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## For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

## FEATURES

### 4 **Worship Coming Out of the Pandemic** By Rev. Todd A. Peperkorn

Everyone has been trying to figure this out from day one. As we have tried to work through and make sense of all of these things, decision fatigue can easily set in. Because of that, remembering how to show charity toward brother pastors and our sister congregations has never been more important.

### 7 **Pastoral Care in a Lonely World** By Rev. David C. Fleming

Since our Lord proclaimed, before the fall into sin, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18), it’s clear we’re meant to be together. However, we live in largely lonely times. Loneliness has been on the increase in the United States for decades. Before COVID-19, the majority of Americans reported being isolated with the youngest adults (18–22 year-olds) being the loneliest of all. The lockdowns because of COVID-19 only exacerbated this isolation. What might we learn from the challenges of COVID in our already lonely society?

### 10 **What Is It to “Be the Church”?** By Dr. Adam C. Koontz

In the distant land of pre-coronavirus America, some congregations would take a Sunday off to “be the Church” in their community. The Divine Service was replaced with community service, with the understandable but misplaced idea that the Church is defined by what the members are doing, not by what the Lord is doing among them. For many Christians, the church is what the Church does, not whom the Lord gathers. The Church is defined by her Head, Christ Jesus, as the branches live from the Vine. Where He is, there she is. If He is preached, she is there.

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# What Is It to “Be the

In the distant land of pre-coronavirus America, some congregations would take a Sunday off to “be the Church” in their community. The Divine Service was replaced with community service, with the understandable but misplaced idea that the Church is defined by what the members are doing, not by what the Lord is doing among them. For many Christians, the church is what the Church does, not whom the Lord gathers.

We have now all had several and maybe many Sundays “off” from the Divine Service. Our pews were empty, our organ benches empty, our communion rails unused. Diligent pastors and diligent musicians did streaming services for us, but we knew it wasn’t the same as being there. We weren’t there hearing and singing, tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.

If the Church was defined by what we do, the love and kindness and generosity so many Christians have shown in the past year would have been enough for all of us. If the Church was the sum total of all our good works for the sake of others, we would have no sense of loss about the last year. There were kindnesses and joys in abundance, but there was still a lack we all sensed. There were extraordinary examples of generosity and faithfulness among our people. We wouldn’t all feel that we had lost a lot and wouldn’t all know people who have been lost to our congregations and not yet returned—not so much from fear of infection as from indifference to Christ. They did not watch the recorded service all the way through, then didn’t watch anything except the sermon, then didn’t watch more than a few minutes at the beginning, then didn’t watch at all. What happened?

What sustains us? What defines the Church? We know better now than we did before. It used to make some sense somehow that the Church was what the members of the church did. Some of us thought that “church” was the fruit the branches bore, the hours devoted to the community, the number of meals served, the total backpacks given away each school year. None of that fruit then or now was bad, none of it useless or pointless. None of that fruit, however, was Jesus.

Never once have I preached to someone drawing near to the kingdom or near to death’s door that my congregation had given away a large number of backpacks, served a large number of meals to the homeless, or made a certain large number of evangelism contacts in the past six months. I might have those statistics in my head or in our church database, but that fruit never called anyone out of darkness into Christ’s marvelous light. No one was ever saved by the fruit we bore. When it really matters, all I have to say is that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and will see you through death into life everlasting. All I have is that Jesus died for sinners and rose for their justification. I do not preach the branches. I preach the True Vine.



# Church”?

● Adam C. Koontz



Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

The Church is defined by her Head, Christ Jesus, as the branches live from the Vine. Where He is, there she is. If He is preached, she is there. If His washing of water with the Word is done, she is there. If He is handed out in His Body and Blood, she is there. This is basic, but basic isn't the same thing as forgettable. Basic is the same as fundamental, the same as indispensable, the same as essential. The live and lively proclamation of Christ, the life-giving Baptism, the sustaining manna of Holy Communion are all "in-person events," and they are how the Church exists because where He has promised to be and is, there she is too.

If one member is cut off from that Vine, his branch withers. The sap of life no longer flows into him, and he shrivels up by and by. He may love the warm atmosphere of his congregation, but that doesn't come through on Facebook. He may appreciate the good people he grew up with, but they weren't around him when he was in lockdown. By the time the church opened up again, he had no desire to come back. The deer pants for flowing streams, but the man cut off from Christ does not thirst for the Lord. He has no desire any longer for what he has so long done without.

Don't take more Sundays "off," whether for seemingly good reasons or obviously bad reasons. We know now,

if we didn't before, that we can't afford to be "off" or "away" from Christ. We have life only in Him. Without Him we can do and we are truly nothing. This is a wonderful time to learn focus for all our congregations, councils, committees, and every other group in the church: if it does not promote being where and when Christ's Gospel is preached and His Sacraments administered as He commanded, what's it for? This is basic, so it's fundamental and indispensable and essential. If what we do and what we plan as a Church does not lead to more branches growing from the Vine, what's it for? If it's not for building up the Church, what's it for?

Branches need pruning to bear fruit, and we have all been pruned of late. The cutting back was sometimes painful, and our perspective on life is never so wise nor so long as the Vinedresser's. No matter now. He is good, and we are His. We are who we are—His Church—because He is who He is—our faithful Bridegroom. He will never leave us nor forsake us, so wherever He is in His Word and in His Sacraments, there we too will be. From now on, we will not be away or too busy to "be the Church" because being the Bride of Christ is being where Christ the Bridegroom is. Each Sunday we receive from Him all the fullness of God's riches, mercies ever new—good measure pressed down, shaken together,

and running over. Now more than ever, we find in Jesus grace upon grace upon grace and more to spare. [▲](#)

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Photos: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod