

Being a Lutheran Risk-Taker in the 21st Century

Robin J. Morgan

Learning from our Forebears

We are a people who respect our traditions and our past. The Lutheran tradition has produced some of the foremost church historians of the 20th century: Sydney Ahlstrom, Jarislav Pelikan, and Martin Marty. These men, along with many others, have taught us that our history is full of riches that inform not only who we are today, but also provide part of the foundational realities for most of the denominations in our country. But how does this rich tradition translate into our 21st century culture?

We revere our forebears, the men and women who established the congregations that we hold so dear. We want to honor our parents and grandparents by preserving what they gave us and by emulating them. One way to do this is to freeze our congregations in time, keep everything just the way its been for as long as we can remember: the lutefisk and lefse dinners or the sausage suppers, refusing to learn new hymns, complaining about disrespectful teen-agers who don't know the Bible and their parents who don't make them come to church like parents used to do. All while the depressing statistics keep piling up.

Another way to honor our forebears is to look back and learn from them. We can take a hard look at who our predecessors were, how they struggled, failed and succeeded and learn from them – successes, failures and all. We can learn about the ground from which their ministries grew and flourished or were planted and

prematurely died. Either way, we can learn how we might engage our contexts today and tomorrow with the best of traditions we hold so dear. It's not impossible, it's just risky.

Which brings up a crucial point. Though we revere our forebears, we tend to have collective amnesia about the first step those brave women and men took in bringing their Lutheran faith to this country – they got on the boat. Whether in Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland or Sweden, they took that scary first step toward a new life and they brought their faith with them. They got on the boat knowing that they would probably never again see their homelands and the loved ones they left behind. They took a huge risk, leaving everything familiar behind and their lives were changed forever.

Do we have what it takes to risk the way our forebears did? Yes we do because of the resources they have given us. In this paper I'll be looking at some of our theological resources through the writings of one of our forebears, Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., and through my own experiences working in the city of St. Louis. By focusing on the church in the world, Caemmerer gave us a theological springboard to move into the 21st century using the theological resources of Law and Gospel to enlighten our footsteps.

Care and Redemption

To begin this journey, I want to clarify what theological resources I'm referring to before we delve into Caemmerer's work and my experience. Two words, **care** and **redemption**, can be used to characterize the two main responsibilities that God has given to Christians. These words may seem like synonyms or may seem like they have nothing to do with each other, but together they sum up the ways that God works in the world. In the Lutheran Book of Worship, the second offertory prayer contains these two

theological seeds for ministry in the 21st century:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the **care** and **redemption** of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

These two words, **care** and **redemption**, stem from Luther's breakthrough in understanding Scripture and led to a whole series of realizations in his life about the way God works in the world. Here is how Luther described this breakthrough late in life when asked what had set him on the road to become a Reformer:

For a long time I went astray and didn't know what I was doing. To be sure, I was onto something, but I did not know what it really was until I came to the text in Romans 1:17, "The one who through faith is righteous shall live." That text helped me. There I saw what righteousness Paul was talking about. The word stuck out in the text. I connected the abstract notion of righteousness with the concrete phenomenon of being righteous, and finally understood what I had here. I learned to distinguish between the law's kind of righteousness and that of the gospel. My previous reading was marred by but one defect in that I made no distinction between the law and the gospel. I regarded them to be identical and spoke as though there was no difference between Christ and Moses other than their location in time and their relative perfection. But when I found that distinction – that the law is one thing and the gospel is something else – that was my breakthrough.²

This Law and Gospel distinction became the touchstone not only for the way he interpreted the Bible, but for the way he looked at God's actions in the world.

