

THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS AND PARISH EDUCATION

To the Annual Conference of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations gathered at the Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary in Plymouth, Minnesota, June 16-19, 2021:

“Prepare the Way of the LORD!” Even from a young age, these words of our conference theme become familiar through annual Advent readings from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, and perhaps for some, through hearing a performance of the tenor recitative “Comfort, Comfort” in the oratorio, Handel’s “Messiah.” Isaiah 40:1-2 announces salvation and comfort for God’s people in exile. Then the voice cries out, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3 ESV). The remnant of God’s people in the prophet Isaiah’s day would have recognized the Exodus language in these verses. They would have remembered the story passed down from generation to generation. They would have known about the first exodus—God’s deliverance of His people out of bondage in Egypt and through the Red Sea. They would have known of the journey of the children of Israel through the wilderness. They also would have known of the ancient practice of eastern monarchs who sent heralds ahead of them on a journey with a task to clear away the obstacles, level out the hills, and construct causeways or fill up the valleys in order to make a straight and clear pathway for a royal parade. “Triumphal highways, ways prepared and made level for the triumphal entry of the god or king, were also well-known in Babylon These imposing highways were symbols of Babylon’s might, the might that had brought about Israel’s own downfall” Now the LORD was using the same picture to show forth His kingship, might, and power. “Just as Yahweh glorified himself in his victory over Pharaoh, so when the exiles are freed in the new exodus, Yahweh will be glorified over Babylon.” What a beautiful portrait of the LORD’s deliverance and victory for His people is seen in Isaiah 40:1-5—shadows of God’s faithful deliverance in the past and assurance of spiritual deliverance that would come through the Promised One announced hundreds of years later by John the Baptist. “Prepare the Way of the LORD,” cried John, calling the hearts of the people to repentance and faith. And now, we who trust in Christ the Savior continue to “Prepare the Way of the LORD” as we await the final exodus from our own exile, the final deliverance—Jesus’ final victory over sin, death, and the devil.

“Prepare the Way of the LORD!” That is what we are trying to do through the ministry of Ambassador Publications. Passing down from one generation to the next the grand biblical narrative of God’s deliverance through Jesus the Messiah and proclaiming His kingship, might, and power, while anticipating the final victory over sin, death, and the devil.

1 Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 38.

2 R. Reed Lessing, *Concordia Commentary: Isaiah 40-55* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 115.

AFLC congregations are preparing the way of the LORD too. One of the most significant ways we try to help them in this endeavor is by providing the Ambassador Sunday School Series for Preschool, Kindergarten, and Grades 1-6. This thoughtfully developed curriculum gives students a comprehensive overview of the Scriptures as they move through the series, emphasizing sin and grace and encouraging a daily life of repentance and faith in Christ. The Ambassador Sunday School Series was established in the early years of the AFLC and began a revision process in the 1980s to update the presentation with new, full-color student lessons. The Level 2 curriculum on *The Ten Commandments* released in 1987 was the first in the series to be produced in color, followed by a revision and update of all the other levels in the Ambassador Series over the next 20+ years. The last elementary level to finally be revised and updated in full color was Level 6, *Journey Through the New Testament*, completed in 2013. And so the new cycle of revision for the elementary materials began with newly developed Level 4 curriculum on The Apostles' Creed (since its inventory was nearly depleted), published in 2014-2015. The next level in the updating process is Level 2 on *The Ten Commandments*. During the past two years, the primary focus of online meetings with the Board of Publications has been developing and editing new student lessons for The Ten Commandments curriculum. After conquering many obstacles, we are excited to finally introduce this long-awaited curriculum. The Quarter 1 student materials have been printed. An artist is working on illustrations for Quarter 2, and the Board of Publications has nearly completed the editing of Quarter 3 student lessons. Please pray with us for all the facets of this curriculum to be completed so that it can serve our congregations well.

The new Bible lessons help children understand how the Ten Commandments show us our sin and reveal our inability to keep God's commandments perfectly, but the lessons are Gospel-centered, pointing to Jesus our Savior and Deliverer who fulfilled the Law and perfectly kept all the commandments. Students learn that the commandments are also God's gift to us, showing us how to honor the LORD, and live as God's people by loving and serving our neighbor.

Quarter 1 includes six introductory lessons, giving students a foundation for learning the Ten Commandments. The introductory lessons are based on God's statement, "I am the LORD thy God." The 36-lesson series spends approximately three lessons on each commandment. Written exercises and a variety of optional interactive classroom activities help students apply God's truth. Memorization of the commandments and related Scripture is encouraged throughout the curriculum. Each Bible lesson, attractively designed in a four-page leaflet format, is intended to be sent home with students weekly to reinforce their learning at home.

