presentation seeks to address is: how do Christians operate in a decadent culture that is at odds with it at virtually every turn?

Rev. Chris Heaton has been a sole pastor in mid-Missouri for over four years. Before Seminary, I worked 17 years for Barnes and Noble, ten of those as a Store Manager. I had a front-row seat to what our Lutheran congregants are mass-consuming! I have been married for 25 years, and have two daughters, ages 16 and 12. My wife and I are proud Lutheran home-educators.

B-02: Christ and His Church – A Six Week Sermon Series – Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan

This sectional will present an outline and notes for a six-week sermon series on Christ and His Church. In a time when so much of our culture seeks to divide and technology can increase distance and separation, this series will explore Biblical metaphors for the Church and their implications for our life together. This series could be utilized during Lent or at other times to highlight the relationship of individual Christians with one another as the Church and the Church's relationship with Christ.

Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan was elected president of the Missouri District in 2015. He is a graduate of Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Dr. Hagan served parishes in Concordia, Missouri and Evansville, Indiana. He is married to Jill, and they are the parents of Caroline and Jack.

**B-03: Helping Your Military Members Thrive and Survive in the Military as LCMS Christians
Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana**

Scripture honors those who serve. We know of Centurions, Abraham and David the "warrior King." Martin Luther wrote on the vocation of military service in, "Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved." Romans 13 is the backbone of his work and on the "Two Kingdoms Doctrine." The military is a wonderful vocation. This session offers tips and ideas to assist those in the military. Service to God and Country is a challenge. The congregation is a key and essential element in military service. By grasping tight to the cross of Christ and relying on Him, the military is a place you can grow.

Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana, Chaplain, Lieutenant Colonel, USA (Ret.) is the Assistant Director of Ministry of the Armed Forces, for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. His driving passion is a deep love for those who struggle through difficult life events. Steve has written and spoken extensively on the topic of Christ's power through painful issues of life. He is a clinically trained chaplain with a specialty in spirituality and post-traumatic stress disorder. Hokana is a member of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education and a Diplomate, American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress as well as a Board-Certified Chaplain.

Hokana is a retired active-duty U.S. Army chaplain with 31 years of service to our nation. His assignments vary from Airborne Infantry, Armor, Combat Service Support, to major medical centers and military academic institutions. He is the recipient of the Legion of Merit medal, Order of Medical Military Merit medallion, the St. Martin of Tours Medal for meritorious service as an LCMS Chaplain in the military, and the "Four Chaplains Medal" by the United States Army Chaplaincy for collegial selfless behavior while rendering religious support in the US military.

Chaplain Hokana is married to his awesome bride Mary for 39 years. They have three adult children and four wonderful grandchildren.

B-04: Orality, Literacy, and Secondary Orality: Medium and Message in the Church and Her Catechesis **Rev. Dr. Craig Meissner**

Today we are constantly choosing whether to speak or write our words, as well as how to transmit them. Every medium employed affects us differently both individually and collectively. In the late 1900's Marshall McLuhan and especially Walter Ong of the "Toronto School" explicated more detailed ways that different communications media shape our thought, knowledge, consciousness, and relationships.

With the advent of the internet, where pictures and oral and literal words are transmitted simultaneously over different devices, we have entered a culture and era of what scholars have dubbed "secondary orality." Here, there are new relational, psychological, and sociological effects of both orality and literacy, though usually diminished compared to when employed independently. Noting the effects, advantages, and disadvantages of orality compared to literacy, and the medial devices by which both are transmitted can have great implications for how we worship, study, and go about the tasks of the Ministry, as well as our theological and ecclesial understanding.

In light of these insights, this presentation will observe new dimensions of brilliance in Luther's Small Catechism and the Reformer's catechetical advice. (This will be an adaptation of material from a D. Min course project in 2017).

Rev. Dr. Craig Meissner is Pastor of Holy Cross, Kansas City. Until this past April, he was pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Steger, Illinois for fourteen years and Mt. Calvary, Franklin Park/St. Michael, Chicago for five years before that. He received his S.T.M. (Systematic Theology) from CTS, Fort Wayne in 2010 and D. Min (Pastoral Care and Leadership) from the same in 2018. Craig has served on multiple roles in District Conference Committees (NID), including Chair and Program Committees, as well as District Life Coordinator, and Chair of the Northern Illinois Confessional Lutherans.