Care from the offertory prayer is a task that God, through the law, expects all human beings to be about in the world. God gave Adam this task in Genesis 2:15 when “the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” Humanity, all of humanity, is called to **care** for God’s creation. Throughout Scripture, human beings are called to specific **care** tasks, particularly the care called for in primal relationships such as spouse, child, and parent, as well as the **care** of widows and orphans and the demand that all people conduct their lives honestly, doing so without taking unfair advantage of others. Micah 6:8 puts it this way: “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

We have this God-given job and much of the time, we’re lousy employees. The second use of the law is our six-month job review. It is through the knowledge of God’s law that we see our sinfulness, our separation from the Creator, in bold relief. This is the second use of the law, the theological use. As such, God’s law functions as judge, accuser and even executioner. “This is the primary purpose of the Law of Moses, that through it sin might grow and be multiplied, especially in the conscience...the chief and proper use of the Law is to reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.”³

We may try to extricate ourselves from this situation by negotiating or hiding or blaming somebody else for our lousy work record, but, in the end, humanity is unable to change this state that God’s Law reveals to us. We don’t fear, love and trust God above all things so we end up not doing what God calls us to do as well. We don’t **care** for God’s creation and we try to cover up that reality. As a result of this profound disconnect between who we are called to be and how we live, we are driven

to look outside of ourselves for relief.

God knows we can't get out of this mess ourselves and so, we finally get to the good stuff, the verse that gets put on the fences at football games and scrawled on walls, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." This means that God loves me, wants an intimate, loving relationship with me so much that he is willing to send not just the employee of the month, but the employee for all eternity to take my mess onto himself, get fired instead of me, and give me his status as one of his co-employees of eternity. Jesus loves me and trusted our God so completely that he was willing to put his life in God's hands and say, "Not my will, but thine be done."

He bought us out of the mess we were in with his own life. That's what redemption means. **Redemption** is what Jesus Christ does for human beings who are subject to God's law – that is everyone. Luther tells us that as our Redeemer, Jesus Christ "has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there...He has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace."⁴

How do we live out care and redemption in our context today? A first step is by looking at Caemmerer to see how he addressed these issues during his lifetime in the mid- 20th century.

Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr.

Caemmerer began talking about the church in the world early in his career. He talked about the need to address the context in which Christians are living in his 1938 article, "Lutheran Social Action," by highlighting the differences between his time

and the time of the Reformation:

The Reformation arose in a day when the Church was the dominant institution of the world not only religiously, but also politically and economically. From a fourth to a half of the real estate holdings of Europe were in the hands of the Church. Its endowments controlled many educational, commercial, charitable enterprises. Only in exceptional instances, chiefly in the law faculties, were instructors in the higher and middle schools of Europe other than ordained clergymen.⁵

He also highlighted the reality that, as an immigrant church, Lutherans had been focused on their own development and "for the most part [had] a narrowly horized social consciousness, with little participation in the affairs of a democratic commonwealth."⁶ Caemmerer believed that it was time to look beyond those initial immigrant realities to life as established members of their American communities.

He went on to say that the church needed to educate clergy and laity about the twofold purpose of the congregation:

To maintain Word and Sacrament for itself and spread it among new believers; and to provoke unto the good works which are the end and aim of the spiritual power engendered by the means of grace. Every use of the means of grace is to result, in home and congregational situations, in the development of spiritual power. This power is to be used; and the administration of the congregation is to direct these powers into valid channels. Permitted to be dissipated and unused, these powers become a blight on the Church's program.⁷

Without clergy support, any social action programs would be stillborn. Without laity support, much of that work would go undone and unfunded.

We can see Caemmerer beginning to build a Lutheran theological framework to address the issues of **Christian** interaction with the world. He reached back to the Reformation and, using his forebears' wisdom, began to develop the foundation that would eventually lead him far beyond his inherited mental and theological thought patterns.