Educational ministry has been complicated for congregations during the past year. In March 2020 as most congregations were suddenly faced with an inability to do in-person ministry due to COVID-19, we quickly adapted to serve our congregations, looking for creative ways to help them in their new challenges. We compiled, produced, and provided weekly free online resources for the remainder of the Sunday school year. These resources were posted on our website and promoted through our Facebook page and e-news, including family worship service outline for home use; children's Bible lessons, activities, and correlating lesson videos; Jonah

youth/adult Bible study; and devotional bulletin articles.

During the months that followed, we kept adding to the quantity of free resources available online, in an effort to help our congregations in the midst of their many limitations and challenges. We also informed congregations that if they needed curriculum resources that were not yet posted free on our website, to please contact us, and we would make available to them whatever was needed. Many of these resources are still available free on our website to help churches get through this time of uncertainty. We are in the process of converting much of our elementary curriculum to a downloadable form to be available for purchase through our online bookstore as a package (e.g., per quarter) or as individual lessons. The majority of congregations do not have equipment to print quality full-color curriculum pages in large quantities and still benefit from purchasing the published and printed student materials. The online option may be especially helpful for purchasing and printing individual lessons for potential visiting students.

Another challenge for Christian education ministry in the congregation during the past year was figuring out what to do about Vacation Bible School. We hosted an online Zoom session to help congregations navigate various options for holding some form of VBS summer ministry in 2020. With help from several congregational representatives, we presented modified and online options as well as a backyard Bible club style. Those in attendance appreciated the opportunity to share their challenges and ideas with one another.

Due to the Minnesota Shelter in Place order, our on-site offices were closed for several weeks in the spring of 2020, and our work shifted primarily to temporary home offices. We changed the focus of much of our work to tasks that could be accomplished off-site. Technology enabled staff to have remote access to email and network files and to have office calls forwarded to cellphones. Staff were allowed to come to the office at designated hours two or three times per week to fill and ship orders to customers. Though we continued to ship orders, a significant decrease in sales was evident, particularly with VBS materials and Sunday school curriculum for the spring quarter of 2020, as well as the fall and winter quarters that followed. We are hopeful that curriculum sales will stabilize again in the 2021-2022 school year.

During the coming year, we hope to publish adult Bible studies on I and II Peter written by Pastor Gary Jorgenson. Other future publications, Lord-willing, include a study on the AFLC Fundamental Principles nearing completion (under the auspices of the AFLC Coordinating Committee), a study on the Means of Grace begun by Dr. Francis Monseth, and a study on the Unity of the Testaments currently being written by Dr. Phil Haugen. Work also continues on several other youth and adult Bible studies.

In addition to many of our publications already available as e-books and downloadable PDFs, a number of our print publications are now available for purchase through Amazon Marketplace. This opportunity broadens our exposure. However, online prices through the Marketplace are listed higher than our own web store prices in order to compensate for assessed fees through Marketplace. Consequently, buying direct from Ambassador

Publications will provide greater benefit to both the customer and to Ambassador Publications.

We have launched a YouTube channel for Ambassador Publications. We are grateful to Adam McCarlson for creating songs to help teach the Ten Commandments. Those music videos can be found on our YouTube channel, as well as a series of children's Bible lesson videos, and informational videos about the ministry of Parish Education.

We prayerfully hope the long-awaited Volume V in the AFLC Heritage Series will be published in the summer of 2021. *One Thing I Seek: Selected Writings of Francis W. Monseth* is a posthumous collection of devotional, historical, and theological writings from the pen of longtime AFLC Schools faculty member and dean of the Free Lutheran Seminary. We are grateful to the AFLC Women's Missionary Federation (WMF) and to Calvary Lutheran Church in Everett, Washington, who generously provided financial support for this project. Calvary was the first pastoral call for Pastor Monseth after completing seminary training, and we gratefully acknowledge the Everett congregation's personal interest and investment in helping to ensure that this collection of Dr. Monseth's writings will be widely accessible for the people of the AFLC. An update on two other Heritage Series volumes mentioned in last year's report is appropriate: 1) Pastor Robert Lee has made significant progress and is nearing the completion of his writing a history of the AFLC. 2) The collection of writings by Georg Sverdrup will likely not be published in the AFLC Heritage Series at this point since the Sverdrup Society is now planning to publish its own series of Sverdrup's writings.

