



## In Healthy Congregations, leaders provide immune capacities

*“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:58*

This column’s title is curious. “Now what’s he talking about?” you might wonder. Immune capacities?

This is not hard to understand in the cold and flu season. Some of us, myself included, have already wrestled with one “bug” this autumn. It’s miserable, right? And those viruses sure can hang on!

This is the ninth of an 11-part series on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

What causes infections? The quick, obvious answer is: germs or “bugs”—right? But that’s really only half of the reason. The other reason is that we are vulnerable hosts. We get sick when two things happen: a virus attacks AND our immune capacities are “down.”

Our bodies are always being assaulted by viruses, germs, cancer cells. If that’s all that caused illness, we’d be sick all the time. But fortunately, our bodies have wondrous defense systems that ward off the bugs. And, thankfully, most of the time our immune systems are strong and sturdy. But when they weaken—when we grow weary or malnourished in any way—opportunistic invaders can gain a foothold.

The same holds true in congregations. Congregations face multiple threats every moment of every day. Some of these are large and easily identified: demographic decline, economic recession, a neutral if not hostile culture, etc. Other threats come in the back door, though. The “cells” (members) of the Body of Christ can act like viruses, attacking the host.

I’m not just talking about specific individuals in the church—although there are persons who fit the bill. “Persistent troublemakers” can be found everywhere.

But even more seriously, there are virus-like traits that *all* of us display from time to time. We all have moments when our anxieties overflow into the Christian community. We’re all tempted to form “triangles,” bypassing the person we need to speak with and conversing instead with a third party. We all, on occasion, operate secretly rather than openly and above-board.

There are enough obstacles and viruses assaulting the congregation to make it sick most of the time. Thankfully, our congregations are not sick all the time. Why is that? It’s because God protects us from such viruses, largely through the leaders God raises up in each congregation.

**Leaders provide immune capacities** in the Body of Christ. Leaders resist forces that undermine a congregation, forces that take our eyes off God’s mission, forces that tempt us to act in under-handed ways. God graciously gives us leaders who are “steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

But “immovable” doesn’t always sound like a good thing. We associate being immovable with being inflexible—and that’s not always good in a leader, is it? The kind of immovability the apostle Paul speaks of, though, is about holding the line against forces that threaten Christ’s church. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul defends the reality of the resurrection in the Christian life. It doesn’t get more basic or foundational than that! Leaders provide immune capacities when they are clear and “immovable” about what God’s word and God’s mission is for us—and when they’re willing to resist any and all forces that threaten that. That’s a wonderful sort of “immovability.”

**Do you see how, in each of these examples, leaders increase the “immune capacities” of congregations? It’s amazing!** Thank God for leaders who know when to be flexible and when to be “steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord.”

*Bishop Larry Wohlrahe*

### “The Lutheran” to feature Northwestern Minnesota Synod

Watch for the January issue of “The Lutheran,” which will include the first of four quarterly inserts produced by and for the Northwestern Minnesota Synod.

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## Northwestern Minnesota Synod Connections

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Expressions of the ELCA



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