

NETWORK NEWS



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Prof. Mark Mattes says: **‘All are theologians, since all are Christians’**

By Betsy Carlson, editor

The grassroots met some theological fundamentals at the WordAlone Network’s annual fall theological conference Nov. 12-14.

Farmers, retailers, homemakers and clergy were reminded they all were theologians during the WordAlone Network fall conference at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Fridley, Minn. Keynote speaker, Prof. Mark Mattes, Grand View College, Des Moines, Iowa, told them, “Luther taught us that all are theologians since all are Christians.

“Some are very good theologians and others not so good. But we are all condemned to be theologians in one way or another, and it is only through being damned that one is made into the best kind of theologian, a theologian of the cross.”

Mattes, who teaches religion and philosophy, and Professor of Church History Walter Sundberg, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., each responded to eight propositions that Prof. Dennis Bielfeldt offered in the past year for consideration as fundamental to the theology of the WordAlone movement. Bielfeldt teach-

es philosophy and religion at South Dakota State University, Brookings, S.D.

Bielfeldt, who is leading efforts to found a Lutheran house of studies, told the WordAlone members and friends at the conference that it was critically important in developing a house of studies to be precise about what theological position would be taught, communicated and what would be understood by it.

He stressed that adopting his proposed fundamentals was not something he could do on his own, but needed to be done on a “corporate level.” The theological conference was planned as a working meeting so that those attending could discuss the proposals, provide feedback and help prepare WordAlone members to vote on fundamentals, possibly at next spring’s convention.

After keynote speeches and formal responses to them, the conferees gathered in pre-assigned discussions groups to chew on the content of Bielfeldt’s proposals. They were encouraged to take home to WordAlone chapters and mem-

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bers what they were learning and discussing.

Mattes' and Sundberg's papers are up on the WordAlone web site, <http://www.wordalone.org/>, along with Bielfeldt's brief responses to them. Abbreviated versions of Sundberg's and Mattes' keynote addresses appear in this issue of Network News. Bielfeldt's proposals have been posted on the web site for some time and reported in an earlier newsletter.

Here are Bielfeldt's proposals in very abbreviated and simple form:

1. Some theological statements are true and some aren't.
2. God is a real being, not just a product of our thinking or consciousness. He is real in spite of the fact that humans cannot taste, smell, touch or see him, nor can we measure him scientifically.
3. God, as a real entity, causes things to happen in the universe.
4. Structures and institutions are affected by what has come before and are not divine.
5. Nothing that is finite—limited or created—can be or become infinite—divine and without limit. Lutherans believe the finite can hold the infinite—Jesus' body and blood are given in, with and under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper.
6. The true church is not visible, but hidden and one, holy, catholic and apostolic.
7. Because of original sin, we inevitably turn from the Almighty God to false gods.
8. The Holy Spirit doesn't need our help but brings salvation to individuals on his own. ♦

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Towards a more robust Lutheran theology: response to Dennis Bielfeldt

By Mark C. Mattes, professor of religion and philosophy
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Dennis Bielfeldt raises the question of how theological discourse is true. For Bielfeldt the real crisis in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is one of truth. We do not seem to have a standard by which to test theological positions and, with that vacuum, the positions that win are the ones that garner the most popular support. Of course, our church constitution assures us that the ELCA grounds its doctrinal stance on the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions as faithful and true witnesses to Scripture.

By rights we are loyal to the Scriptures and the Confessions. Actually, however, we promote a pluralism of theological methods and teachings in ELCA-related institutions. In a sense, we are no longer a synod—meaning same path—but a *poly-odoi*—meaning many paths. Bielfeldt urges us back to a concern for truth in his quest to ground theological discourse in an epistemology (theory of knowledge) of critical realism (a position that says there is an objective knowable reality outside of our minds). My response will not disagree with the overall content or thrust of Bielfeldt's work, but hopefully will nuance it in light of my own reflections about the nature of theology and the mission of the gospel.