Before taking his call to Holy Cross he was accepted to study in the Ph.D. program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He resides in Kansas City with his wife, Rebekah, and daughter, Greta.

B-05: Why Virtual Opportunities Matter to Your Flock! Rev. Joe Rodriguez

The goal of virtual opportunities, worship or otherwise, should be for the building up of the Lord's church. When "two weeks to flatten the curve" arrived, all our congregations had to make decisions on how to move forward and many chose to use a virtual component. Today, even two and a half years later, some still offer virtual opportunities for their members, guests, or the online community created by the pandemic. While some see the online verses onsite opportunities as separate or exclusive of one another, there is a way to combine them as one in purpose. Obviously, the purpose is to build up one another in the Lord's church. This breakout sectional helps bridge the online and onsite opportunities to better serve the flock.

Rev. Joe Rodriguez: I am married to Eunice (nee Theiss), we have five grown children and currently blessed with seven awesome grandchildren. I have served as pastor of St. Stephen for over 15 years. When St. Stephen added our new sanctuary addition in 2013, we wanted to incorporate multi-sensory learning in our worship space. We were fortunate that our son Joey was studying worship arts at Concordia (now Nebraska) which was helpful in charting a path forward for worship in the new space. Heading into our capital campaign, we used video production to communicate one clear and concise message that Joey helped us create. Thankfully, we had the tools to manage online worship when the pandemic hit. Another key component was having a qualified audio/visual trained staff member that was already working on staff. We continue to use online worship, Bible classes, pre-school chapels, Sunday school lessons and much more through Facebook and YouTube. We are always looking for opportunities where online contributions can enhance our onsite opportunities.

B-06: I'm Ready to Retire ... Or Am I? Paul Snyder

This session is designed to review the concept of being financially well as a church worker, and provide information, tools, and resources to help pastors plan for their financial future.

Paul Snyder has been with Concordia Plans since 1982. As a part of the Financial Education Team he focuses on helping church workers be financially prepared, especially when it comes to planning for their retirement. Paul is a 1981 graduate of Concordia--River Forest, and is an active member and Director of Worship at Immanuel - Olivette, MO.

B-07: Raising Faithful Young Disciples of Jesus Christ in an Effective PARTNERSHIP of the Congregation and Home - Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson

Christian Smith (sociologist who years ago coined the term, 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism') wrote recently, "All research in the United States today shows clearly that parents are by far the most important factor influencing their children's religion, not only as youth but also after they leave home. Not clergy, religious schools, youth ministers, neighborhoods, Sunday school, mission trips, service projects, summer campus, peers, or the media. Parents." (p.69, *Handing Down the Faith*, Oxford University Press, 2021). Yet, Smith's research also shows that congregations have an important part in this work in formally teaching the content of faith, connecting families in a community, and inspiring parental "religiousness." In this breakout session, Dr. Thompson of Concordia Seminary will share findings from Smith's recent study, as well as the biblical teaching on the vocation of raising children in the faith with exegetical insights and practical application.

Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson is Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Specific Ministry Pastor Program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He has also as a campus pastor, sole pastor, and senior pastor for many years before being called to the seminary. His areas of experience and expertise include pastoral theology, catechesis, member assimilation, small group ministry, youth and family discipleship.

Sectional C: Tuesday, October 25 10:45 – 11:30 a.m.

