FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Friends in Christ,

The 2026 LCMC Annual Gathering was centered on the theme of our freedom in Christ. 6 of us from Immanuel attended among a total of 894 registrants at Lutheran Church of Hope in West Des Moines. It was good to see Evan Nielsen representing his new congregation in Clear Lake, Iowa. He is attending seminary at the Master's Institute.

Our gathering focused on our freedom in Christ under the theme of "Unleashed." Each morning Sara Stenson of the Luther House of Studies in Sioux Falls led us in a Bible study on our theme verse of Galatians 5:1 "For freedom Christ has set us free. Therefore, do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Dr. Stenson explained how God's Law is different from man-made laws. Man-made laws focus on externals. God's Law focuses on our inmost heart. We can't fulfill God's Law with our external deeds. God's Law exposes and accuses the sinner within us. The Gospel simply announces that Jesus Christ forgives you all your sins. Period. No ifs, ands, or buts. If we add an "if" to the Gospel it is no longer good news. It is now fake news. Christ's forgiveness is complete or it is no good news at all.

David Zahl was our first keynote speaker. He spoke on the universal captivity of humanity. Have you ever met a human being who was not captive to something? Approval, fear, self-pity, a phone, work, money, politics, looks, sports, anger, the past, poverty? We are all captive to something. Sin is the internal captivity of disordered desires. We love the wrong things too much and the right things not enough. Evil is the external captivity of social, political, spiritual forces assaulting us. Jesus came forgiving sin and casting out demons, setting people free from internal and external captivity.

Tara Beth Leach was our second keynote speaker. She used the story of Paul in Philippi (Acts 16) to talk about our freedom to set others free through the sharing of the Gospel. The Gospel leads to radical conversions with lasting effects. The Gospel leads to real diversity. The Gospel raises up new leaders from the most unlikely people. The Gospel produces outrageous joy.

Our final keynote speaker was Pastor Mike Householder from Lutheran Church of Hope. He said that if you are going to survive in this oppressive world, you have got to know that there is a God and this God loves you.

All 6 of us attended various breakout sessions and came away with some encouraging ideas and helpful information. It was also good to visit with various exhibitors from our LCMC ministry partners. I personally enjoyed singing in the Gathering choir in a section of 8 tenors!

Next year's gathering will be in St. Louis October 3-6. I would highly encourage anyone looking for hope for the future of the Church to join us next year in St. Louis.

Yours in Christ, Phil Nielsen