First, I think that we need to be clear that theology, according to Luther, is not primarily about developing propositions about God, as is widely believed, but is instead evaluating discourse in light of the truth that the human is sinful and that God is justifying. If theology is to regain the sense that it deals with truth,

then we will have to challenge the centuries-long tendency to reduce truth to measurement or mapping.

The goal of philosophers has been to establish comprehensive systems to explain reality or, more humbly, to analyze the nature of language on the basis of "clear and distinct" ideas. According to Aristotle, reason is the monarch that is to rule as we seek to understand our experience. The goal of modern philosophy, historically, has been to get our

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thinking to conform as much as possible to mathematics. Through mathematics, mind is able to map matter.

Thoughtful philosophers acknowledge that scientific method must presuppose a metaphysics, a philosophy that seeks to understand reality whether visible or invisible. When I ask students, "can you touch, taste, hear, smell or see a number? Or an electron?" they look puzzled. I'm urging them to think about the status of the reality of things of which we have no

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direct sense awareness. How are they real? My students do not want to give up the view that numbers or electrons are real, but they are challenged when they try to explain how these things are real.

The truth about truth is that truth perhaps should not be limited to mapping or even "clear and distinct ideas." Modern ways of viewing truth, as well as Bielfeldt's, prefer propositional ways of looking at truth. Luther's reformation discovery does not easily or quickly mesh with these views. The reason for this is that the Gospel is primarily a performative word. The form of the Gospel is not language that describes reality as such or expresses inner feelings or directs behavior but instead is language that does something. For instance, sins are forgiven in the words of absolution, a blessing is bestowed in the benediction.

Faith means, for Luther, to agree with God's promise against the evidence of the accusing law or the threat of God's indifference as divine hiddenness. Yes, this is realism indeed! The reality of God is crushing us through the drive of the law. Or, it is crushing us in the terror that we as insecure creatures face in the prospect of chaos or the void. In fact, this is the strongest case for realism—human passivity *coram deo* (before the face of God). We are ultimately recipients with respect to God. And, for Luther there is a clear criterion by which we are measured, God's law. We claim that the freedom to think or do is dependent on the prior gift of God's creating us.

The quest of reason as monarch—almost like Sauron's ring (in "Lord of the Rings), "one ring to rule them all, one ring to find them, one ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them"—is thwarted by the fact that God's disquieting hiddenness and revelation, the

accusing law and the promising Gospel and providential order, can not be harmonized into an overall system this side of the eschaton (the end times).

For Bielfeldt, there is a tendency to see truth in terms of true propositions. We can say that he sees theology as tied to constative propositions, that is, language seeking to describe states of affairs.

There is a place for this approach. It is aligned with the scholastic approach to theology that confirms theology as an academic discipline whose primary method is *disputatio*. However, we must ever keep in mind that theology primarily begins and ends with the worship service. More fundamental to the task of theology *per se* is the need to analyze the performative character of the language of proclamation and worship, particularly an analysis of how law and Gospel are used in language. The point is: the liturgical, monastic approach to theology is to be done in tandem with the academic, scientific approach to theology. Both need to be intertwined if our theology is to be faithful to that of Luther and the Confessors.

Bielfeldt's affirmation of realism is a critical response to the deep-set psychologizing trends that we see adopted in theology so much since Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher was not concerned that theological propositions conformed to reality but that they corresponded to the deepest religious sentiments or feelings of the Christian. Bielfeldt is adamantly opposed to the resulting subjectivist trend in theology. Subjectivism tends to

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make theology into a product of the imagination.

Such romanticism, as Schleiermacher's, is experienced in today's seminary education. When I was a senior at Luther Seminary in St. Paul 20 years ago hundreds of ministerial candidates were expected to concoct our own theologies, which we then submitted to the seminary faculty, who evaluated it to establish our fitness for ministry. We actually were urged to be expressive, explore our creativity. We were not urged to be orthodox and confess the faith of the church established in Scripture, the ecumenical



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Creeds, and the Confessions. One can imagine: Barth, Tillich, Bultmann, and me! The result is a plurality of confessions within an allegedly confessional church. How can we have loyalty to the cause in the ELCA when we do not share a common faith?