Sectional	Title	Facilitator
C-01	Teaching Adults Online in a Virtual Age	Rev. Dr. Pete Jurchen
C-02	A Tale of Trees: Genesis to Revelation	Rev. Elden Kohn
C-03	A Concrete Gospel in a Virtual Age: Connecting the Four Gospel Accounts to the Four Living Creatures of the LORD's Throne	Rev. Paul Landgraf
C-04	Memes and Ministry	Rev. William Voelker
C-05	Staying Connected in a Digital World - Virtual Tools and Systems for Stewarding Your People	Tammy Wiese
C-06	Listening to the Needs of Our Retirees – And Soon to Retire	Moderated by Rev. Terry Weinhold
C-07	Two Kinds of Comfort: The Cross and its Comforts vs Philosophy and its Comforts in Post-Reformation Lutheran Dogmatics	Rev. Andrew Preus

C-01: Teaching Adults Online in a Virtual Age - Rev. Dr. Pete Jurchen

Though the technology had already been used for years, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many pastors to teach their Bible studies online. Even after the pandemic, many are still teaching their adults virtually. Like it or not, this new paradigm of teaching, for adults and for others, is now part of our culture. Trying to facilitate a meaningful educational experience for adults online is often confusing and frustrating, but it does not always have to be. In this session we will explore online education from an adult learning perspective. We will consider how to best engage adult learners in a virtual space. Whether or not you currently teach a Bible class or a group study online, in this session you will be equipped with some valuable insights and tips on how to get more out of your adult education programs.

Rev. Dr. Pete Jurchen is a Developing Editor of Bible and Curriculum Resources at Concordia Publishing House. In addition to his work to strengthen and aid the congregations of the LCMS with products and services that are faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, he regularly teaches and presents online for Concordia Seminary and other institutions. His passion is to educate, equip, and encourage pastors, so that they can better serve their congregations and equip God's people for the daily life of faith. He lives in Imperial, MO, with his wonderful wife Deb and five children.

C-02: A Tale of Trees: Genesis to Revelation - Rev. Elden Kohn

Participants will trace the theme of trees in Scripture from Genesis through Revelation as a way of highlighting the Father's redemptive work through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Rev. Elden Kohn was ordained and installed at Zion, Macon, in July 2013 after completing the M.Div. program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Before becoming a pastor, he earned a degree in Elementary Education and served as a teacher for five years. This included work as a missionary and ESL teacher in Togo, Africa, and in Taiwan. He also taught 5th-8th grade for one year in an LCMS school in St. Louis. Originally from Michigan, Elden now lives in Macon with his wife, Molly, and five children. He enjoys singing and playing guitar, running, woodworking and just hanging out at home with his family.

C-03: A Concrete Gospel in a Virtual Age: Connecting the Four Gospel Accounts to the Four Living Creatures of the LORD's Throne - Rev. Paul Landgraf

The Early Church connected the four gospel accounts to the four living creatures of Yahweh's throne in Ezekiel 1, 10, and Revelation 4, but their connections varied and were confusing to many. During the Enlightenment, the four accounts were seen in a more historical and chronological light, and this did not help the situation. Recently, with a more literary perspective, the four gospel accounts may be strongly connected to the four living creatures, and the varied use of historical presents within the four gospel accounts may help to support these connections.

Rev. Paul D. Landgraf graduated from Concordia Seminary in 1990. Since then he has completed two Masters of Sacred Theology degrees, one with the thesis route and one with the exam route. He has given papers on the literary structures of Genesis, Matthew, John, the Pauline Epistles, and Hebrews. He is currently in the process of writing a book about the gospel within biblical theology, and he is currently serving two rural congregations between St. Louis and Jefferson City (at Drake and Freedom).

C-04: Memes and Ministry - Rev. William Voelker

Memes have become culturally ubiquitous. These combinations of images and words communicate quickly, can be devastatingly effective, and function by their own set of rules. This presentation aims to lay out how memes function, what makes for effective (or not so effective) memes, some particular families of memes, and how they might be best used in communicating both within and outside the Church.

Rev. William Voelker has served as pastor at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Marshall, Missouri since 2012. His educational background includes work in both Philosophy and Classics.

**C-05: Staying Connected in a Digital World - Virtual Tools and Systems for Stewarding Your People
Tammy Wiese**

We will discuss strategies for tracking both in person and online attendance and how to use the attendance information to be good stewards of the people that God sends through our doors (both in person and virtually). How do you get people to let you know that they are joining you online? What do you do when someone has missed several weeks of church? Or, how do you know when someone has been absent? Are there ways to get the online viewers into your church on Sunday? We will present some of the online tools and processes we have used, including online connection cards, QR codes, a church specific app, and outreach through our weekly livestream.

