



## “For Us and for Our Salvation, ... He Became Truly Human”

### The Translation of the Nicene Creed in *Christian Worship*

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We believe; therefore we speak. The Spirit who convinces us that the Triune God is the God of our salvation also compels us to confess. We do that each day in interaction with family, friends, and acquaintances. We confess in a special way when we gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ on the Lord’s Day, to hear God speak to us in his Word and to receive his gifts. The word of absolution so fills our hearts that we cannot help but speak. As we sing canticles, psalms, and hymns, we proclaim the good news to one another. When we join to recite the words of the ecumenical creeds, we confess what God’s people have believed and asserted for centuries. The Lutheran Church, by regularly using in worship the creeds common to all Christians, makes it clear that it is not sectarian and has no interest in being so.

The preparation of a new hymnal provides a natural time to review the translations of the ecumenical creeds included in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (CW) and used in WELS congregations for more than twenty-five years. The Executive Committee of the Hymnal Project asked the Scripture Committee to conduct that review and propose translations for the new hymnal. The group reviewed the translations of all three creeds, with significantly more time spent on the Nicene Creed than on the Apostles’ Creed or Athanasian Creed. This article will focus on the committee’s review of the translation of the Nicene Creed in common use in the WELS, and particularly on the section that confesses the work of Christ on behalf of all people. Even more specifically, this article means to provide the rationale for the Executive Committee’s decision to utilize the following translation in the new hymnal: “for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was conceived by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human.”

## Confessing the Divinity and Humanity of Christ

The second article of the Nicene Creed begins by addressing the Arian heresy. Those who spoke of Jesus only as a creature, even if they described him as the first, best, or most powerful creature, or pictured him as having been created before God formed the universe, ultimately condemned him with faint praise. Their teaching contradicted the clear word of Scripture, that the Son of God was co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit. The 318 Fathers at Nicaea powerfully and poetically confessed that Jesus was begotten, not made. He was of the same substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. At that point, the writers of this ecumenical confession described the one and only Son of God, through whom all things came into being, with these words: τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα. (Very roughly translated, with an attempt to capture in some small way the connection between ἀνθρώπους and ἐνανθρωπήσαντα near the beginning and end of these lines, respectively: “He is the one who, because of us humans and because of our salvation, came down from heaven and was enfleshed from the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin and was made human.”)

The Fathers gathered at Nicaea were eager to confess the genuine humanity of Christ. While today more attack the divinity of Jesus than his humanity, in the fourth century there were many false teachers denying the humanity of our Lord. The common view went along these lines: material was evil, and therefore God could not and would not assume a human nature. With the aorist participles σαρκωθέντα and ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, the men who composed the Creed confessed Jesus' genuine humanity. The one and only Son of God, true God from true God, did not come down from heaven as a disembodied ghost. He didn't just appear to have flesh and bones in something resembling a human body. He chose to be enfleshed (σαρκωθέντα) by the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin<sup>1</sup> Mary. One cannot help but hear an echo of the prologue of the Gospel of John: καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (1:14). (Roughly translated, “The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.”) The Son of God became flesh. The Second Person of the Trinity assumed a human body through the Virgin Mary.

The Son of God did not take on a human body only for a short time. In other words, his assuming of human flesh was different than what some of the angels, who came from heaven at God's direction,

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<sup>1</sup> The translation proposed for inclusion in the hymnal capitalizes Virgin as a title. The theologians who prepared the Nicene Creed confessed that the Son of God became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and Mary, the Virgin (Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου). While we do not always capitalize titles in English, we often do. We capitalize pastor when it is used as a title for a specific individual (e.g. Pastor Schmidt), but we don't capitalize pastor when we are speaking of the work generically (e.g. “The pastor preached a beautiful sermon this morning.”). The capitalization of the title Virgin does not mean in any way to suggest that Mary was sinless or is to be regarded as co-redeemer with Christ. The English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), which prepared an English translation that they hoped would find use across denominational lines, recommended the capitalization of the title. The *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (ELH), the hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) capitalizes the title, too, even though it does not follow the ELLC translation. The ELH translation follows, with a few minor modifications, the one used in *The Lutheran Hymnal*. The 2000 translation of the Book of Concord, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, provides its own translation and capitalizes the title. The *Lutheran Service Book* (LSB), published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), does not capitalize virgin.

occasionally did in taking on human bodies. One thinks, for instance, of the two angels that accompanied the Lord in visiting Abraham in Genesis 18. They took on human bodies, by which they could sit with Abraham, speak with him, and eat with him. Even the Lord himself took on flesh on that occasion, to appear to Abraham and promise that Sarah would have a son in a year. That assumption of flesh, however, was only a temporary arrangement, for a set purpose and within a specific timeframe. The Son of God, when he was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, did not take on flesh only for a limited time. He lived among the people, the Apostle John writes. Jesus engaged in the routine of human life, day after day, so that all would have recognized him as their brother in the flesh.

