

Papers presented at the Fifth Conference
of the International Loehe Society
Wartburg Theological Seminary, July 24-27, 2022



Christian Identity in Crisis:

*The Legacy of
Wilhelm Loehe
as Inspiration for
the Church Today*

Introduction to This Issue

This is the second of two issues of *Currents in Theology and Mission* devoted to the papers presented at the 5th Conference of the International Loehe Society, held at Wartburg Theological Seminary, July 24-27, 2022, under the theme “Christian Identity in Crisis: The Legacy of Wilhelm Loehe as Inspiration for the Church Today.” For information about the International Loehe Society, a brief reflection on the conference theme, and brief summaries of the first set of papers, I invite you to refer to the introduction to the January 2024 issue of *Currents*. That entire issue is reprinted here in the “Special Section” below as well as at *Currents* online. The Loehe Society is grateful to the editorial staff at *Currents* for generously providing the space in these two issues to offer these explorations of the legacy of Wilhelm Loehe to a wider audience.

Many years ago, when I was working to complete my dissertation on Loehe’s liturgical work, the Yale historical theologian Jaroslav Pelikan offered me some encouragement one Sunday at the New Haven church we both attended. The first encouragement was to get it done without delay. In his view the dissertation was to be a first scholarly exercise, not a life’s work. Then, he went on to affirm the significance of Loehe as a nineteenth-century figure worthy of consideration and still waiting to be discovered in the twentieth century. In most theological and religious circles, Loehe

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remains an obscure figure now well into the twenty-first century. What might still be worth our attention? For one, the responses of this nineteenth-century German Lutheran pastor to the crises of his own time were both theologically informed and regularly embodied in the communal practices of spiritual care and formation, liturgy, diakonia, and mission. The relevance of this kind of responsive posture—one that holds together the claims and practices at the heart of Christian identity and genuine engage-

Cover art by H. Avery Prozenko, Canada: *Icon of Wilhelm Loehe* (2016). Copyright © 2016 Harrison Avery Prozenko. Used with permission.

ment with present need for personal and social healing—hardly needs saying.

Together with the papers from the 2022 conference, readers are welcome to further their exposure to the Loehle legacy at the next conference of the Society to be held at Neuendettelsau, Germany, July 27-30, 2025. The conference theme is “Imagining Church Anew—Rooted and Open.” More information about the conference theme, schedule, and registration will become available starting later this spring at the Loehle Society website, <https://www.iloes.net>.

Like the papers in the previous issue of *Currents*, the remaining conference papers include historical and theological explorations, critical assessments, and reflections for the church in its life and mission today. **Stephen Pietsch** (Concordia Seminary—Saint Louis) examines Loehle’s influential, but not always well-understood, views on the office of ministry. The presentation takes into account Loehle’s two books of *Aphorisms* on church and office (1849, 1851) as well as Loehle’s two-volume handbook on pastoral ministry, *The Pastor* (1852-1858), and his own life as a pastor. These sources provide both a theological understanding of the office of ministry and a practice of ministry as a spiritual *habitus*. The *kenosis* integral to the pastoral *habitus* deepens what is often described as Loehle’s “high” view of ministry.

Klaus Detlev Schulz (Concordia Seminary—Fort Wayne) takes up what he describes as Loehle’s missionary ecclesiology and brings it into conversation with the *missio Dei* concept that first emerges among missiologists in the middle of the twentieth century and in recent years has seen a renewal in the missional church movement. Loehle’s *Three Books about the Church* (1845) is the key text for his missionary ecclesiology and its place within the mission of God. Loehle’s missional understanding gives central place the local congregation gathered around Word and sacrament in witness and service to God’s universal purpose.

Man-Hei Yip (Wartburg Seminary) offers an intercontextual approach to the Loehle legacy on immigration “to interrupt our assumptions and to form new possibilities for ecclesial resistance as well as ecclesial practice in relation to human suffering, dignity, and flourishing.” The growing crisis of immigration in our own time is here juxtaposed with Loehle’s border crossing mission to German immigrant communities in North America. In both the historical and contemporary contexts, seeing and hearing grounded in the Word of God leads to thinking and acting in borderless solidarity with the immigrant “other.”