My response to Bielfeldt is that constative and performative are or should be more intertwined. As German theologian Oswald Bayer notes, academic tools are regulative for theology but liturgical spirituality is constitutive for theology. The former makes theology to be scientific while the latter guarantees that it is theology, tied to the worship service. The proposition, "God creates the world," as Bielfeldt notes, calls for assessing its truth in terms of its correspondence to reality. Hence, Bielfeldt is

so concerned about divine causality. However, his concerns need to be nuanced. Are the days of Genesis 1 to be understood literally or is Genesis more of a confessional or liturgical narrative? Talk of creation is propositional and commends itself to the academy. It is also—and primarily—creedal and fosters the life of faith and the community of worship.

Again, my suggestion of a case for realism is that according to Luther, God is ever working upon us as he is mediated in creation, scripture and the sacraments. Through such means, God accuses, comforts, threatens and provides. This God gives us freedom in his very promise of life. Our realistic position is embodied in a narrative—for that is exactly how the promise of the Gospel is conveyed. And, this can only be told because God raised Jesus from the dead.

The faith is both story-based and accountable to the best academic research available. We need to honor both poles in our theologizing. This has many repercussions as WordAlone anticipates supporting a Lutheran house of studies. Theological education has tended, in this country and Europe, to dichotomize head and heart, the liturgical-spiritual moment of theology from the academic moment. The tendencies in theological education, affecting both seminaries and church-related college religion departments, have been to be too enamored with the secular modes of thinking that translate faith into either a knowing as we see in the philosopher Hegel, or doing, as we see in Kant and Marx or feeling as we see in Schleiermacher and his disciples.

When our ancestors established seminaries and colleges, it was not that they were unfamiliar with these ways of doing theology. They knew them firsthand in Europe. Rather, they intention-

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ally avoided these approaches as counter-productive to the mission of the Gospel. The institutions they established were far more akin to the European mission schools than the universities. Theologically, they tended towards orthodoxy, for the most part. Theological leaders in our seminaries and colleges back in the late 1950's through the 1970's intentionally felt that the wave of the future for religion would be away from the wooden and stale proof-texting approach to theology and mission that they had received in their educations. That presentation of faith was dead for them and unable to address the needs of an increasingly secular world. But that led to the situation that Bielfeldt criticizes today. These leaders whether knowingly or not adopted those very secular, accommodating theological methods of knowing, doing and feeling that our ancestors knew were not serving Europeans at all well.

Theology became less tied to real parishes and more attuned to the secular university—an audience that is not sympathetic with the Gospel. If a wooden orthodoxy was no longer viable, the solution was even worse. The promise of the Gospel was transformed into ethical agendas, psychological explorations or grand unified systems. The interconnection between scripture, worship, doctrine and pastoral conversation was lost. WordAlone stands now in a position to reclaim a more holistic approach to ministry and faith. Ought not this topic to serve as our theme for next fall?

More than anything, the theological task is fundamentally a pastoral task of distinguishing law and Gospel. Apologetic tasks, which we see heightened in

Bielfeldt's work, are legitimate and necessary. However, they are subordinate to this primary theological task.

Luther taught us that all are theologians since all are Christians. Some are very good theologians and others not so good. But we are all condemned to be theologians in one way or another, and it is only through being damned that one is made into the best kind of theologian, a theologian of the cross.

Bielfeldt is right to highlight critical realism as an alternative to Schleiermacherian subjectivism that reduces theology to anthropology. He is right to affirm theological propositions as conforming to states of affairs in so far as we, as sinners and creatures, all suffer divine things. Theological language, however, analyzes not only constative forms of discourse but even more importantly performative discourse—words that convey God's reality impinging upon us primarily as either command or promise. ♦

“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.”

John 1:3-5.

Response to ‘The Fundamentals of WordAlone theology’

By Walter Sundberg, professor of church history
Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minn.

