
Wilhelm Loehle and the Future Church

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As with the church in the present, the church of the future is always constructed out of the fragments of the past. Only God can create something out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Human communities, including the community of church, always are constrained to imagine and construe the future with reference to what has gone before us. We are limited as human agents by our own personal experiences and accustomed patterns, in which we can be highly invested as the only way forward. One value of education is to expand our horizons to know, appreciate, evaluate, and reclaim those fragments of the past that are most promising for fashioning the future church.

In this article, we imagine how we can draw upon the Loehle legacy for the construction of a vital church in the future. We focus less on the past and more on the significance of the Loehle legacy for the emergent church, both for congregational life and theological education. We will explore six dimensions of the Loehle legacy: mission, worship, equipping others, *diakonia*, open questions, and recovery of the “missionary.” How can these themes contribute dynamically to the vitality of the future church?

Dimension One: Mission

Mission originates from the Triune God, who sends Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit to gather the church community through worship into life-giving relationships, to send forth the people of God to love and serve neighbors in every arena of daily life. Families, schools, workplaces, local communities, and global relationships provide the arenas where Christians have opportunities to serve the neighbors God gives us.¹ Georg Vicedom, a Neuendertelsau missionary, wrote a ground-breaking work, *The Mission of God*, in 1960, in which he articulated the significance of the Loehle legacy for the mission of the church.² Vicedom pointed out that

1. Craig L. Nesson, “Universal Priesthood of All Believers: Unfulfilled Promise of the Reformation,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* (Jan 2019): 8-15, <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/155/178> Accessed 26 January 2023.

2. George Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a*

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the primary agent of mission is the God who sends Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring forth the kingdom as God’s ultimate purpose for human salvation.

The mission is work that belongs to God. This is the first implication of mission Dei. God is the Lord, the One who gives the orders, the Owner, the One who takes care of things. [God] is the Protagonist in the mission. When we ascribe the mission to God in this way, then it is withdrawn from human whims. Hence we must show that God wants the mission and how [God] conducts it.³

While the church serves as an agent in God’s mission, the efforts of the church are not primary but are consequent and obedient to God as the divine Director of Evangelical Mission. With this seminal insight the Loehle legacy has born incredible

Theology of Mission, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965). Long before the subsequent work of David Bosch about the “mission of God” in his book, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), Vicedom in the Loehle tradition formulated and developed the foundational concept of mission Dei, which has played a seminal role in the “missional church” literature and movement of our times. The work of Vicedom builds on the work of the Willingen Conference in 1952.

3. Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, 5.

fruit for re-conceptualizing the entire field of missiology in an era where previous mission models have been severely criticized.

Outer Mission

Loehle and his colleagues distinguished mission activity into two types, outer and inner. Whereas inner mission addressed those who are already baptized members of the church, outer mission was directed to those outside of the Christian community. In Loehle's lifetime outer mission was directed in North America to Native Americans and inner mission to the emigrants from Germany gathering into congregations in need of Christian instruction. This distinction remains useful in our present context, though more nuanced and complex than implemented in previous generations.

Outer mission encompasses not only those in remote places, but also those who call themselves "spiritual" but not "religious," the increasing numbers of those who identify as "Nones," those who espouse Atheism as their studied worldview, and the "Dones," those who once were involved in the Christian church but now have lapsed into inactivity. Outer mission requires competence for building trustful relationships and constructive engagement with those in each of these categories.⁴ The outer mission of God is comprehensive to count all individuals, even those expressing opposition against God, as falling within the loving divine embrace of Christ whose arms are extended in welcome from the cross.

Inner Mission

Although this usage has been more common in German missiology than in North America, inner mission is an extremely fruitful concept to be retrieved for the renewal of Christian mission. By making the distinction between outer and inner mission, we are reminded that the mission of God needs to be understood as an ongoing activity among the baptized as much as it is also a divine activity among those who claim no church connection. God the Missionary continues to establish, renew, and deepen life-giving relationships with those who are already members of the body of Christ, so they might be drawn ever more closely into divine belovedness and sent forth as agents of that divine love. Inner mission begins with the means of grace employed by God to mediate the gifts and presence of Christ, including the Word, baptism, affirmation of baptism, Holy Communion, prayer, and the Christian community itself.⁵ God desires life-giving relation-

4. Cf. Lillian Daniel, *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To: Spirituality without Stereotypes, Religion without Ranting* (New York/Nashville: Faith Words, 2017); Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford, 2016); Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church* (Loveland, Colorado: Group, 2015); Alister E. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2004); and Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

5. Regarding the Christian community as a means of grace, see Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 45-46.