Tammy Wiese is the Developer of Stewardship and Ministry Support Coordinator at Alive In Christ Lutheran Church in Columbia, MO. She came on staff at Alive In Christ in 2016 as the part time Developer of Stewardship and Assimilation and transitioned to full time with an expanded role in 2020. She has a M.S. in Human Development and Family Studies and previously worked in healthcare quality. She is married and has 2 teenage daughters.

**C-06: Listening to the Needs of Our Retirees – and Soon to Retire
President Lee Hagan, Paul Snyder, Steve Gruenwald, and Chaplain Steven Hokana
Moderated by Rev. Terry Weinhold**

This breakout is for retirees or soon to be retired. There will be short 5-minute presentations from the District President and from the wellness people from Concordia Plans but the emphasis will be on listening to the needs, concerns, and joys of the brothers for the majority of the seminar.

Rev. Terry Weinhold is a retired pastor who served most of his ministry in the Missouri District. He has served on numerous district boards and committees. Currently, in retirement, he serves as a special assistant to President Hagan in the area of call lists and special assignments.

C-07: Two Kinds of Comfort: The Cross and its Comforts vs Philosophy and its Comforts in Post-Reformation Lutheran Dogmatics – Rev. Andrew Preus

In their sections on the Cross and its Comforts, the old Lutheran dogmaticians often compared the comfort of philosophy and natural law with the comfort of the gospel in the Christian's cross. Here one finds a lively engagement with classical philosophers, showing the difference between how Christians and unbelievers deal with tragedy and suffering. This becomes a concrete application of law and gospel in the context of the cross. Such discussions from the dogmaticians serve at the same time as a polemic against false comforts, an apologetic for the truth, and pastoral consolation for troubled souls. The intention of this sectional is to present the main points of the Lutheran dogmaticians and demonstrate how such treatments of the cross help inform pastoral instruction and practice today.

Rev. Andrew J. Preus is pastor of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, New Haven, MO. He received his seminary training at CLTS, St. Catharines, ON (MDiv 2013) and CTS, Fort Wayne, IN (STM 2017). He and his wife, Leah, have been married for 13 years, and they have six children: Jacob, Solveig, Kristiana, Robert, Marian, and Cephas.

Plenary Presentations

“The Church in a Virtual Age—In the Flesh or On the Cloud?” Joel D. Biermann and Richard J. Serina, Jr.

1. The Challenge of Online Religion (Serina)

Premise: The practice of online religion is not new, but parallels the development of other cyber communities and involves assumptions about what such a community is, what that community does, and how that community does what it does that, while compatible with much of modern and/or American Christianity, is largely incompatible with a traditional Christian theology of the church, and especially one from a Lutheran perspective. “How you practice church reflects what you believe about the church.”

2. The Lutheran (Ecclesiological) Distinctive (Biermann)

Premise: Our Lutheran confession centers on Word and Sacrament, but our foundation in the church's teaching gives us a robust self-understanding of what it means to be church that distinguishes us not only from the world, but from many other Christian traditions and provides us an excellent grounding toward principles for sorting out the good and bad of the church's relationship to virtual religion.

3. Lutheran Confessional Ecclesiology: A Response to Online Religion (Serina)

Premise: The confessional foundations of Lutheran ecclesiology—particularly the shape it takes within the Missouri Synod—views the the public and visible gathering of the church as not only an indispensable medium for delivering the forgiveness of sins in various, tangible ways, but also a concrete embodiment of that fellowship of believers as the body of Christ, of that Christ's saving gospel, and of that gospel's means of grace in a way that the world might see and know.

4. The Church's Witness to a Virtual World (Biermann)

Premise: The church exists not for her own sake, but for the sake of the world. This idea is not commonly accepted, much less practiced, but has enormous implications for how the church understands herself and then functions in her routine activity – including her on-line presence and resources. The church witnesses God's reality to the world by her conduct and should more carefully consider this truth in all decision-making. Principles for navigating the world of virtual religion will be offered to guide and strengthen this witness.