At the request of the Georg Sverdrup Society, we now have all the previous years of the Sverdrup Journal available in a downloadable format through our online bookstore. Published copies of the journals are also available to purchase through our online bookstore, in the Book Nook, or in our Parish Education office. We are serving as the distributor for the journals as they are no longer available directly through the GSS website (a link is posted there to our online store). These journals are valuable tools to help learn about the biblical and historical roots of the concept of "free and living congregations," which is an important part of our AFLC heritage.

Ambassador Publications is working on a cooperative book project with AFLC Schools, *Luther for the Busy Man*, a daily devotional book for the entire year. The Free Lutheran Schools established a website for the project and are producing and managing the online podcast and email subscriptions for daily downloads. Since the devotional book follows the Church Year, the online options were launched for Advent 2020. Ambassador Publications is producing the print edition, to be released prior to Advent 2021. Pre-orders for the print edition will be available beginning at the annual conference in June. We are grateful to the Free Lutheran Schools for their initiative and partnership in this important project.

We continue managing the Ambassador Book Nook in Heritage Hall in cooperation with AFLC Schools. Fall Book Nook sales were very strong. Due to COVID challenges, we promoted early online pre-orders and delivery to student rooms prior to their arrival on campus in order to minimize Book Nook traffic. A large percentage of the students took advantage of

this opportunity. The week prior to classes starting, we also promoted sales of gift cards online, to distribute to students during orientation, and several individuals purchased gift cards for students. In addition, we promoted the opportunity to sponsor our annual gift books to FLBC juniors (The Believer Free from the Law), FLBC seniors (A Faithful Guide to Peace with God), and FLS first-year students (a set of Heritage Series books and Catechism resources). We received responses almost immediately with fully-funded sponsorship. This is a great opportunity for people to show their support of our campus students. We encourage more individuals and congregations to consider supporting students and the ministry of Parish Education in this way. Gift cards or gift certificates can be purchased in the Ambassador Book Nook or through our online bookstore and make practical gifts any time of year for students, ministry leaders, family, and friends.

The Eastern Montana/Western North Dakota AFLC District hosted a weekend children and youth ministry training workshop at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Beulah, North Dakota, in October. The purpose of the event was to provide education and encouragement for ministry leaders. I was grateful for the opportunity to teach sessions at this event in partnership with Pastor Jason Holt, AFLC Youth Ministries Director. We opened the conference Friday evening with complementary presentations on “Why Youth Ministry Matters” and “Why Children’s Ministry Matters,” followed by an open question and answer session. Saturday workshops provided education on various ministry-related topics. Representatives from many congregations in the district attended the event. Participants were reminded that children and youth are longing for connection with real people. Ministry leaders have opportunity to develop relationships that model the love of Christ. They can also provide tools to help children and youth continue growing in Christian faith. Workshop attendees were encouraged to persevere in faithfully teaching the Word of God, trusting not in ourselves or in our own efforts, but in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the hearts of children and youth. We encourage more districts to consider this type of ministry training event to encourage and equip leaders in the congregation.

Though our in-person events were minimized during the past year due to COVID, we are thankful for the opportunities we did have to lead Christian education workshops, to teach sessions at the Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary, and to share about the ministry of Ambassador Publications at conferences and WMF rallies. We are also striving to increase our online presence, attempting to strengthen communication and build connections with individuals and congregations through e-news updates, Facebook, Zoom, email, our website, and online bookstore. Please encourage members of your congregations, and especially teachers, to help us stay connected with them and to let us know how we can serve them better.

Like many other ministries, the past year has been difficult financially for Parish Education. We are grateful to the individuals and congregations who have faithfully continued to support us during this time and also to those who have given generous, special gifts. In addition to your gifts, we have been blessed to receive two grants in 2020:

- \$4,664.66 from the Myrtle, Thelma, Gladys Johnson Fund given

through the InFaith Community Foundation.

- \$1,500 Foundation Grant towards youth and adult Bible studies.

We ask for your continued prayers and financial support as we strive to serve our congregations with our very small-in-number staff. Pray for God's wisdom and guidance as we seek to be good stewards of the time, talents, and financial resources God provides.

Volunteers and staff put in countless hours behind the scenes. I am grateful for each one of you and for your generous hearts! May you be encouraged that "God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints" (Hebrews 6:10 NASB). Thank you especially to office staff Diane Brubakken and Scott Olson for their capable and cheerful service. The Board of Publications is a gifted and dedicated group, and it is a joy to serve with them. Thank you to board members Rev. Dennis Norby, Rev. Ryan Patenaude, Maren Sletten, Suzanne Tietjen, and Leeanna Lunn for prayerfully guiding the ministry of AFLC Parish Education.

Respectfully submitted,

Marian J. Christopherson
Director of Publications and Parish Education