There is a striking convergence between the central claim of Christianity about love as the greatest of all gifts (1 Cor 13:13) and what ultimately makes for human happiness. The inner mission of the church is so to mediate the love of God in Christ to fill our hearts in relationship with others.

ships for us, beginning with our relationship with the Triune God and extending to every human being, every living creature, and all of creation.⁶

Not only does God desire life-giving relationships for us, but life-giving relationships are the deepest longing of the human heart. There is a striking correspondence between Christian theology and research about what finally makes people happy.⁷ While we are socialized to believe that things like wealth, status, and success are the most important factors in human happiness, the key element in long-term human happiness involves the quality of one's relationships and involvements in human community. While happiness is predicated on sufficiency in what is necessary for physical survival—food, water, shelter, safety, and health care among them, research demonstrates one compelling finding: "Human beings are social creatures, and the quality of our relationships is inextricably linked with our own physical and mental well-being."⁸ There is a striking convergence between the central claim of Christianity about love as the greatest of all gifts (1 Cor 13:13) and what ultimately makes for human happiness. The inner mission of the church is so to mediate the love of God in Christ to fill our hearts in relationship with others.

Dimension Two: Worship

Every generation faces its own call to the renewal of vibrant worship of the living God. Loehle answered that call by returning to ancient sources for the construction of a creative liturgical order, his *Agende*, which was used both locally in Neuendettelsau and through publication by Lutheran congregations in North America. In recent decades Lutheran churches in North America have

6. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

7. Liz Mineo, "Good Genes Are Nice, But Joy Is Better," *Harvard Gazette* (April 11, 2017), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/> Accessed 5 August 2019.

8. Carolyn Gregoire, "The 8 Most Important Things We've Learned About Happiness In The Past 10 Years," in *The Huffington Post* (Dec 6, 2017), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/23/science-of-happiness_n_7154918.html Accessed 5 August 2019.

engaged in vigorous deliberation about the nature and purpose of Christian worship. Many have jettisoned historic liturgy in favor of “contemporary” forms which intend to appeal to the unchurched and “seekers.” By contrast, ecumenical (mainstream) Protestant church bodies, as with the Roman Catholic Church, have reclaimed the value of the historic liturgical *ordo*, while at the same time providing resources for contextualizing the liturgy through various musical settings and alternative texts to construct the worship order.⁹ The Loehle legacy compels us to recover and renew the centrality of Word and Sacrament at the center of the church’s life and mission.

Proclaiming

A church schooled in the Loehle tradition remains grounded in its conviction about the efficacy of the proclaimed Word as a means of grace for bringing Jesus Christ to the world. As we consider the requisites of proclamation in the twenty-first century, not only must we devote attention to the traditional practices of preaching and teaching Scripture within the gathered congregation, but even more to proclamation that employs new modes of interpersonal communication, including the mediation of God’s angels through social media and other online platforms.¹⁰

The interpreter/proclaimer of God’s Word operates with the fundamental conviction that God is both the One who spoke in previous generations through the biblical texts and the Living One who promises to speak again today to hearers of the Word.¹¹ A new challenge and opportunity for proclamation involves the use of electronic media as means of grace for the work of the Holy Spirit in communicating God’s Word as law and Gospel. Each form of electronic communication offers opportunities for proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are many aspects to this brave new world and the Loehle legacy provides precedent. Here we can only comment on one facet, digital teaching and learning in service of the Christian faith.

The church has the innovative possibility to gather people for in-depth study of the Bible and the Christian faith through the development and use of digital teaching and learning methods, either asynchronously or in hybrid form including synchronous elements. Increasingly, we are discovering how to deliver highly effective social learning (life-giving relationships!) through the practices of “teaching by design” in a “collaborative and globally-networked pedagogy.”¹²

9. Department for Theology and Studies of the Lutheran World Federation, “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities.” (Geneva: LWF, 1996) http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/LWF_Nairobi_Statement_1994.pdf Accessed 26 January 2023.