With *σαρκωθέντα*, the writers of the Nicene Creed testified to the fact that the Son of God chose to take on the same flesh and blood as Adam and Eve and all their descendants. The bishops gathered in Nicaea built on that thought with *ἐνανθρωπήσαντα*. The one whom they confessed as God from God, true God from true God, they also confessed as taking on everything associated with being genuinely human, which would be more than merely having flesh and bones. In Jesus, God became *ἄνθρωπος*. As an *ἄνθρωπος*, Jesus had a rational soul and human emotions. He was like every person who has ever lived, except that he was without sin. That does not, however, make him something other than genuinely human, because sinfulness is not of the essence of being human. Everything that makes a human being a human being could be ascribed to Jesus. In fact, Jesus was the quintessential human being, exactly as God designed for all humans to be. Jesus rested in his identity as the one with whom his Father was well pleased. In relationship with others, Jesus lived as the Creator designed for human beings to live, freely serving all without expecting or demanding any repayment.<sup>2</sup>

## For Us Human Beings He Became a Human Being

The Nicene Creed artfully confesses why it was necessary for the Son of God to become an *ἄνθρωπος*: “because of us *ἄνθρώπους* and because of our salvation.” The Son of God became a person because he was eager to redeem each person from the guilt and punishment of sin. He assumed a human nature, becoming like those he desired to save, in order to obey God’s law perfectly on their behalf and to give himself into death for their sin, both the sinfulness with which they were born and the sins they committed in their lives. The writers of the Creed chose the generic *ἄνθρώπους* to confess that the object of the Savior’s work was every last human being, regardless of how they might otherwise be categorized, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, rich or poor. The Son of God assumed flesh and became a member of the human race to save every member of the human race. Because he *ἐνανθρωπήσαντα* he could redeem all of us *ἄνθρώπους*, even those who would reject him in unbelief.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles Arand argue persuasively that this was Luther’s understanding of what it was to be genuinely human, that is, to be human as God designed for humans to be. See Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XIII (1999): 449–66; Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Charles P. Arand and Joel D. Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?” *Concordia Journal* 33 (2007): 116–35.

The words of the Nicene Creed seem to echo the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 5:12–19. Sin entered the world, St. Paul writes, through one ἄνθρωπος. Adam, the first human being, introduced death into the world by his trespass. While it is true that Adam was a male human being, his transgression didn't just have an impact on males. His sin affected both males and females, and not just a handful or even a majority. The Apostle explains that death came to all ἀνθρώπους, to all human beings, because in Adam, the head of all humanity, all sinned. By his disobedience to God's command about eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, one human being had an impact on all human beings. Every person born to sinful father and mother, no matter how they might otherwise be categorized, is sinful and on the path to death.

The Apostle details the Lord's response to the devastation introduced by Adam, the first human being. The Lord's answer to the sin and death introduced by one ἄνθρωπος is another, greater ἄνθρωπος. In 5:15, Paul writes, “πολλῷ μᾶλλον ἢ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ δωρεὰ ἐν χάριτι τῆ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐπέρισσευσεν.” (Roughly translated, “By how much more did the grace of God and the gift in the grace, which is of the one human being Jesus Christ, abound to the many.”) Because one human being brought sin and death to all human beings, the Son of God became a human being to counteract what Adam had done. By his obedience to the calling given to him by his Father, which included his willing submission to the law of God in thought, word, and action, as well as his acceptance of the punishment God had spoken upon sin, Jesus had a far greater and better impact than Adam. While Jesus was decidedly a male, born as the son of Mary and circumcised on the eighth day, his obedience didn't affect only males. His life of righteousness had an impact on all human beings. Where Adam's disobedience established all people as sinners before the judgment seat of God, Christ's obedience established all people as righteous. God has credited the obedience of Christ to all. In Christ, he has changed their status. He has declared all human beings innocent of sin and promised that every person who trusts in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins receives it. By his obedience, Christ has become the head of a new humanity.

