

## CREDO Initiative for Congregations

### North American Lutheran Church

#### CREDO: Confessional Renewal Embracing Discipleship and Outreach

The **CREDO** Initiative aims to assist NALC congregations in “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15) – actively tending to the Word of God as the source and standard of faith and Christian life. We come together to hear God’s Word and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, and Jesus goes forth with us in mission. We engage one another in conversation around the Scriptures, hold one another in prayer, and challenge and encourage one another to walk in obedience to Christ. Martin Luther explains this holy obligation in his preface to the Large Catechism: “Nothing is so effectual against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy oneself with the Word of God, talk about it, and meditate on it.” As we attend to the Word, the Holy Spirit impels us to make disciples by reaching out in Christian love – whether across an ocean, or across a table.

#### Confessional

“Credo” means “I believe.” It is the first Latin word of each article of the Apostles’ Creed, the Church’s age-old affirmation of what it means to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: to be brought by the Spirit into the reality of having Jesus Christ as our Lord; to have died to sin, and risen to new life in His righteousness.

Both our identity as Christians and our belief in Jesus are not something we choose or accomplish. They happen by God’s command through the speaking of the Gospel by the Church, the community God made for that purpose. In joyful response to the Gospel, we *confess* together our shared faith that Jesus is Lord and none other, and the Spirit compels us to be ready to explain this reality. Luther’s simple catechetical question – “What does this mean for us?” – is a powerful tool for sharing the Gospel. We need to keep that tool sharp by constantly engaging the Scriptures and the confessions of the Church.

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- We often think of “confess” in the context of repenting – “confessing” our sins. What does it mean to *confess* Jesus as Lord?
  - “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.” What does this confession of faith mean for us – as individuals, and as the Church together? What does the reality that Christ alone is Lord mean for us in how we live our lives?
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#### Renewal

*He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:5-6)*

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The call to discipleship is initiated in Holy Baptism, the sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. Christ washed us of sin so we would have the fullness of his salvation. He has made us a new creation by the living water of His own righteousness, a spring “welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). We are branches on His vine (John 15:5), and His Good News flows through us as “rivers of living water” (John 7:38) for refreshment and healing, through all our responsibilities and relationships. With the abundant life of His Gospel on our lips and in our hearts, we bear fruit for the kingdom, one life to another.

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- The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is a once-for-all event in our lives. How does the Holy Spirit *renew* us through this sacrament – then, and now?
  - How is repentance a “return to baptism” (Large Catechism 4:79)? What does it mean to die daily to sin and rise with Christ, “cleansed and righteous” (Small Catechism 4:12)?
  - In what ways do we refresh and renew the lives of others with the “living water” of the Gospel?
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### **Embracing**

To *embrace* is, in the traditional language of weddings, “to have and to hold.” In the life of following Christ, this is the response of faith and love – the upward and outward echo of God’s loving Word, toward Him and toward one another. Jesus draws us into fellowship with Him and calls us to *hold fast* to His Word of Truth. Our Spirit-filled response of faith is to turn to Him in repentance and to receive Him “with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). As Christ embraces us in His Word and His Holy Supper, He makes our lives an adventure of joyous thanksgiving. “Where two or three are gathered in His name” (Matt. 18:20), around His Word, He is holding us. He teaches us to hold each other in prayer and to embrace the suffering of the cross in emptying ourselves in love for one another for His sake.

- Members of a family will often embrace one another in love. In what ways does Christ hold or embrace us, and in what ways do we embrace Him?
- The Church is a holy community that embraces Christ and one another. What are the various ways that we hold one another in Christian love?

### **Discipleship**

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Our ongoing instruction or catechesis in the faith into which we were baptized is inseparable from our fellowship with Christ and with one another. The original Greek for “disciple” is the word for adherent, learner, or pupil. In *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), Martin Luther uses the Greek term *theodidactoi*, “those who are taught by God,” to describe Christians and their mutual obligation in Holy Baptism to build each other up in the Lord’s family. We are adherents to the

Risen Lord, and we pass on *as of first importance* what we have received (1 Cor. 15:3). As we *are* disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit calls and equips us to *make* disciples through the Gospel.

- Before Jesus' death and resurrection, His disciples followed Him by *sight* – going with Him where he physically walked. In what ways do we follow or hold fast to Him now as his disciples by *faith*?
- Jesus called His disciples, and they followed after Him. How do we “make disciples” in His name?

### **Outreach**

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). As the Risen Lord continues to reach out and come alongside us in Word and Sacrament, so He sends us from his Table to bear His peace and His *presence* to those sitting across from us in the tables of our daily lives. In Holy Communion, Jesus invests in us with all the fullness of his life and righteousness. With thanksgiving, we go forth to invest His love in the lives of others through concrete relationships. We thus extend the life of the congregation into the broader community. With works of love and Christ-centered conversation, we invite our neighbors to “come and see” (John 1:46) the Body of Christ.

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- What does the Sacrament of Holy Communion have to do with loving our neighbors as ourselves? How does this also relate to Jesus' “I am” saying concerning the vine, the branches, and the fruit (John 15:5-8)?
  - How is it that we serve as “ambassadors for Christ” (1 Cor. 5:20)?
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## **Description: CREDO Initiative for Congregations, NALC**

### **CREDO, "I believe": Confessional Renewal Embracing Discipleship and Outreach**

**CREDO** is not a technique or a program. It is an initiative for supporting our congregations in tending to the Word of God in the various ways it forms us into the holy community of the Church, feeds our life together in Christ, and sends us forth on His mission. Our vision is that the NALC will reclaim the confessional Lutheran emphasis on life-to-life discipleship through Christ-centered conversation. We will do this through ongoing catechesis and intentional faith formation in the life of our congregations. The goal is not to recommend a single set of materials or a one-way-only approach, but rather to develop a set of resources and a series of transferable processes that can be used in congregational settings throughout the NALC.