By 1942 Caemmerer's theology included the need for the church to adapt in new contexts without losing itself. In his essay entitled "The Lutheran Church Faces the World," he wove together his concern for social issues with an anticipation of post-war realities for the church. Caemmerer's opening comments addressed this need for the church to adapt yet keep its foundational core intact. "All history has one lesson, which current world disorder is bringing into sharp focus: only useful institutions survive."⁸

He said that Lutherans have clear doctrine to offer the world, particularly justification by faith. However, having clear doctrine is not enough:

We rightly define justification as the center of our faith. But justification in the scheme of the Christian religion is not an end: it is a dynamic; it thrusts in the direction of the Christian life; it has a design and purpose in view, that the saved Christian should serve God and man with love. This service is not to be by compulsion; but is to be joyful, thrilling, wholehearted.⁹

To carry out this joyful responsibility Christian needed to be equipped with **three things** he said. The **first** was the knowledge of the plan of salvation that most Lutherans memorized in school. The **second** was faith in Christ, not merely in the classroom or chancel steps, but in all of life. The **third** was growth in love. With this equipment, the Christian can be about

“the high charge to show sodden, broken people the glory of God.”¹⁰

His most complete conversation on this topic was in his 1949 book, **The Church in the World**. Caemmerer’s focus throughout the book was on teaching the **Church** how to carry the good news of justification by grace through faith for Christ’s sake into the world – the world, not as challenge or menace, but the world as people “subjects and objects of the cosmic drama of salvation.”¹¹ He said that there are **two points** which were essential in this task. The **first** is *agape*, love, “by which the man of the world becomes alert to the fact that he needs help and that the Church has help to give.”¹² The **second** was the *kerygma*, the gospel message. This “second factor is the help itself, the answer of God Himself through the Church to the need of the world.”¹³ He said that it was not enough for the message to be received by the senses of the hearer. It must “register on the mind of the hearer.”¹⁴

Registering on the mind of the hearer was accomplished by the Christian as s/he participated in the lives of people outside the church through a variety of avenues: family, business, and citizenship. All of these areas of life were ripe for “Christian conditioning” – where *agape* in action drew the unbeliever to the Christian so that this individual wanted to hear what the Christian had to say. At that moment the Christian had an open door to speak the word of the redemption to a listening ear.

Caemmerer’s specifications about what were involved and how the Christian went about his tasks were all clear and readily understandable. However, all that he talked about in this book was focused on having the opportunity to speak the word of redemption. All of the **care** work that he articulated was done by the Christian with the express intent of telling someone about Jesus. The positive meanings of the first use of the law were no

where to be found. However, the clarity of his thought did open up a theological framework that can be used as part of the foundation for developing ideas to address more fully the issues of care and redemption in today's world.

Caemmerer was astute in looking at the world and then applying his theological knowledge to it. He offered the most comprehensive framework that theologically explained both the **care** and **redemption** work that was and still is, the church's responsibilities in the world. However, late in his life he still had questions that I want to look at next. I believe that these questions open the theological door to an underutilized theological resource in the Lutheran toolbelt that is necessary for us to do ministry in the 21st century – the positive meanings of the first use of the law.

Caemmerer's Questions

Of all Caemmerer's questions, the first one, *What is Christian love?* was most readily answered. His definition of Christian love, *agape*, was very clear:

It is the will of the Christian man bent and directed toward the good of the other, the other regardless of claim or chance of return. This love is always a personal thing. It is the response of the heart to the Kingdom or indwelling of God. It is in itself the reaching out of the individual heart to the next individual in need; it is simultaneously being sensitive to need, assuming responsibility for need, devising means of helping in need, sacrificing self for need, all without hope or intention of return.¹⁵

Caemmerer's next question was, *What of "the exercise of charity and good will carried on by the non-Christian?"*¹⁶ Is this also love? Here was the point at which the theological framework used

by Caemmerer broke down. There was no answer for these questions in his writings. His focus was on the actions of Christians who were already inside the fold of the church, who already knew the Gospel and were partaking of the means of grace.

Yet in Matthew 22 Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question, "Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?" by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."¹⁷ Jesus sets love as the keystone of the law. Love of God and love of neighbor encapsulate the rest of the law. "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" are components of this love that the prophets and the priests of the Old Testament reiterated to the people over and over again. Acknowledging the Creator and caring for what He has given human beings to steward, acting in the best interest of the other is love.