I wish to respond to Professor Dennis Bielfeldt's argument by reflecting on the first of the “fundamentals” he lists in his shorter version of his paper on WordAlone fundamental beliefs: **“God is real and statements about God are either true or false.”**

I think Bielfeldt has identified in this first of his fundamentals a problem that grips the mainline Protestant church today and is the root cause of its decline since the 1960s. There have been many witnesses to this problem in the church. I would like to call on two: the first an outsider to Christian faith—and all the more a compelling observer because of that fact; the second, a distinguished Roman Catholic New Testament scholar. I have purposely picked two people who are not Lutheran and have no association with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I do this for two reasons: first to indicate that these issues are larger than those of a particular Lutheran denomination in America; second, to counter the argument (actually it is a canard) that WordAlone is an insular organization that is unable to see beyond its parochial Lutheran agenda.

The witness of an outsider

The outsider is the sociologist Sherryll Kleinman, a Jew by birth, and a self-described agnostic in religion, who in the late 1970s was a graduate student, newly arrived at a large midwestern university (not in the Twin Cities of Minnesota.) Like most graduate students, Kleinman was interested in finding cheap living accommodations. She

was told that a local seminary provided dorm rooms to outside students at reasonable prices. She obtained one, although she was a bit nervous at the prospect of spending time around students dedicated to a religion that she did not share. She was especially anxious about the prospect of being proselytized. To her surprise, however, she found the seminary students remarkably “unreligious” in their character and concerns. No one questioned her beliefs—or lack of them.

“God is real and statements about God are either true or false.”

Their talk about faith was, in fact, so secular in content, so strange in its use of language, that it did not seem to her to be a faith at all. Indeed, Ms. Kleinman found her entire experience living in a seminary dorm so unusual, particularly from her viewpoint as an unreligious outsider, that she soon resolved to make “Midwest Seminary” (as she called it) the subject of her Ph.D. dissertation. The result was an instant classic that made her career: “Equals before God: Seminarians as Humanistic Professionals” published by the highly prestigious University of Chicago Press in 1984.

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Kleinman found that the vast majority of seminarians at this mainline Protestant institution were prone to translate biblical ideas and traditional dogmatic language into what she calls "feeling states." For them, the basis for religious reality had become the subjective and interpersonal sphere of human discourse and relationships. The budding pastors saw themselves primarily as counselors, not preachers, facilitators of healthy self-awareness, not deliverers of tradition. The skills needed for ministry were skills that anyone might possess. For example, after spending several weeks at her task of observation, Kleinman was told by a student that she would make a good minister. "Why?" asked Kleinman. "Because you are such a good listener," was the reply. Here the ministry of the gospel was equated with a common characteristic: the ability to be attentive to what others say—admirable to be sure, but hardly distinctive and without religious content.

In Kleinman's view, ministers had become little more than therapeutic humanists who accommodate religious creed to the conditions of mundane reality and the conventional values of polite society.

In writing "Equals Before God," Kleinman had no axe to grind, no theological commitments to blur her vision or tempt her to engage in special pleading. What Kleinman saw as something fairly new at the end of the 1970s has only become, since then, more entrenched in mainline churches. The humanist spirit is now so pervasive, so naturally a part of the modern character that it is in the very air that our seminarians breathe. This pervasive humanist spirit has been accompanied by a strategy of accommodation that involves both

the translation of doctrine into feeling and the denial of the transcendent sphere as the ultimate referent of theological speech. It is a strategy that goes back to the German romantic theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and beyond him to the Enlightenment. As I said, it is in the air our seminarians breathe—indeed all seminarians and pastors, whether Catholic or Protestant, liberal, evangelical or traditional. One can't wall oneself off from it and create a cloistered environment. It has to be faced and answered.

