



**Interview Steve Wachtmann  
Pastor in Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Columbus / Ohio**

*Klaus: Dear Steve, you are a US Lutheran congregation. How is your church structured and how many Lutherans do you have in Ohio?*

Steve: Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio is a congregation of Southern Ohio Synod in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA], The ELCA is composed of some 8900 individual congregations across the country which are organized as confessional congregationalists, meaning that while each adheres to the Augsburg Confession along with the three traditional creeds (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian) and gather with other such congregations in regional expressions known as “Synods” as well as a national expression known as “Church-wide,” each congregation is nonetheless fully autonomous to establish its own program of worship, education, outreach and community care. Our synodical and national bishops can only inform and advise rather than mandate courses of ministry.

The state of Ohio has three synods, each with roughly 180 congregations with membership ranging from 10 to 2000 members for a total of approximately 150,000.

*Klaus: How did the partnership between you and the then Paulsgemeinde come about?*

In the 1980’s Pastor Hans Kasch from the Mecklenburg Synod in Germany and Pastor Larry Hoffsis from the Southern Ohio Synod in the ELCA began exploring partnership opportunities across our two synods. In 2000, as a part of those partnership activities, a small group of youth and adults from Paulsgemeinde in Schwerin stopped at Holy Trinity for a brief engagement while visiting the United States and Ohio, in particular. In 2004, a youth group from Holy Trinity made its first pilgrimage to sites of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, including a visit with Paulsgemeinde and Pastor Manzei, at which point the formal partnership was approved. This summer will be our fifth such Youth Group Pilgrimage in addition to three other Luther and Music Pilgrimages with adults.

*Klaus: The USA is a very diverse country. Who are the people in your parish? Are there also members of the First Nations with you?*

Holy Trinity is situated in an upper middle class neighborhood on the northwest side of Columbus which is the capital of Ohio. We are also close to the largest college in the United States: The Ohio State University. We enjoy what I refer to as the blessing of generations; that is, rather than a young congregation or an old congregation, we perform roughly 5-10 baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals each year. Reflecting our neighborhood the congregation is 99 percent white, although our two black members have both served to terms as Council President. While there are no Native Americans who live in our community, we are bounded by two rivers named for historical tribes in the area: the Olentangy and the Scioto.

*Klaus: How do you live your faith together?*

Our Vision, Mission and Values Statement guides are life of faith together

Vision: Inviting All ~ Transforming Each ~ Serving Christ Together

Mission: To invest the gifts that God gives you toward the mission that God gives us

Values:

- The gospel of Jesus Christ, that reveals God's unconditional love for all creation, calls us to the same unconditional love.
- Our study of the Bible provides the foundation for our lives of faith in the gospel.
- Our vitality as a community is expressed when our members share their spiritual gifts through the four traditional expressions of the gospel – worshipping, learning, serving, and nurturing.
- Our discipleship may call us to perform any ministry consistent with our core values.
- Prayer and other forms of regular communication are necessary care for our relationship with God, one another, and the world.

*Klaus: What special tasks do you as a church have in your country and city?*

Holy Trinity has these primary outreach partnerships in the Central Ohio Area:

- Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio and an agency funded by all Lutheran churches in the area to address hunger, homelessness and safety from domestic violence.
- Jacob's Porch is the Lutheran Campus Ministry at The Ohio State University.
- Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University trains pastors and other leaders in the church.
- Habitat for Humanity builds houses and neighborhood for people in need.
- First English Lutheran Church is the urban ministry that strives to meet needs in inner city Columbus.
- The Y-Family Center is a short-term apartment complex for families who are between homes.
- MomenTous is a new initiative striving to reach unchurched people through podcasts and other virtual forms of communication.

*Klaus: We often have problems getting young people excited about the faith, also because many families are no longer Christian. Can you do it better?*

We are experiencing a similar trend with fewer families with young people participating regularly in the life of the congregation. This is especially true now as we emerge from the pandemic. Those of us 55-years-old and older have pretty much resumed our regular church activities. Those younger, while still around for special occasions and making regular offerings to the church, are not so routinely involved yet again.

One innovation has begun to show signs of hope though. We used to conduct Sunday School between two Sunday morning services. Since Sunday School attendance has become so erratic, we have integrated those activities into worship now instead. We begin with a Warm-up 15 minutes before worship when we ready the lesson for the day from a Children's Bible and sing

several camp songs associated with the them. Then we hand each child a bag filled with activities for them to work on during worship on small end tables that we have distributed throughout the sanctuary. Then for the benediction at the end of the service, we call them together for a special Wrap-up activity to help foster church friendships while their parents visit over coffee and donuts. This new approach has really invigorated our Sunday morning experience.

Where our teenagers are concerned, we are finding them to be more interested in service activities, as well as starting to join some of our adult Sunday School presentations. We are also working to “take church” to them, inviting congregation members to attend the young peoples ball games, concerts and other performances that mean so much to them, hoping to show how much they mean to church as well.

*Klaus: At this time, we are deeply moved by the war of aggression against Ukraine. How about you? You are much further away and not threatened yourself.*

While we are very concerned about the war in Ukraine, you are right — our concern is different than yours given your close proximity to the fighting. Our concern for Ukraine is fairly similar to the concern we have for conflict in Syria, Yemen, Palestine and Israel, including debate as to what our role should be at all. We pray for peace every week.

*Klaus: Another political question: We hear a lot of bad things about D. Trump and Republicans in general. Is democracy really threatened in the US?*

Political discourse in the United States has become veer coarse, combative and polarized since the run-up to the 2016 Presidential Election. Yet just when there is fear that minority rule might eventually gain power over democracy, an election helps bring the country back toward the middle. While the technology of modern communication seems to amplify the discord like never before, our history is full instances that have tested the fabric of our democracy as well.

*Klaus: Last personal question for you, Steve: Which Bible verse is most important to you?*

Perhaps the most accurate answer is to say that whichever Bible verse I happen to be reading is most important to me at that time!

More directly, among many verses that are important to me, right now I would say Acts 10:34, where Peter is preaching about his enlightenment after Jesus resurrection, saying: “I understand that God shows no partiality ...” What Jesus revealed about God’s eternal and infinite love on the cross and through the grave, Jesus revealed it for all.

Our country in the United States, and dare I say around the world, is is partial and divided in so many way between race, gender, nationality, and age. And all too often, the gospel of Jesus is misappropriated to provoke those divisions rather than to help bridge them.

We of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio are blessed to partner with you of Friede Gemeinde in Schwerin, Mecklenburg to serve as beacons of the impartial love for all that God along can bring through Christ Jesus our Lord.

*This interview was conducted by Klaus Kuske and Steve Wachtmann by email in April and May.*