All human beings, Christians and non-Christians, are capable of acting in the best interest of the other. No human being does it perfectly or all the time, but most people have acted in the best interest of the other at one time or another. Parents taking care of their children, spouses with each other, members within the same family – these are all examples of personal relationships in which any human being may act in the best interest of the other. Likewise, people, non-Christians and Christians, work for the betterment of their communities, take care of the environment, or participate in efforts for peace – again, examples of efforts made by many people, Christian or not, in the best interest of others.

Caemmerer's third question "*Conversely, is it Christian love when the **Christian** carries out some duties of care of others*

*under the direction of government, sometimes quite without his heart in it?"*¹⁸ This third question opens a door into the positive meanings of the first use of the law that can be particularly helpful for Christians today. No Christian, or any other human being, can always know their own motivation. Is this act of care inspired by the Holy Spirit? Is that act of care a matter of obeying the first use of the law? Do acts of care done by Christian love look inherently different from acts of care done as obedience to the first use of the law? These questions are subsets of Caemmerer's question and at the edge of our ability to find quantifiable answers. Nonetheless, I believe they are worth exploring. Maybe you think I'm splitting theological hairs for no particular reason other than that I've been thoroughly steeped in one of Lutherans' favorite indoor sports – ripping everybody else's theology apart. I don't think so. I think following this train of thought will help us begin to find some answers to 21st century questions that Lutherans have never had to address before. So bear with me.

Again, care of creation is the responsibility of all human beings. Whether the government supports a particular care program, whether a religious organization funds it, or whether community volunteers take care of it themselves, care is a human responsibility. So, when Christians participate in, even initiate such efforts, they are, first of all, fulfilling the first use of the law. The work needs to be done, is the responsibility of human beings, regardless of the motivation. When acts of care are done in the best interest of the other, they will not look differently if they're done by Christians, whether motivated by **Christian** love or obedience to the first use of the law, or by anyone else. Making sandwiches is making sandwiches, cleaning and pressing clothing is cleaning and pressing clothing, building a new house is building a new house. None of these things is inherently Christian or Buddhist or

Atheist.

Of course, there are times when the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is foremost in the Christian's life as s/he does acts of care. At such times, the **Christian** may have a unique contribution to make because of that inspiration. Certainly, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made a unique contribution to the well-being of the United States because his faith in Jesus Christ inspired him to work in a unique way for civil rights. However, it is the prior claim of the Creator through the first use of the law that generated the responsibility to do such work. The civil rights themselves are not inherently Christian.

For Christians, care of creation work stands on both sides of the cross – both before, in the first use of the law and after, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Looking at care work from this dual vantage point can modify, maybe even eliminate, the sense of superiority that has plagued Christians throughout the years of Christendom. If Christian human beings' first responsibility to the Creator is shared with every other human being on earth, what is there to act superior about? Christians have been called to care for creation with all who are participating in that work. Working as partners, rather than as dominators is at least worth a try. Trying to dominate other cultures is no longer working.

Another result of using this theological tool (the positive meanings of the first use of the law) is that by working as partners with all people who are doing creation care work, Christians are freed to reclaim the word of redemption through Jesus Christ. A Christian need not minimize nor eliminate the Christ of faith from his/her life to lift up Jesus as example of right living. As stated above, **care work is on both sides of the cross**. It is woven deeply into the fabric of the Christian life as human beings and as Christians. It's not a matter of choosing

one or the other. God has already chosen Christians to be about **both** care and redemption work in the world.