The writers of the Nicene Creed testified beautifully to Jesus' genuine humanity. He was a human being like all other human beings, except he was without sin. He was the perfect counterpart to Adam, who, as the representative of humanity, failed to be righteous as God designed. The Son of God took on flesh and blood and succeeded where Adam failed, rescuing all people from sin and death.

## The Challenge of Translation

The question, then, is this: How does one render in contemporary English what the Nicene Creed confesses about the Son of God becoming the head of a new humanity? One could default to Thomas Cranmer's translation in the Book of Common Prayer of 1540, a slightly modified version of which appeared in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH) in 1941: “Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary And was made man.” Changing “Holy Ghost” to “Holy Spirit” would be a simple fix, to acknowledge the way English speakers now generally refer to the Third Person of the Trinity. Cranmer's translation does catch the connection between ἄνθρωπος at the beginning and end, by speaking of “us men” as the object of Christ's work and

confessing that Christ was “made man.” It is a fine translation that served well for centuries. However, “men” is not always understood generically, as referring to human beings. Some, and not just radical feminists, hear “men” and think exclusively of males. Might that not be particularly the case when it is confessed that Christ was “made man”?

One option is to make a point of explaining that “us men” is generic and really means all human beings. *Lutheran Service Book* (LSB), for example, has a short explanatory note after the Nicene Creed which says, “*Us men* means all people.” By including that helpful note, LSB acknowledges that some could hear “us men” and think “us males.” Instead of insisting that everyone still understands the generic use of “men” or suggesting that those who do not understand it have been overly influenced by politically correct language, LSB wisely offers an explanation of its translation.

Another approach would be to try to render this section in contemporary English in a way that would make an explanatory note unnecessary. The Creed is emphasizing that for the sake of all of us human beings, the one and only Son of God became a human being. One could legitimately translate, “For us human beings and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became a human being.”<sup>3</sup> That translation catches the connection by the repeated use of “human being,” noting that the Son of God became a human being to rescue human beings from the guilt and punishment of their sins. No one could be left wondering, “Did Christ come down from heaven to save me?” The translation clearly states that he descended into this world for everyone in the category of “human.” If the Nicene Creed were only a written statement of faith, like the Augsburg Confession or the Formula of Concord, that would be a workable solution. The challenge, however, is the use that God’s people make of the Creed. Because they believe, they desire to confess their Christian faith with their fellow believers. They wish to join their voices in reciting the Creed in worship, to encourage their fellow Christians and be encouraged by them. For that reason, it is desirable to utilize a translation that is rhythmic and euphonious, that at least compares with the splendor of “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” On that scale, “For us human beings and for our salvation he came down from heaven ... and became a human being,” may not measure up. It’s perhaps a bit cumbersome.

A slightly modified version would be to drop “beings” and confess, “For us humans and for our salvation he came down from heaven ... and became human.” There is much to commend that translation. It acknowledges the connection between the ἀνθρώπους at the beginning and the ἐνανθρωπήσαντα at the end. That rendering confesses clearly what the writers of the Nicene Creed were eager to confess, that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to be the substitute for all humans. Speaking of “humans” instead of “human beings” significantly improves oral recitation and God’s people could quickly become accustomed to it. At the same time, the translation “for us humans

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<sup>3</sup> The translation of the Nicene Creed included in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* follows that approach: “For us human beings and for our salvation he came down from the heavens, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became a human being.” Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 23.

... he became human” is not being used by any other churches. The WELS has no interest in being sectarian or adopting a translation that no one else is using.

The translation adopted for use in CW, published in 1993, does not specifically render the first reference to human beings, in the sense of providing an English word for the Greek word *ἀνθρώπους*: “for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven ... and became fully human.” That translation did not come from a group of WELS translators, but from the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), an ecumenical group focused on preparing translations of liturgical texts that could be used in English-speaking Christian churches throughout the world. In utilizing the ELLC translation the producers of CW gave evidence of their desire to join their voices with all Christians everywhere who believe and confess that the Son of God assumed a human nature to rescue all human beings from everlasting punishment.