10. See Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016).

11. For the following, see Craig L. Nessan, “Chapter 1: Biblical Authority and Lutheran Hermeneutics,” in *Free in Deed: The Heart of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 11-26.

12. See G. Brooke Lester, *Understanding Bible by Design: Create Courses with Purpose* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) and Nathan Loewen, *Effective Social Learning: A Collaborative, Globally-Networked*

Digital teaching and learning communities offer congregations, church members, and inquirers beyond the church opportunity to participate in a challenging and formative encounter with profound life questions from a Christian perspective.

While theological schools, such as Wartburg Theological Seminary, have innovated with new methods of distance learning, there are also enormous possibilities for introducing new forms of proclamation and worship into use by local congregations.¹³ Digital teaching and learning communities offer congregations, church members, and inquirers beyond the church opportunity to participate in a challenging and formative encounter with profound life questions from a Christian perspective.¹⁴ As Loehle was innovative in developing new forms of theological education by establishing an “emergency seminary” to prepare and form teachers and pastors for North America, the Loehle legacy provides precedent for imagining and developing creative new experiments for engaging God’s Word for Christian formation and proclamation.

Doing Liturgy

For Loehle, God is the Primary Actor, who encounters us in Word and Sacrament at worship and brings us Jesus Christ. Loehle was a renewer of liturgical worship, who researched ancient sources and reconstructed the worship rite. As we draw upon the Loehle legacy for the renewal of worship, we need to become articulate about a dynamic theology of worship that connects every aspect of the liturgy with formation for the Christian life.

Each of the historic elements of the liturgy involves both worship of God by the gathered people and the formation of the worshipping congregation in Christian life practices, inspired by God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ For example, the Great Thanksgiving forms the people of God to place the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ at the center of their daily thanksgivings. As we gather with the saints of every time and

Pedagogy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

13. Cf. Kristine Stache and Craig L. Nessan “Adventures into Digital Teaching, Learning, and Formation: A Case Study from Wartburg Theological Seminary,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 17 (Fall 2018): 20-45.

14. One gain from the global pandemic for church mission has been the adaptation by congregations of new methods for digital ministry.

15. For the following, see Craig L. Nessan, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), chapter 4.

place at the Lord's Table, we receive the body and blood of Christ so that we become the body of Christ for the life of the world. Here is a meal where there is amazing welcome and mercy for all, as Christ's body and blood are received in bread and wine. At the conclusion of the meal, we are sent: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." The church is sent for sharing the good news and being generous to the poor. Live according to who you have become at worship, members of the body of Christ!¹⁶ At worship the church is formed and scattered for mission into all arenas of daily life to serve the neighbors God gives us in our families, schools, workplaces, local communities, and around the globe.¹⁷

"Doing liturgy" is not only what we do as those gathered for worship in a sanctuary but also functions as formation for our being body of Christ in all involvements of daily life. The worshipping congregation becomes the liturgy and performs it every day for the life of the world (cf. Rom 12:1-2). At worship God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit transforms our lives as we are transmogrified into the very body of Christ. Doing liturgy is who we are!

Dimension Three: Equipping

Loehle provided many resources for Christian formation in his body of work. The equipping of the baptized through catechization is one the most critical educational tasks of the church. Teaching and forming people in the fabric of one holy catholic apostolic faith is the Great Work of the generations. This Great Work is even more urgent in our post-Christian era, when the traditional methods of catechizing (Sunday school, vacation Bible school, confirmation instruction, and Bible study) appear ineffective due to overscheduled lives and competition with other activities. Parents no longer automatically see the value of Christian education for children as it competes for precious time with other activities. Many adults are exhausted by the pace and stress of their lives and choose alternative Sunday activities. The challenges facing the church in its effort to equip the next generation for Christian existence are enormous.