The fourth question Caemmerer asked, "*Should the Christian view his government, on the national or the neighborhood level, as performing tasks of Christian love?*"¹⁹ The short answer to this question for citizens of the United States is no. Our government, though peopled with many Christians throughout its history, is not inherently Christian. It is a republic, based on Enlightenment principles, principles of reason. Again, Christians are responsible to participate as citizens according to the first use of the law. If in carrying out of that responsibility some unique inspiration comes to the Christian which helps in the execution of his/her duty that is a grace note. However, the Christian is responsible, as are all human beings, for participating as citizens in the processes of government.

Caemmerer's last question, "*Is the answer to these questions simply the strict separation of church and state?*"²⁰ This question, like number four, can be answered briefly – no, there is much more at stake. However, the full force and ramifications of applying the positive meanings of the first use of the law to such matters is outside the limits of this paper. However, considering the urgent issues pressing upon this country at the beginning of the twenty-first century with regard to religious beliefs across the globe, this question and others like it deserve careful and deliberate scrutiny.

After looking at all of this information about compassionate, theologically-literate Lutherans of the 20th century, my question is why didn't they see and use this Reformation theological tool that had been sitting in their tool box? I believe it's because they didn't need it. They lived inside a world that assumed Christian ethics as the basis for personal

behavior.

The tacit agreement between our republic and Protestant Christianity shaped their world. Protestant Christianity controlled the private realm of the citizenry and the State with its Enlightenment principles ruled in the public arena. The culture was split into two independently controlled domains.

This was a mutually beneficial arrangement for both sides. Protestant Christianity produced human beings instilled with a basic sense of ethical behavior and with the same basic set of stories that shaped their thinking. These behavior patterns and thought processes molded citizens who fit into the American way of life. In return, the church didn't have to pay taxes on its property nor fear government interference in its activities.

However, what has been happening with increasing rapidity since the 1960s is that many citizens are demanding that our country live up to its high ideals of equality for all people, whether they are white, male Protestant landowners or not. African-Americans, women, gays and lesbians, Hispanics and people of other religions have all, at one time or another, demanded that the United States put its money where its mouth is and reshape the culture to include all of its citizenry.

At the same time, Protestant Christianity has been losing its grip on its own people, particularly its youth, to say nothing of the general shift away from the church in the national population at large. Sally Morgenthaler, one of the original gurus of the mega-church movement admits: "For all the money, time, and effort we've spent on cultural relevance – and that includes culturally relevant worship – it seems we came through the last 15 years with a significant net loss in churchgoers, proliferation of mega-churches and all."²¹

Acknowledging this changing national landscape in which we live,

maybe it's time for Lutherans to embrace whatever persons God puts in our path who need care and yearn for a relationship with Jesus Christ whether they are German or Scandinavian or not. We have discovered solid Lutheran foundation in our care and redemption theology. This is the foundation on which we can stand without fear of sinking or losing our way. This is also the foundation from which we can reach out to people far beyond our comfort zone because we know that we are called, along with all people, to care for creation and have the added privilege of telling the world about Jesus when asked about the hope that is in us.

Faith Place: A 21st Century Experiment

In 2000, the St. Louis Metro Coalition Urban Taskforce of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, approximately a dozen lay and clergy leaders in the area, began meeting to plan a new ministry in the city. Up to that point in the Lutheran church's history in the city, ministry had either been done along traditional congregational lines or had followed the charity method – care and redemption work on behalf of the marginalized in a top-down model supported by Lutheran donors.

As the planning developed and it became obvious that I was going to be the leader of the ministry once it got started, I wanted to build this work with a more complete foundation. Using the positive meanings of the first use of the law as an additional piece of the theological framework, I wanted to build community-wide partnerships into the initial fabric of the ministry while still retaining our unique Christian-Lutheran core. I hoped that by leading by example, showing others what such ministry could look like, that we could begin to shift the way we worked together. Instead of keeping our marvelous heritage to

ourselves, I wanted to introduce a more inclusive model that incorporated both **care** and **redemption** work in a context that welcomed everyone: Lutheran, Christian or not. In retrospect, I see how naïve that hope was, however, in the process, I learned much about the Lutheran tradition, civic organizations and the vagaries of trying to make paradigm shifts.