One could ask, “Does the translation ‘for us and for our salvation’ unintentionally make Christ’s work particular, instead of universal? Does it teach that the Son of God came down from heaven only for the sake of those who confess that they believe in him, not for all?” That’s a fair question. The writers of the Nicene Creed were not addressing the faulty idea that Christ came only for the elect. Their focus was rather on testifying to the fact that the Son of God became a genuine human being to rescue all human beings. However, the Greek text clearly states that Christ entered the world and became human to live and die for all people. It’s true that someone could read “for us and for our salvation” and think, “Jesus died only for those who confess this creed.” Yet it’s also true that Reformed Christians subscribed to the Nicene Creed when it was translated “for us men and for our salvation,” and found it in agreement with their teaching that Christ died for all, but died savingly only for the elect. “For us men” they understand as speaking of the subgroup of human beings that the Lord graciously selected in eternity, and for whom the Son of God entered the world. “For us humans” might seem like a closer tie to the Greek and a clearer confession of the universality of Christ’s atoning work, but “for us and for our salvation” also confesses that the Son of God became human for all of us who are members of the human race. In opting for the translation “for us and for our salvation” for use in CW, the members of the Joint Hymnal Committee (JHC) were not seeking to be politically correct or to avoid the ire of feminists. They only wanted to express that the Son of God had entered this world, incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, for the sake of rescuing all people, both male and female. They considered it unnecessary to insist that everyone still understands and appreciates the generic use of “men.” They felt there were other ways to express the same truth in contemporary English.

The translation recommended by the ELLC seemed to fit the bill, which included the use of an adverb to render the participle *ἐνανθρωπήσαντα*: “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven ... and became fully human.” Professor Theodore Hartwig, in an article explaining the translation of the Creeds that would be used in CW, thought the ELLC’s translation of these lines was particularly apt: “The change in line 16 from ‘was made man’ to ‘became fully human’ may be counted as one of the finest improvements in the new translation; it catches quite satisfactorily what the original participle (*ἐνανθρωπήσαντα*) intends to communicate.”<sup>4</sup> Taken out of context, his assessment of the translation

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Hartwig, “The Creeds in Contemporary English,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 86:3 (Summer 1989): 202.

might seem biased at best and self-congratulatory at worst. It's helpful to keep in mind that he was merely assessing the translation produced by the ELLC. He was not suggesting that people ought to thank the members of the committee for lighting upon the translation themselves. Rather, he thought the translation captured what the writers of the Nicene Creed were at pains to emphasize—that Christ Jesus was genuinely human, with everything that is of the essence of being human. He became ἄνθρωπος. While no lexicon would provide “became fully human” as a meaning of the participle ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, the translation does seem to express in the target language the thought being conveyed by the text of the Nicene Creed. Charles Arand, James Nestingen, and Robert Kolb contend that the Nicene Creed expressed the “soteriological implications” of the Son of God being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary “when it confessed, ‘who for us human creatures and for our salvation, became a human creature.’”<sup>5</sup> In a footnote, the authors point to the Nicene Creed’s “interesting play on words here” and suggest that the translation “fully human” used in the WELS hymnal seems to catch the Nicene Creed’s intent. They also spoke approvingly of the translation “truly human” used in the hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).<sup>6</sup>

The translation “truly human” did not originate with the ELCA. They adopted a translation recommended by the ELLC. The ELLC had moved on from “fully human,” which they used in 1986, to “truly human” in their 1988 publication, *Praying Together*. Though the 1988 publication date would have made it possible to include in CW, the JHC had already spent a significant amount of time explaining their decision to use “fully human.” Had “truly human” been the translation in the 1986 version the JHC almost certainly would have used it. First, they desired to utilize a translation that was going to be confessed in Christian churches across denominational lines. While it's true that they did not adopt every aspect of the 1986 ELLC translation—they opted for “holy Christian and apostolic Church” instead of “holy catholic and apostolic Church” and chose “who has spoken through the prophets” rather than “and has spoken through the prophets”—they showed that they desired to use a text that crossed denominational lines. Secondly, “truly human” captures the thought that Christ was a genuine human being, with everything that entails. Additionally, it ties nicely to the statement earlier in the Creed that Christ is “true God from true God.” Jesus is truly God and truly human, the only one who could rescue human beings from the guilt and punishment of their sins. The new hymnal will use “truly human” instead of “fully human” in its translation of the Nicene Creed.