Church leaders need laser focus to intentionally equip church members in the logic of the Christian faith. Ministers of the Word need to keep asking the question: "What does this have to do with Jesus Christ and following him?" If few are willing to gather for Christian education opportunities, ministers of the Word need to re-construe all meetings of the church as occasions for educating and equipping for Christian faith. Indeed, this is what it means to be a "minister of the Word" in our age: on every occasion to make connections between what we are doing and the significance of God's Word, Jesus Christ. Now is a *kairos* for the renewal of what it means to be a teaching and equipping church. Two themes emerge as pertinent from the Loehle legacy: confessing and practicing the Christian faith.

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Confessing (Orthodoxy)

"Confessing the Gospel of Jesus Christ" can no longer be considered the sole, or even primary, responsibility of those called as pastors but must become the shared responsibility of all the baptized. In the Affirmation of Baptism service, Christians promise to "proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed." Equipping the baptized for discipleship in our post-Christian age involves building capacity for speaking the good news of God in Christ to other people. In the New Testament, the words translated as "Gospel" (*euangelion*) and "proclaiming" (*euangelizomai*) both refer to verbal communication, speaking the promises of Christ one person to another. Paul describes the essential role of the spoken word as a means of grace for creating faith in hearers: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). Whereas evangelism has come to encompass various forms of publicity, evangelizing is very specific: speaking Christ to others.

Evangelizing begins with "evangelical listening," deep listening to the stories of others, and only then sharing the promises of God in Christ with others according to what we have heard. This approach requires Christians to be aware of the many ways in which the Gospel can be communicated to others. Just as in the New Testament there are many ways the gifts of Christ are described (as love, mercy, generosity, forgiveness, life, reconciliation, peace, joy, shared suffering, hope, etc.), Christian evangelizing needs to be adept at correlating what we hear through evangelical listening with a very specific expression of God's promises matching the needs of that person.¹⁸

Confessing the Gospel (justification by grace through faith in Christ alone) has been described as "the article upon which the church stands and falls." Every Christian generation is called to confess this Gospel at the center of its proclamation. The baptized need to be equipped intentionally for speaking the good news to others through modeling by church leaders, building small group

16. Cf. Nessan, *Shalom Church*, chapter 3.

17. Dwight L. DuBois, *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

18. See Norma Cook Everist, *Seventy Images of Grace in the Epistles... That Make All the Difference in Daily Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015)

We are called to live out the pattern of Jesus Christ in daily life. The disconnect between “churchified” life and daily life occurs from two directions: either by failing to understand that church is about patterning our lives on Jesus Christ or by not extending the pattern of Jesus Christ into all our roles and relationships.

ministries that foster speaking the faith, developing mentoring programs that focus on sharing of faith stories by trained mentors, and introducing the practice of testimony by church members at worship services.¹⁹ Equipping the body of Christ to confess means increasing the proficiency of church members to follow 1 Peter 3:15-16: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

Practicing (Pietism). Pietism arose as a renewal movement to instill Christian faith into the entirety of a person’s life.²⁰ The leaders of the Pietist movement observed how Christian faith had become compartmentalized into certain times of the week and by conventional religious practices, especially activities organized by the institutional church. By contrast, the pietist movement sought the full integration of Christian existence into every aspect of life. To accomplish this agenda, Pietism engaged in two strategies: 1) etching the pattern of the Christian life on believers through practices such as Bible reading, prayer, singing hymns, and small group meetings; and 2) drawing connections between Christian discipleship and everyday life.

As Orthodoxy and Pietism belong together, confessing the faith through evangelizing and practicing faith in daily life belong inseparably together. We are called to “proclaim the good news of God in Christ *in word and deed*.” This is the meaning of discipleship.²¹ Jesus Christ calls us to follow him. The church serves as the agent of God to etch the way of Jesus Christ as the pattern of our lives through worship, preaching, teaching, and spiritual practices. We are called to live out the pattern of Jesus Christ in daily life. The disconnect between “churchified” life and daily life occurs from two directions: either by failing to understand that church

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The Christian life is not about “being good.” The Christian life is about serving as “little Christs.” Luther writes:

. . . as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians . . .²²

This is baptismal existence, daily dying and rising with Christ. God in Jesus Christ puts to death everything in us that is not of Christ; God in Jesus Christ raises up in us everything that is of Christ. The church is called to equip the members of the body of Christ to “be Christ” for the sake of the world through our words (confessing/evangelizing) and our deeds (practicing/serving).