To keep this hope at the center of all we did, I incorporated wholeness and inclusivity into Faith Place's mission statement: "Faith Place's mission is to enhance life in the community through opportunities to develop spiritual, physical, mental, social and emotional health. We are called to serve by: Caring for God's creation in all its manifestations and Speaking the Word of Redemption through Jesus Christ." Our logo was a circle of clasped hands, one to represent each color of human skin, as well as a rainbow-striped hand to represent the gay/lesbian population in our city with a cross in the middle of them all. Our intention was to partner with anyone who was about God's business in the community. It didn't matter what color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious interest or lack thereof, we were God's people in the community through both **care** and **redemption** work.

After numerous planning meetings and a year of research on possible sites, we were offered the use of a Missouri Synod school building in the Fox Park neighborhood in south St. Louis. Our next step was doing multi-cultural training with volunteers. Third, were our "walk-about" during which teams of two asked people on the street three simple questions: What do you like about this neighborhood, What would you like to see changed about this neighborhood, Is there room for another ministry in this neighborhood?

The consensus after a few weeks of conversations was that everyone wanted to get the kids off the streets, particularly

after school. There is no elementary school or community center in Fox Park and many children had nothing constructive to do once they got off the bus in the afternoon. So, in September 2003, we opened Faith Place with an after-school program that included snacks, games in the gym, arts and crafts, homework help, Bible lessons and prayer.

Within a month, a teacher from the Catholic archdiocesan schools came on board with a focus on music and discipline. Through his skills we were able to add choir and martial arts to the after school program. Most importantly, we added a Wednesday evening worship service at 5:30PM that incorporated lively African-American gospel music with our Lutheran liturgy. From the very beginning we did Word and Sacrament ministry with neighborhood children, some of whom went to Baptist or non-denominational churches on Sunday, some of whom had never before darkened the door of a church. Part of our Bible study time during the after school program was dedicated to on-going training in the Christian faith, liturgy and the sacraments.

One significant development early in Faith Place's life was the basketball program for young men in the neighborhood. These youth, some of whom were gang members, came together and played basketball in the gym while the younger children were involved with other activities in various classrooms. This program grew as neighborhood African- American men heard about it and came up to volunteer their time to work with these young men.

This was a risky development for Faith Place, in the sense that some of these young men had criminal records and participated in violent activities. Some of the younger kids were nervous when the older youth were in the building. Yet, how could we turn them away if we were about bettering the whole community? These young men were just as much a part of the community as anyone else, but often were not invited into community facilities

because of the fear that many folks, both black and white, have of their violent tendencies. Of course we took precautions and clearly stated our rules for conduct, but, for the most part, this program was a positive experience for us all.

On Wednesdays we also served dinner after worship. This was the place where we began to incorporate other Lutheran congregations into the ministry of Faith Place, so that they could begin to see what a **care** and **redemption** ministry in the city could look like today. Groups from congregations would bring food for dinner, worship with us and eat with us.

It was an eye-opening experience for many people who hadn't been to the city for years except to go to a baseball game. Gradually, we added congregational groups from other denominations as well. However, my initial thinking about this process was to help suburban Lutherans begin to re-connect with the city, get some positive experiences and then participate in theological conversation to help incorporate those experiences so that they could help broaden and deepen their understanding of what it meant to be Lutheran.

During the summers we were open from lunchtime (free lunches were provided through the St. Louis city summer food program for children) through the usual after-school program time for six weeks. Youth groups from other churches planned and put on a vacation Bible school-type program with the neighborhood children. Participating youth groups were each responsible for one week that included four afternoons of activities and the Wednesday evening meal. A few of the groups even stayed overnight in the building, just to get a better understanding of what it was like to live in an inner city neighborhood.