Someone could ask, “Does ‘became truly human’ clearly confess what the scriptural record reveals—that Jesus was male? Wouldn't ‘he became man’ be helpful to make it clear that he was both a human being and a male at the same time?” It's true that ἄνθρωπος can be used both in a generic sense, of a human being as opposed to a plant or animal, and in a more specific sense, of a male as opposed to a female. However, that ἄνθρωπος may be used in different ways does not mean that it brings both denotations to a particular use of a word.<sup>7</sup> In other words, when the Nicene Creed confesses that the Son

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<sup>5</sup> Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 46.

<sup>6</sup> Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord*, 294 (n19).

<sup>7</sup> Many words have a range of meanings like this. We cannot conclude from that, however, that a word still possesses all these meanings once it is locked down within the context of a specific sentence or paragraph. There its meaning narrows to

of God became ἄνθρωπος, it denotes either that he became a human being (without maleness being highlighted) or that he became a male (as opposed to entering, more generally, the larger class of human beings). The term cannot highlight both human-ness and male-ness at the same time. Tying this together with the line “for us human beings and for our salvation, he came down from heaven,” the Creed is speaking of him becoming a genuine human being, not a male.

One could say in response, “To be truly human, however, one must be male or female. There is no generic humanity. For that reason, a faithful translation of the Nicene Creed, which is meant as a summary of the Scriptures, must reflect what the Bible teaches, that Jesus was male.” That’s a fair point. The prophecies of the Lord’s Anointed, who would bear the sins of the world, pointed to a male human being becoming the sinners’ substitute. The Gospels portray Jesus as a man, not some amorphous human creature. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He taught in the synagogue, a privilege accorded only to men. The Father testified of him from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him” (Matt 17:5b)! It was not generic humanity nailed to a tree or raised from the dead, but a male human being. The fact that the Scriptures portray Jesus as a man makes the Nicene Creed’s use of ἄνθρωπος so striking. They had available to them the word ἀνὴρ, which most often is used to indicate that an individual is male as opposed to female. Because there was no debate at that time about Jesus’ maleness, but rather about the genuine humanity of Christ and his purpose in taking on flesh, they chose ἄνθρωπος. Their focus was on expressing the truth that in order to save human beings, both male and female, he had to become like them in every way. He had to become truly human. If the translation of the Creed proposed for the new hymnal gave no indication that Jesus was male, one might have to consider how to remedy that. However, the fact that Jesus was a man is indicated by the translation’s use of the male pronouns throughout the second article. For someone to suggest that the proposed translation does not confess that Jesus’ genuine humanity took shape in being a male seems uncharitable and unfair.

## Concluding Thoughts

The members of the JHC were pleased with the ELLC’s translation of the lines of the Nicene Creed considered in this article, because they thought it reflected the point of the text, that the Son of God had become truly human for the benefit of all human beings, to be their Savior. The JHC anticipated that others who would be producing hymnals would adopt a common text, like that produced by the ELLC, instead of having an ecumenical Creed confessed in different ways in different places. Unfortunately, the JHC’s hope has not been realized. There is no one common English translation of the Nicene Creed in use in English-speaking countries. While returning to a modified version of Archbishop Cranmer’s translation would not solve that issue, it would at least have WELS sharing a common translation with confessional Lutheran church bodies like the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. At the same time, returning to that translation after nearly thirty years of use does not seem wise. Moving from “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven ... and became fully

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what the author is seeking to express by it in that context. If that were not so, given the range of meanings most words possess, communication would be impossible. The rule is that a word’s contextual usage determines its meaning.



human” to “for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven ... and was made man” would likely cause confusion. People might wonder about restoring language that some could hear as confessing that Christ came into the world only for males, while the translation in CW had addressed that possible misunderstanding.

This discussion underscores the importance of pastors taking seriously their responsibility to teach the people of God the foundational truths of the Christian faith. Christology may well be the deep end of the theological pool. That the task is challenging, however, hardly seems a legitimate reason not to address the critical topics regarding the person and work of Christ.

*This is a preliminary draft of an article that will appear in a future issue of Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. The author is the seminary's president, Earle Treptow. Before coming to the seminary in January 2016, Treptow served as an exploratory pastor in Langley, British Columbia, Canada, as Director of Admissions for Pastoral Studies at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, and as lead pastor at Zion, Denver, Colorado. During his last five years in Denver he also served as president of the Nebraska District. He teaches systematic theology and Old Testament courses at the seminary.*