Dimension Four: Diakonia

Jesus Christ is a diaconal minister. One of the most apt and accurate descriptions of the ministry of Jesus Christ is the ministry of Word and Service. Jesus Christ became incarnate in the form of a servant (cf. Phil 2:5-7a). Jesus Christ commands his followers to live as ministers of Word and Service.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you servants are not greater than their master, nor are the messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (John 13:12-17).

The basin and towel are signs of Word and Service ministry for the whole church. How would our church be transformed by making foot washing a sacrament? Love is the spiritual gift and the washing of feet with water is the material sign, all at Jesus’ command.

Diakonia of All Believers

As the New Testament makes clear, Word and Service ministry is not only the ministry of Jesus Christ. Word and Service ministry, made explicit by those serving as deacons and deaconesses, is really the nature of ministry itself as entrusted by God to the *laos*, the whole people of God, the diakonia of all believers. No theme from the Reformation has more potency to contribute to the renewal of the church in the next generation than the universal

19. Bliese and Van Gelder, *The Evangelizing Church*, 129-132.

20. See Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

21. See Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

22. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), trans. and intro. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 88.

priesthood of all believers.²³ Luther described faith as “a living, daring confidence in God’s grace so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times.”²⁴

The stations where Christians are sent to live out their faith with living, daring confidence are the arenas of daily life where God gives us neighbors to serve in families, schools, workplaces, local communities, and civic engagement for the common good.²⁵ We stand at a juncture where the decline in church affiliation in the U.S. is gaining momentum. While people are searching for meaning and ways of authentic service, they do not perceive what the church has to offer as a living, daring confidence on which to stake their lives.

How might we reimagine pastoral ministry in relation to the ministry of the whole people of God, a diakonia of all believers? Word and Sacrament ministry exists finally as a ministry of service “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). Word and Sacrament ministers contribute to this service by so proclaiming the Word and stewarding the sacraments that the *laos* (laity, whole people of God) are *set free from* everything that prevents them from becoming the individuals they were created to be and *set free for* living out their baptismal ordination in all the arenas of daily life—family, school, workplace, local community, and civil society. Word and Sacrament ministry must be renewed as a ministry oriented toward equipping a diaconal church in service to others for the life of the world.

Deacons

With this vision for the diaconal ministry of all believers, the role of those called as deacons becomes as crucial for the church today as it was in the life of the earliest church or for the ministry of Loehle in the nineteenth century. The heart of diaconal ministry involves a dynamic exchange between church and world. Deacons are called to bring the crying needs of the world to the attention of the church and to equip the church for addressing the aching needs of society. Diaconal ministry has two key features: 1) the *exemplary function* to model the character of the ministry of all baptized individuals at the interface of church and world, and 2) the *catalytic function* to equip intentionally all members of the body of Christ to claim their baptismal vocation of service to neighbors in their daily lives.

Deacons fulfill a twofold role on behalf of a diaconal church. First, through the exercise of their own charismatic gifts (with their distinctive specializations), they demonstrate the character of Word and Service ministry as those sent by the church from worship into the world to serve neighbors and by bringing the needs of the world to the attention of the church. Second, deacons serve

23. Craig L. Nessan, “Universal Priesthood of All Believers: Unfulfilled Promise of the Reformation,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46 (Jan 2019): 8-15.

24. Martin Luther, “Prefaces to the New Testament,” in *Luther’s Works* 35: 370-371.

25. See the resources provided by the Life of Faith Initiative, www.lifeoffaith.info Accessed 26 January 2023.

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as catalysts among the whole people of God, equipping others for service that the church become diaconal church. Diaconal ministry involves the ongoing reformation of the church through Word and Service ministry in the name of Jesus Christ: the diakonia of all believers.²⁶

Dimension Five: Open Questions

One of the most intriguing and needed contributions to ecclesiology from the Loehle legacy is the stance of “open questions.”²⁷ This principle anticipates one of the key hermeneutical moves from the ecumenical movement. Already in 1893 Sigmund Fritschel described the Iowa Synod as representing “a strictly confessional as well as ecumenical Lutheranism.”²⁸ During the twentieth century, building ecumenical consensus was fostered when the process shifted from concentrating primarily on those beliefs that divide to attention on the shared convictions of Christian faith. This involves making a distinction between matters which are central and those which may be considered peripheral, even *adiaphora*.