Jan Rippentrop Schnell (Wartburg Seminary) challenges us to take a critical look at the legacy of Loehle’s mission to Native Americans, which reached out from the immigrant congregations and communities he supported. While certain positive aspects are acknowledged, the weight of evidence presented here points to attitudes of religious, moral, and cultural superiority on the part of Loehle and his followers and to the displacement and death of indigenous peoples. Loehle’s liturgical process of announcement—confession—communion suggests an analogous process of land acknowledgement—confession—repair that

could help the church address the current relationship to Native American communities.

Mathias Hartmann tells the story of diaconal work at Neuendettelsau from Loehle’s time to the present: from Deaconess Institution to *Diakoniewerk* to *Diakoneo*. Through much change and many developments, the need for diaconal work remains a constant. Sustaining such work requires adjustments to ever-changing social conditions and individual needs. The significant transformations in the current shape of diaconal work at Neuendettelsau demonstrate the effort to adapt to current realities while maintaining long-held values and commitments.

Jenny Wiley Legath narrates the story of deaconess movements among Lutherans in the United States as they emerged out of the historical context of Protestant diaconal institutions in nineteenth-century Europe, including the one founded by Wilhelm Loehle in Neuendettelsau. Diaconal movements among American Lutherans are found in the ELCA and its predecessor bodies, in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and the independent (pan-Lutheran) Lutheran Diaconal Association. Throughout, the center of interest is in the changing patterns of diaconal identity, lifestyle, and work.

The Loehle conference began and ended with services of worship, and so, the sermon by **Christian Weber** from the closing worship concludes this second set of conference papers. Weber takes his cue from Jesus’ surprising statement to his disciples in the face of great human need: “The harvest is plentiful” (Matthew 9:37). In that moment, Jesus teaches his disciples to imagine the situation of crisis as the time and place of unexpected abundance. We see that kind of living with imagination amid crisis in the Indonesian painter Ketut Lasia and in Wilhelm Loehle. Jesus’ words offer hints of how this is possible.

Weber’s sermon is a fitting summary of a message embedded in the conference theme and all its papers. The time of crisis is—in God’s time—the time of abundance. It is the time to imagine God’s life-giving purpose for us and for our world. Amid all our crises, God’s promised gift of abundant life remains. The time is now. The harvest is plentiful.

Membership and conference information for the International Loehle Society can be found at <https://www.iloes.net>.

For the **Currents Focus** feature in this issue, **Michael Schulte** addresses how the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America might leverage its sacramental identity to achieve its goal of engaging 1 million new, young, and diverse people. The church itself is the penultimate sacrament, an extension of Jesus Christ in the world. We are compelled to manifest Christ in compelling ways by practicing eucharistic solidarity with the despised while maintaining our historic Lutheran identity. This article explores how the church might re-envision itself according to the catholic sacramental principle to meet the needs of individuals in a changing world and work toward revitalization.

We are also pleased to publish two sermons by seminarians

who received awards for the James Kenneth Echols Prize for Excellence in Preaching at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. In a sermon on John 11:1-45, **Gail Kenny** explores ways that despite Christ's making all alive, we often remain bound ourselves, or bind our neighbors in less than abundant life. Jesus' raising of Lazarus and bid for us to unbind him, offers a model for societal renewal in way-making and peace-bringing. Also preaching on John 11:1-45, **Katherine Mueller** explores deep Lenten themes of preparing for change and transformation in the Resurrection. In contemporary music texts about change and through the example of the mycelium community, we experience Jesus' invitation to "Come Out" from the isolation and "stickiness" of grief to experience a freedom and liberation that breaks down barriers.

How do we preach in this election year? That's the question raised in the introductory essay to "**Preaching Helps.**" Writers for this issue focus primarily on the lectionary texts even as we move ever closer to the summer political conventions. We will move from the Easter season to the Sundays of Ordinary Time. But we know the presidential election is far from ordinary.

Thomas H. Schattauer, Guest Editor

Craig Nesson, Issue Editor

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