This was the program that most successfully incorporated my original thinking for Faith Place. In the summer of 2005 for one week, we had a youth group from Wisconsin staying on-site,

doing building repair in the morning and participating in the vacation Bible school in the afternoon. Additionally, there was a local youth group that came in the afternoon who organized and led the vacation Bible school program. We brought together out-of-state rural teenagers and adults, suburban St. Louis teenagers and adults with our regular staff and the neighborhood children and adults, to work, play, worship and eat together.

In the evenings after some fun activity (the MUNY, the Arch, etc.), I was able to sit down with the teenagers and adults from Wisconsin and do some theological reflection about the day. This was the time when I was able to help them sort out the experiences they were having and incorporate them into the faith structures that were already in place in their lives through their church experiences at home. We looked at our responsibilities as human beings to be about the **care** of creation with anyone who wanted to make a difference in the world. We also talked about speaking the word of redemption through Jesus Christ and the gift from God it was to worship with people we never imagined we'd ever meet. We also talked about the significance of using our gifts, as human beings and as Christians, in service to the world.

Faith Place connected with a wide variety of civic organizations while I was executive director. We participated in the Fox Park neighborhood association. We interacted with the DeSales Housing Corporation and the Neighborhood Stabilization programs of the city. Faith Place was involved with CardinalsCare and the Police Athletic Leagues. Our intention was to be open to anything that would build community in the Fox Park neighborhood, walking as partners with everyone who was doing **care** of creation work while we kept Jesus Christ as the center of our lives.

From the beginning, though Faith Place was grounded in the Lutheran tradition, we were an inter-denominational ministry.

Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, folks from non-denominational churches, Pentecostals, all joined forces to help make Faith Place happen. The most interesting and eye-opening reaction to our work came from some folks who'd given up on church long ago. Even though they would no longer darken the door of a traditional church, they participated in, financially supported and embraced the work of Faith Place, largely because we were about building up the community for everyone. One young man even re-embraced Christianity after working at Faith Place. It was the combination of hands-on **care** of creation work and openness to the whole community as partners in this work wrapped around the Christian worship core of the ministry that pulled him back into the fold.

Of course, these were the highlights of my three years with Faith Place. As with all new ministries, Faith Place had problems, too. Funding for such a venture is always precarious. Genuine partnering between the white community and the African-American community in St. Louis is even more precarious. Most of all, we struggled with the traditional paradigm of how to do this kind of ministry.

In this regard, the Lutheran legacy of city ministry is both positive and negative. Though traditional models had done enormous good for the St. Louis community as a whole and for the Lutheran community in particular, those models for this work are no longer sufficient. Those ministries, as effective as they were at the time, must be re-tooled for the twenty-first century. I see reclaiming the positive meanings of the first use of the law as a first step toward building a new model for Lutheran care and redemption ministries in the years to come. It adds a dimension to basic Lutheran theological thinking about doing this work that comes straight out of our Reformation foundation. It gives Lutherans the freedom to work as partners with everyone who is doing **care** of the creation work, while

keeping core theological touchstones intact. Adding the positive meanings of the first use of the law challenges Lutherans to be about God's work in the world, both **care** and **redemption** work, without losing the faith in Christ that nourishes and sustains.

At Faith Place, though we encountered Muslims during our "walkabouts" in the summer of 2003 before we opened, we never were able to make that inter-faith connection. If Faith Place had survived, and continued to develop its programs that were open to everyone, I saw the possibility of such relationships developing. However, building trust among people is a long, slow process. Building trust between Christians is still an issue in our world, so building inter-faith trust can be even more difficult, especially in the tense religious climate today. Incorporating the positive meanings of the first use of the law gives Christians a basis for entering an inter-faith relationship as a partner rather than from a sense of superiority or as an enemy. At the same time, the Christian has his/her relationship of trust with Jesus Christ that is her/his anchor when the going gets rocky, as will happen.