J. L. Neve wrote:

Iowa, from the very beginning, acted according to the principle that in matters of faith it is essential to agree in

26. Craig L. Nessan, “The Neighborliness (Diakonia) of All Believers: Toward Reimagining the Universal Priesthood,” in Kathryn A. Kleinhans, ed., *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 143-146.

27. Cf. Gerhard S. Ottersberg, “The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa and Other States, 1854-1904,” PhD Dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1949.

28. Sigmund Fritschel, “The German Iowa Synod,” in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1893), 62.

case church-fellowship is to take place, but that doctrinal points, which are not doctrines of faith, must not affect fellowship of faith and church-fellowship. They must be considered “open questions.” By this not a theory but a general principle concerning the treatment of differences within the Church in regard to church-fellowship is laid down.²⁹

Furthermore, “Iowa...insisted that this principle had always been a confessional declaration of the Lutheran Church, and that the Lutheran Church has always acted according to this principle. Another practice would end in sectarianism, and would be un-Lutheran, since it was just as wrong to add to the confessions as it was to detract from them.”³⁰ The principle of “open questions” remains a lasting contribution of the Loehle legacy to ecumenical understanding, whose articulation deserves more recognition and consideration regarding matters of theological controversy today.

The Ultimate

In his *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the importance of distinguishing, yet without separating, the “ultimate” from the “penultimate.” The ultimate pertains to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, while penultimate matters always must be viewed in relation to the ultimate.³¹ By placing justification at the very center of Christian faith and teaching, Bonhoeffer sought to secure Jesus Christ as the Center around whom all other matters revolve and in relation to whom all other questions are relativized.

Agreement about Jesus Christ as the ultimate source of our justification before God was crucial for unity in the Christian faith and served to distinguish between the Confessing Church and the German Christians. Bonhoeffer summoned the church to vigilance about the costly discipleship of Jesus Christ against yielding to “cheap grace.”³² By distinguishing without severing the relationship between the ultimate and penultimate, Bonhoeffer acknowledged the existence of a “hierarchy of truths,” a term later employed to guide the church in its interpretation of doctrine and involvement in ecumenical relations.³³

The Penultimate

To describe a point of doctrine as “penultimate” does not suggest that it is unimportant. Deliberating penultimate issues has great significance for understanding the coherence of the Christian faith

29. J.L. Neve, *A Brief History of the Lutheran Church in America* (Burlington, Iowa: German Literary Board, 1916), 290.

30. Neve, *A Brief History*, 291. The author cites the Augsburg Confession, article 7 regarding the *satis est* (“it is enough”).

31. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 6: 159-160.

32. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelley and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 4:53-56.

33. Cf. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: A New Study Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 1102.

The church needs to give its best analysis of and reflection upon penultimate matters, to represent Christian teaching faithfully and the Christian life with integrity. However, designating certain matters as penultimate allows the church to respect differences of interpretation on a range of issues without putting at risk justification, the ultimate, as the basis for church unity.

and for engaging ethical issues. The church needs to give its best analysis of and reflection upon penultimate matters, to represent Christian teaching faithfully and the Christian life with integrity. However, designating certain matters as penultimate allows the church to respect differences of interpretation on a range of issues without putting at risk justification, the ultimate, as the basis for church unity.

Loehle and his followers crafted a hermeneutical approach to the Lutheran confessions that distinguished between the ultimate claims of dogma and penultimate matters. Speaking about the doctrinal stance of the Iowa Synod, Sigmund Fritschel wrote:

On account of this historical view of the Symbols, the Iowa Synod does not see in them a code of law of atomistic dogmas of equal value and equal weight, but an organic expression of the living connection of the faith of the Church. Accordingly, there is a distinction to be made between the dogmas, properly speaking, and other parts of the Symbols; as e.g., the frequent exegetical, historical and other deductions, illustrations and demonstrations. Only the former, i.e., the dogmas, constitute the Confession, whilst the latter partake of this dignity only indirectly, inasmuch as they define the dogmas more clearly. ... The Church is bound to accept these doctrines which constitute the Confession in their totality, without exception, whilst the demand of doctrinal conformity by no means includes all unessential opinions which are only occasionally mentioned in the Symbols.³⁴