The witness of a New Testament scholar

To begin to see at least the beginnings of an answer, I turn to the second witness: the distinguished Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Ga. He speaks from the viewpoint of his particular field of New Testament studies. Johnson declares bluntly and alarmingly that there is "a crisis in pedagogy concerning the New Testament." This crisis "has little to do with constraints imposed on scholars from the outside. It has much to do with the emptiness of biblical scholarship apart from communities for whom these ancient texts have real-life significance and with the inadequacy of the historical critical method to meet the questions of significance posed by our culture today." Johnson decries what he calls the "Jesus business in America." An academic cottage industry has developed, exemplified by the notorious Jesus Seminar, which profits by marketing provocative portraits of "the historical Jesus."

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Insofar as this type of scholarship has an influence on seminary education and church life, its effect is devastating. This effect is felt most strongly in mainline churches where modern criticism of the Bible carries the most weight. Ironically, efforts to accommodate the Bible to modern notions of truth serves more to drive members away than to make the church socially acceptable.

In "Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers," Dean R. Hoge of Catholic University of America, Benton Johnson of the University of Oregon, and Donald A. Luidens of Hope College—all professional sociologists—learned that membership decline and reduced levels of active participation and church-going since the 1960s, are directly related to belief in salvation by Christ alone. This belief, this creedal affirmation, is the most important predictor of a person's religious allegiance and practice.

Since Dean M. Kelley's pioneering study "Why Conservative Churches Are Growing" (1972), it is widely recognized that liberal denominations lack impetus because they deliver a confused message. By contrast, evangelical churches are successful because they are clear, dogmatic in belief, strict in their demands on behavior, refusing to accommodate intellectual trends, affirming the infallibility of Scripture; these churches successfully carry out the indispensable function of religion: to explain the meaning of life unambiguously to adherents.

Luther Seminary's mission statement

Realizing this, the faculty at Luther Seminary, adopted a non-negotiable mission statement a decade ago. The Seminary adopted the statement after much debate, a debate that served to make the mission statement a matter of

"The humanist spirit is now so pervasive, so naturally a part of the modern character that it is in the very air that our seminarians breathe."

self-conscious and deliberate appropriation. The statement reads: "Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God's world."

Seven words became the heart of the mission statement: **"to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ."** These words emerged as central, not because they are orthodox (which they are), or unusual (which they are not), but because, as I said, they were debated and self-consciously appropriated by vote. It was an instance of an orthodox position not being assumed, but won.

Observations on the strategy of "fundamentals"

Which brings me to the matter of the strategy of "fundamentals" that is the subject of this WordAlone conference. Nearly a century ago, the Presbyterian Church found itself in the midst of a culture war with the elite academics and bureaucrats of the church over accommodation to secularism and historical criticism of Scripture and creed. At the 1910 meeting of the General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church passed a resolution identifying what they saw as the five fundamentals of Christian faith. Fundamental number one, on Scripture, used the English word "inerrancy" (coined in the mid-19th century) to identify the old Protestant doctrine of verbal inspiration. While this way of confessing the authority of Scripture may be disputed today, it should not be forgotten that the Presbyterians, in calling upon the

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doctrine of verbal inspiration, were in the best of company at the time. In 1918, Karl Barth, in his preface to the first edition of "The Epistle to the Romans," perhaps the most influential theological work of the first half of the 20th century, took a similar stand with regard to the authority of Scripture when he said that while the historical-critical method of Biblical investigation had its rightful place, if he had to choose between it and the doctrine of inspiration, he would without hesitation adopt the latter, which was concerned with the work of apprehending, without which no technical equipment, however complete, would be of any use.

It also should be noted that Lutherans in America at the time were in general agreement with this sentiment. In 1919, the National Lutheran Council affirmed the "inerrancy" of Scripture with regard to "faith, doctrine, and practice" in the so-called "Chicago Theses" of 1919. This way of speaking about biblical authority was reaffirmed in pan-Lutheran gatherings in 1930 (Minneapolis Theses) and 1952 (United Testimony in Faith and Life) and finally in the Constitution of the American Lutheran Church in 1960.

It is important to note that in all of these agreements, "inerrancy" was defined as applying to "doctrine and life."