**Discipleship Guides** are a corps of trained clergy and lay leaders who are willing to invest in the lives of our pastors and laity by providing them with spiritual guidance, prayerful support, and vocational accountability. To provide encouragement in their ministry and to prevent negligence in their office, pastors should engage in holy conversation with one another. For the good of the Church, we encourage pastors to participate in this intentional conversation as a simple matter of faithfulness to their calling. These guides will also be a resource for congregations through the years it may take to implement CREDO.

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*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (Colossians 1:28)*

The Church's cultivation of maturity in the faith – conforming disciples to their communal identity in Christ – is the work of the Holy Spirit, a life-long process that occurs in the fellowship of the Body of Christ through the Word of God. There are a number of ways that we share the Gospel with one another (see Luther, Smalcald Articles 3.4).

**Pulpit, Font, and Altar:** Our fellowship in Christ *emerges out of* and *returns to* the frequent and regular gathering of the congregation around the Word and the Sacraments (Acts 2:46-47). Here we become disciples in Holy Baptism, are fed with the bread of life (John 6:35) in proclamation and Holy Communion, and are sent forth to spread the Gospel and to embody our Lord's commandment to love one another as He loves us (John 13:34).

**Confession and Absolution:** The Church's responsibility of the office of the keys for the forgiveness of sins, the concrete and personal gift of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is at the direct command of the Lord Himself (John 20:23).

**"Mutual Conversation and Consolation":** Sharing and studying the Gospel together in concrete relationships where "two or three are gathered" in Jesus' name (Matt. 18:20) occurs within the congregation, in the home, and amid our many callings in the world.

- Coupled with this conversation is the spiritual discipline of **Daily Scripture Reading and Prayer**. The more consistently we make time for prayer and the study of Holy Scripture, the more God's Word will shape our life together, and the more prepared we will be to share it with others.

In order to implement this Christ-centered conversation in the life of our congregations, we encourage pastors to form, lead, and mentor **CREDO Leadership Teams**.

These teams – initially one per congregation – should meet for a period of 12-18 months to develop a life of mutual trust for engaging in faith-forming discussion. Their study of Scripture should focus on the Second Article of the Creed, the person of Jesus Christ: who He is, and what it means to have and follow Him as Lord.

### **Walking in Baptism**

Using Scripture and the catechism (with special attention to the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the 10 Commandments, and the Sacraments), the CREDO Leadership Team will discuss over time an overall portrait of life together as followers in Christ, describing how the various forms of receiving and sharing the Gospel are all connected in the life of the congregation and extend from the Lord's Table outward into the world.

A disciple's baptismal identity calls for daily repentance with confidence that the Holy Spirit will "bring to completion" the good work He began (Philippians 1:6). With this call to repentance before them, the CREDO Leadership Team will address areas of personal and congregational growth according to the confessional portrait of discipleship. These may include:

- Fluency in the Bible, the Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions
- Personal prayer life and the willingness to lead prayer with others
- Liturgical involvement and the formation of worship leaders
- Individual Confession and Absolution
- Faithful obedience to Christ in the home and in the world
- The confidence to engage in conversation and share the Gospel
- Outreach and service to the community

This catechetical emphasis will form the congregation's understanding of what it means to model obedience to Christ in the home and the broader community, and to extend the fellowship of our Lord to those who desperately need the faith, hope, and love of the Gospel.

### **Making Disciples: Building a Culture of Faith Formation**

Members of the CREDO Leadership Team will eventually serve as leaders for additional CREDO teams in their congregations. The members of each team will in turn meet for 12-18 months before forming new teams of their own. They will focus their conversations on:

- Adherence to Christ in His Word, with intentional discussion of the catechism.
- Mutual prayer and life-to-life relationships of encouragement and accountability within the group.

These teams will give intentional focus to raising up teachers in the faith, such as:

- Long-term baptismal sponsors
- Discipleship mentors for children, confirmands, and adult converts
- Catechetical instructors for ongoing faith formation

## Community Engagement: MISSION

In obedience to the Lord's command to go and make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20), CREDO teams will train their members for mission together in the broader community as the Holy Spirit presents them with opportunities.

- *Lord, teach us to pray* (Luke 11:1): With focused conversation on the Lord's Prayer, they will develop skills in praying for others.
- *What does this mean for us?* They will come alongside those whom God brings into their path to share the consolation and the joy of the Gospel.
- *Christian Vocation*: They will engage with friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers to build relationships for sharing the love of Christ.
- *Come and see* (John 1:46): They will extend the invitation to participate with the congregation in worship, fellowship, and service.
- *Through love, they will serve one another* (Galatians 5:10) in the name of Christ through outreach by making time, expending effort, and sharing God's gifts of daily bread.

Over time, the leadership of the CREDO teams will help to renew a congregational dynamic of active devotion to "the apostles' teaching and the fellowship" (Acts 2:42). Disciples of all ages will be able to declare what it means to confess the Lordship of Christ in every calling of life. They will understand the urgency of holding fast to Christ together in Word and Sacrament, and they will mature in confidence in leading prayer and discussing their faith. They will continuously prepare together for the daily demands of following Christ in the world: speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), suffering in the world for the sake of Christ's name (Acts 9:16), and modeling His commandment to love one another (John 13:34).