Key to the discussion of open questions in theological debate and ecumenical relationships not only involves agreement about

34. Fritschel, “The German Iowa Synod,” 65-66.

the principle itself but also consensus regarding which theological or ethical questions should be counted as penultimate. The great breakthroughs leading to ecumenical rapprochement—and especially the adoption of full communion agreements—witness to the fruitfulness of the hermeneutical approach that was anticipated and implemented by the representatives of the Loehle legacy in the Iowa Synod.

Dimension Six: Reclaiming the Missionary

Due to manifest abuses confusing Christian evangelism with Western cultural imperialism and denominationalism in missionary efforts by European and North American churches in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the “missionary” idea is called into question.³⁵ Attitudes conveying cultural superiority, ethnocentrism, imposition of Western categories, English as the normative language, and the inferiority of other cultures too often were considered the norm.³⁶ This is not to discredit the faithful service of those who served as missionaries with dedication and cultural sensitivity. It is rather to acknowledge how the churches regularly failed to operate with respect for the cultural matrix of other peoples. Much now has been gained with the practice of the accompaniment model of missionary collaboration, which method involves mutual partnership and enrichment.³⁷

Taking this history seriously, the church and theological education nevertheless need to reclaim a missionary impulse.³⁸ If we have entered a post-Christian era when we can no longer take for granted familiarity with the most rudimentary biblical and Christian teachings among people in the West, then we are living in an explicitly missionary situation analogous to the first centuries.³⁹ This creates a dilemma for those interpreting the Loehle legacy, insofar as theological education in this legacy has been consistently missionary both in its theological commitments and pastoral-diaconal engagement.

If Loehle’s theology is like the beating of the human heart, the diastolic moment is worship and the systolic moment is mission. It is consistent with Loehle’s theology that two of the most extensive studies of his thought in recent times have emphasized its missionary character.⁴⁰ Christian Weber refers to the Loehle

Rooted in the inherited Christian traditions, the new missionary must be a broker of cultures and religions, creative in interpreting and translating the Good News into languages that are understandable to those whose lives are versed in their own cultural and religious tongues.

legacy in describing the church’s call to mission:

It is very urgent for the church to start moving. The church must get away from self-centered thinking and protecting its ownership. It needs to find a global and missionary perspective... In Loehle’s words: “For mission is nothing but the one church of God in its movement, the actualization of the one universal, catholic church.”

This was the vision of Loehle. He drew a picture with words. The church is like a huge pilgrimage ascending a mountain. The first pilgrims have already reached the top. But the top is covered with clouds and cannot be seen from afar. At the end of the pilgrimage, people of all nations and colors join in. The pilgrims are a unity because they share the way.⁴¹

While the term “missionary” has been rightly criticized, we have entered an age where the recovery and reclamation of the missionary concept is crucial, specifically in the secular and religious milieu of North America.

What are the central features of the missionary mindset needed in our context? First, we need a deep understanding of the faith tradition in which we stand. This begins with clarity about the centrality and the efficacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Given the multicultural and multi-religious complexity of our context, this theological posture requires genuine appreciation for the diverse voices that have contributed to the formation of the tradition, both in Scripture and in Christian history. Attending to diverse voices provides rich resources in our missionary enterprise of interpreting the faith today.⁴² This includes awareness of the value of dissenting voices and even heretical opinions from the Christian past.

Second, the missionary mindset involves a profound capacity to listen. Careful and active listening attends to the nuances

35. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 291-297.

36. For a literary depiction, Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999).

37. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Global Mission in the Twenty-First Century: A Vision of Evangelical Faithfulness in God’s Mission*, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Global_Mission_21.pdf, Accessed 26 January 2023.

38. Craig L. Nessan, “Mission and Theological Education—Berlin, Athens, and Tranquebar: A North American Perspective,” *Mission Studies* 27 (2010): 176-193.