The Lutherans who from 1919 to 1960 employed the concept of inerrancy to express biblical authority refused to apply it to "history and geography." Hence, theirs was not a fundamentalist position. But it was, in their time, a witness to what Bielfeldt means when he says, "God is real, that is, God exists in ways that humans cannot experience or wholly conceive . . . God exists out and beyond the human mind."

The movement of bearing witness to the

fundamentals of faith, begun by Presbyterians in 1910, was thus not confined to "fundamentalism," but had much broader reach and influence. It represented a self-conscious protest to a type of liberal theology that had robbed the faith of its vital core. "We live . . . in a time of hostility," wrote H. Richard Niebuhr in 1935, "when the church is imperiled not only by an external worldliness but by one that has established itself within the Christian camp." Niebuhr's contemptuous dismissal of the church's tendency to accommodate culture was encapsulated in the most famous line he ever wrote: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." With this negative assessment of the liberal position, the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1910, the National Lutheran Council in 1919 and pan-Lutheran statements that followed; and the whole movement of theology under the leadership of Karl Barth, which came to be known as "neo-orthodoxy," heartily agreed.

With this in mind, I think it is most fitting in this time of crisis and decline that we consider the strategy of discerning and confessing the "fundamentals" of faith for the renewal of the church,

Professor Bielfeldt's contribution to the effort of discerning the fundamentals of faith, under the auspices of WordAlone, is to be commended.

Editor's note: Mattes' and Sundberg's papers are up on the WordAlone web site along with Bielfeldt's brief responses to them (<http://www.wordalone.org/docs/wa-conference-hist.shtml>). Bielfeldt's proposals have been posted on the web site for some time and reported in an earlier newsletter. ♦

Lutheran Clergy Connect

Clergy Connect is one way for churches seeking a pastor or other leader to connect with potential candidates who believe that Christ alone is sufficient for the unity of the church and that the Word of God is the authority for the church. Below are the most recent listings. A full list, which includes more detail and listings, is posted at: www.wordalone.org/clergy.shtml

To list your search on Clergy Connect, mail or fax your request on church letterhead, signed by an officer or call committee chair, to: WordAlone Network, 2299 Palmer Dr., Suite 220, New Brighton, MN 55112 - fax: 651-633-4260. Include this information: title of position, church's name (city and state), contact person with phone number and e-mail address. If you list your search, please inform us when you fill the position.

Calls are listed starting with the most recently received.

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church Tomah, Wisconsin

Position: Director of youth and family ministry.

Contact: Please contact Pastor Bill Rice for any questions and a job description. Bill Rice at (608) 372-4758 or srppastor@charter.net.

Send résumé to: Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Attn: Personnel Committee, 310 W. Elizabeth Street, Tomah, WI 54660

Zion Lutheran Church Des Moines, Iowa

Position: Associate pastor.

Contact: Submit résumé and names of references via e-mail or mail. Pastor John Kline at 515-270-8142 or JohnKline@zionsm.org
4300 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, IA 50310.

Our Saviour's Lutheran Church Stanwood, Washington

Position: Senior pastor.

Contact: Send mobility papers to: John Holmes, Call Committee Chairman, PO Box 123, Stanwood, WA 98292. Phone: 360-629-3576; Fax: 360-652-7223 and Pastor Jan Nesse, Asst. to the Bishop, NW Washington Synod, 5519 Phinney Ave No, Seattle, WA 98103-5829. Ph: 206-783-9292; Fax: 206-783-9833; nesse@lutheransnw.org

Elim Evangelical Lutheran Church Ogden, Utah

Position: Part-time pastor.

Contact: Joyce Toone, Call Committee chair, at 801-782-8674 or rejoicetoone@worldnet.att.net
3483 N 800 W, Ogden, UT 84414

For details on these calls, go to <http://www.wordalone.org/clergy.shtml> on the Internet

WordAlone Network Annual Convention

April 29 - May 1, 2007

Calvary Lutheran Church

Golden Valley, Minn.

Keynote presenters, Karl Donfried and Steven Paulson, will address issues surrounding a Lutheran reading and interpretation of Scripture