Living Through Failure

If you were paying attention to the tenses of the verbs in the last paragraph, you will have caught the fact that Faith Place no longer exists. We kept it open for a little more than three years, but for a variety of reasons, Faith Place is no more. Funding was a problem, the chaos of the street culture kept day-to-day life in a state of continuous turmoil and taking one of the first steps into a paradigm shift is often like walking in the dark with no streetlights or moonlight.

Even though Faith Place only lived a short time, it was an excellent failure. We learned much that is helping St. Louis-area Lutherans take more steps with more information, both what

to do and what not to do, toward effective 21st century ministries. The Christ of faith and Jesus as example of right living are not a matter of either/or for Lutherans. Using more of our theological foundation to build new work upon gives us the freedom to try, fail, get up and try again. Incorporating the positive meanings of the first use of the law into our theological foundation allows us to function as both/and people – equal partners with all who care for creation and expounders of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Of course the end of this experience was painful. The collapse of a dream is always difficult. But the theological realities that shaped the dream are still solid and useable, even though the experiment itself was short lived. We learned and we moved on, wiser for the experience, more solidly committed to the theological foundation because of its resilience in the face of changing circumstances. It would have been easy to walk away and not try again, but God had other plans.

I was offered and accepted an opportunity to work with a congregation that was ready to try to make some big changes. We are walking forward, however hesitantly or inexpertly, into the preferred and promised future that God has planned for them. Although the details of the theological foundation that I've outlined above isn't part of our day-to-day conversations as we go about the business of being God's people in this place, the basic structure of the positive meaning of the first use of the law, the second use of the law and the Good News of Jesus Christ are providing the framework for evaluating how we will use our time, talents and treasure. Working with anyone interested in doing God's care of creation work in the community is becoming part of how we operate. We may not agree on many important even crucial spiritual issues, but if we can come together for the common good of our community, we make every effort to do it.

With that new reality in our lives, we are also cognizant of finding opportunities for “sharing the reason for the hope that is in us” if the occasion warrants such conversation. The reason we can do what we do is because of what Christ did for us. We realize that our Creator called us to participate in the care of creation AND to speak the word of redemption through Christ to our neighbor.

The work continues – both care and redemption ministries are needed as much today as they were at any time in the past. Thankfully, the Lord of the church has given us the resources and the grace to follow in His footsteps. Though we, no doubt, still have many questions and many fears, there is one decision we can make now. Are we going to sit paralyzed, unwilling to use what we’ve been given to discover new ways of doing ministry or are we going to trust our Lord to help us use the theological foundation He’s given us to walk into the future He has prepared for us? To use a metaphor from our immigrant past – are we going to get on the boat or not?

October 2008

References:

1 Lutheran Book of Worship, Augsburg Publishing House: Minneapolis, 1978, p.88.

2 Martin Luther, Table Talk, winter 1542-43 (LW 54, 442).

3 Ibid.

4 Martin Luther, Large Catechism, The Book of Concord [Kolb and Wengert, ed.], Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 434.

5 Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., “Lutheran Social Action,” Thirty-seventh Annual Convention of Associated Lutheran Charities, 48.

6 Ibid., 50.

7 Ibid., 51.

8 Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., "The Lutheran Church Faces the World," Twenty-Fourth Convention of the Atlantic District of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States, 3.

9 Ibid., 22.

10 Ibid., 30.

11 Martin Marty, "The Church in the World" in **The Lively Function of the Gospel**, edited by Robert W. Bertram, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1966, 139.

12 Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., **The Church in the World**, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1949, 40.

13 Ibid., 41.

14 Ibid.

15 Caemmerer, **The Church in the World**, 44.

16 Caemmerer, "No Continuing City."

17 Matthew 22:36-40, New Revised Standard Version.

18 Caemmerer, "No Continuing City."

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Sally Morgenthaler, "Worship As Evangelism," May/June 2007 issue of Rev! Magazine (www.rev.org)

[BeingLutheranRiskTaker21stCentury \(PDF\)](#)