39. Cf. Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, Trinity Press International, 1997).

40. See Christian Weber, *Missionstheologie bei Wilhelm Loehle: Aufbruch zur Kirche der Zukunft* (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1996) and David C. Ratke, *Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament: The Ecclesial Theology of Wilhelm Loehle* (St. Louis: Concor-

dia, 2001).

41. Christian Weber, “The Future of Loehle’s Legacy,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31 (April 2004): 100.

42. For example, Martin J. Lohrmann, *Stories from Global Lutheranism: A Historical Timeline* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

of emotion and values expressed by others. The other person is honored, not threatened, by this manner of listening. One is attentive to the religious implications of what is heard and seeks to explore the ultimate concern in, with, and under what is said. A cultivated capacity to listen employs methods of cultural and theological analysis to understand and interpret what has been heard.

Third, missionary work understands itself as service to the holistic well-being of the other person and the community to which the other belongs. It imagines the world communally, not individualistically. Missionary service is lived out in acts of love that attend to the restoration of relationships in community. Concern for the wholeness of the entire community, beginning with the most vulnerable members and including creation, reflects God's own desire for shalom.⁴³

Finally, this missionary approach involves the translation of faith traditions into other "languages." Here we mean the ability to speak in the languages of various subcultures (for example, the language of youth culture, contemporary music, or social media). Rooted in the inherited Christian traditions, the new missionary must be a broker of cultures and religions, creative in interpreting and translating the Good News into languages that are understandable to those whose lives are versed in their own cultural and religious tongues. The heritage of the Iowa Synod preserves a missionary identity that has evolved organically from Wilhelm Loehe and been embodied contextually in each succeeding generation, as a living legacy for the future church. We embrace the missionary task of "engaging, equipping, and sending collaborative leaders who interpret, proclaim and live the gospel of Jesus Christ for a world created for communion with God and in need of personal and social healing."⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Loehe legacy affirms repetition of the deep patterns of Christian existence through shared practices. Participation in the liturgy, hearing God's Word, and regular engagement in spiritual practices are chief among these practices that form us as people of faith. The Loehe legacy has valued hearing of God's Word as formative for Christian existence, grounding us in the way of Jesus Christ. Both worship and proclamation are means of grace, whose repetitions over time form our identity through our enactment of the liturgy and the proclaimed Word.

Our existence as Christian people is also tested as by fire through the crucibles that come upon us as we live our broken lives in a finite and sinful world. Our lives are marked by experiences of deep sadness, loss, and grief. We experience the effects of human waywardness, alienation, sickness, and death, as well as other chances and changes of life. For Loehe such experiences included

We revitalize ecclesial life by cultivating new and imaginative repetitions of historic Christian practices and by solidarity with others as they endure the crucibles that beset human life.

the ordeal of extended waiting to receive his call as a pastor, the death of his young wife, difficulties in the lives of his children, dissent within the Bavarian Lutheran Church, controversies with his mission partners in North America, and conflict with close colleagues in Neuendettelsau. Loehe was profoundly affected by the crucibles known to human beings in this world.

At the same time Loehe demonstrated how such crucibles may become the occasion for living by faith in service to neighbors in need. Loehe had acute sensitivity to human suffering as demonstrated by pastoral care for the members of his parish, compassion for the misery of the German immigrants in North America, concern for Native Americans, and commitment to care for the needs of the sick, aged, disabled, and other marginalized people through the training of deaconesses and the organization of diaconal institutions.

The Loehe legacy provides historical perspective and practical resources for the contemporary church to reconstitute Christian existence today. We revitalize ecclesial life by cultivating new and imaginative repetitions of historic Christian practices and by solidarity with others as they endure the crucibles that beset human life. We pray this legacy, as it has been lived out among individuals, congregations, and institutions shaped by Wilhelm Loehe, may provide a compass for orienting the future of a church that seeks to be aligned with the mission of the Triune God.⁴⁵

45. This article is based on Craig L. Nessan, *Wilhelm Loehe and North America: Historical Perspective and Living Legacy* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020), Chapter 8.

43. Cf. Nessan, *Shalom Church*, chapter 1.

44. Wartburg Theological Seminary, "Mission Statement," <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/mission-and-vision/> Accessed 26 January 2023.