Plenary Presenters



Rev. Dr. Richard J. Serina, Jr., is associate executive director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. The 20-member commission assists the Synod and the Office of the President by engaging in theological conversations with other church bodies, issuing theological reports and opinions, and addressing new religious movements. As associate executive director, Serina works with the executive director in helping the CTCR carry out its duties, chiefly drafting and editing CTCR documents, participating in interchurch dialogues, and maintaining the commission's theological library.

Serina came to the CTCR in 2020 from Ringwood, N.J., where he had served since February 2015 as pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church (New Jersey District). During that time, he was a Council of Presidents appointee to the CTCR (2019-2020), New Jersey District secretary (2015-2020), and coordinator of the New Jersey District pastoral conference committee (2016-2020). He also taught courses at Concordia College-New York and through the SMP program of Concordia Seminary-St. Louis. He represented New Jersey at both the 2016 and 2019 Synod conventions, where he was a member of floor committees on the Reformation and on Theology and Church Relations, respectively.

Prior to New Jersey, Serina completed his doctorate in Reformation Studies at Concordia Seminary-St. Louis, with a dissertation on ecclesiology and church reform in the sermons of Nicholas of Cusa, a noted fifteenth-century cardinal, residential bishop, philosopher and theologian (published with E.J. Brill in 2016). While at Concordia, he was guest professor of Historical Theology and fellow of the Center for Reformation Research (2013–2015). Additionally, he edits book reviews for the journal LOGIA, has edited two books (one on the 1519 Leipzig Debate, the other on Lutheran ecclesiology), and has published numerous articles and given various papers on the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. A native of Tampa, FL, Serina colloquized into the ministerium of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 2004, and subsequently served congregations in urban Dallas (Zion-Dallas, 2004–2006) and rural West Texas (Trinity-Albany, 2006–2010).

Rick is married to his wife of 16 years, Christina née Cavanaugh of Houston, Texas. Christina is a registered nurse who has worked in a variety of hospital settings, including five years at Barnes Jewish Care in St. Louis on the neurosurgical unit. She now homeschools their five young children, ages 13 to 2: Richard John, Emma Jane, Brendan Nikolas, Cosette Marie and James Cavanaugh. The Serinas reside in Green Park and worship at Hope Lutheran.



Dr. Joel D. Biermann is the Waldemar A. and June Schuette Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

A faculty member since 2002, Biermann teaches doctrinal theology with a special interest and emphasis centered on ethics and the correct role of the Law in the life of the believer. He also is the faculty marshal.

A pastor's son, Biermann was raised in parishes in Nebraska and Michigan. Graduating with his Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) from Concordia College in Ann Arbor, Mich. (1983), he enrolled at Concordia Seminary and finished his Master of Divinity (M.Div.) in 1987.

At Trinity Lutheran Church in Bemidji, Minn., and then St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Holt, Mich., he served as a parish pastor for 11 years.

Biermann returned to Concordia Seminary in 1998 as a graduate student. He completed his Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in 2002 with a dissertation entitled, "Virtue Ethics and the Place of Character Formation in Lutheran Theology."

Outside of his Seminary responsibilities, Biermann serves local congregations as invited and has helped produce material for congregational small group Bible studies (Help for the Hurried Life, Questions About). He also has worked on similar study material through Lutheran Hour Ministries (Who Am I, What Am I Doing Here?, Fatherhood, We the People, A Man Named Martin) and provided discussion questions and answers for a series of men's Bible study books through Concordia Publishing House (Blessed is the Man).

He has authored three books: *Courageous Fathers of the Bible* (Concordia Publishing House, 2011); *A Case for Character* (Fortress, 2014); and *Wholly Citizens* (Fortress, 2017). He also has written a Lenten/Easter sermon and worship series, *Restored in Christ*, published by Creative Communications for The Parish in 2014.

Biermann is a frequent speaker at LCMS District and congregational gatherings and conferences, where he covers a variety of topics, especially those relating to issues of discipleship, Christian formation, vocation, work and leisure ("rest"), as well as church and state issues.

Biermann and his wife, Jeannalee, have three adult children who are all graduates of Concordia Seminary. Jasmine and Justine are both Master of Arts (M.A.) graduates and Jess is a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) graduate and is currently working on his Ph.D. at the Seminary. They also have nine grandchildren.