

Brought to you by ConcordiaTheology.org, bringing you resources that support the vigorous life of the mind in service of the Gospel of Christ.

Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life. When it's tangible, theology learned and lived. Today we're talking about the vocation of retirement. When you are done with your job, what's next? To discuss this topic, I'm talking with two men whose contributions have shaped the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, as only few others have. Dr. Robert Kolb and Dr. Dale Meyer, and I've got them both right here. Dr. Kolb is a world-renowned authority in the work of Martin Luther and the history of the Reformation. He's a prolific author, having written many books and articles. I asked him how many books he's written and he's like, you know, I don't know, I haven't counted. That's how many. He was the co-editor of the 2000 translation of the book of Concord, which you probably have at home on your shelf. He served as a college professor for 16 years.

Seminary professor for 30 years. He's got four honorary doctorates. He retired from Concordia Seminary St. Louis in 2009, but continues as professor emeritus. He spends half of his time teaching, researching, and writing in Western Europe. Dr. Kolb, welcome back to the show.

Robert: Thank you, Jessica. It's good to be here, especially with the company you've chosen.
Dale:

Yeah, after that introduction. And now we'll go to the other end of the spectrum, Dale Meyer. I went to New York once and I hope to go to Los Angeles and I've read the confessions.

Robert: Made some too.

Jessica: Gosh, you guys are not going to let me even go.
Dr. Dale Meyer is most known for his 12 years as the speaker of the Lutheran Hour, the radio show that currently averages over 1 million listeners a week. Dr. Meyer hosted

the television show on Main Street, which won two regional Emmy awards. He has served as a parish pastor, seminary professor, and was the president of Concordia Seminary St. Louis for 15 years. Dr. Meyer retired from his position as president in 2020, but continues as president emeritus, teaching classes on campus, and is writing a commentary in First Peter. Dr. Meyer, welcome back to the show.

Dale: Thank you, Jessica. Glad to be here. The TV show didn't go that well. My forte was radio, because I have the perfect face for radio.

Jessica: What was the Emmy for?

Dale: It was for the TV show.

Jessica: The topic of retirement is growing more and more relevant. 2024 is a record-breaking year for retirement in the U.S. According to a report from the Alliance for Lifetime Income, 4.1 million Americans will turn 65 this year and every year through 2027. Experts are calling it the silver tsunami, the largest surge of retirement age Americans in history. That's a huge portion of our population, all on a shared life stage, potentially looking

for a new kind of spiritual support to live out their Christian faith. Dr. Meyer, you retired four years ago in 2020. Has retirement been what you expected?

Dale: I didn't know what to expect, and it's

been very difficult for me and my wife. It's been a very hard transition, and there's a number of reasons for that. One is coming out of my situation when I was president. I was in the middle of everything. If I worked at an assembly line, I'd probably be glad to be retired, but I have not had a pleasant transition.

Robert: Well, as a former packing house worker, I didn't get in my packing house career to the stage where I could retire, but I saw a lot of colleagues retire, and it was just as difficult for them too. Well, I tell the story. The phenomenon repeated itself five times. I went back to the packing house after I had left it at the end of the summer to go back to school and came back then five springs, and in each spring, two to seven people of the thousand workers at the time died within the nine months after I left. And so I think there's an impact that we

don't talk about very much, or maybe people our age do talk about, but that's not really been taken too seriously apart from a few theorists.

Dale: In my experience, the church, and I include my ministry

here, the church has not prepared us spiritually for retirement. We're encouraged to be active, and a lot of retirees are. You and I are both very active, but spiritually, what does this time of life mean?

Robert: Well, the social scientists have said a lot about that. Eric Erickson, the psychiatrist, psychologist who talked about eight stages of life, said that the last stage of life starts at 65, and the label he gave it is ego integrity versus despair. It's a time in which you size up life. You look back either saying, I failed or I succeeded. Interestingly enough, Erickson devised this theory in the 1950s. It's among his students today. There's a ninth stage of life inserted, and the eighth stage is now not this integrity versus despair stage, but it's a stage of further activities of one kind or another between 65 and 80. And then the looking back and the finally wrapping up comes after 80.

Dale: When I retired, people wished Diane and me well on the next chapter of life, and I thought, the next chapter of life is dying. What are you talking about?

Robert: And it's not at all that. Life begins at 80.

Dale: Oh, I don't know.

Robert: No, you young people wouldn't.

Dale: I've got a great quotation from Billy Graham. All my life I was taught how to die as a Christian, but no one ever taught me how I ought to live the years before I die.

Robert: Yeah. Yeah.

Dale: It was funny for me that on June the 30th of 2020, I was finished. I was finished. So if I grew up on the farm,
I would still have some putzing around in the yard that I could do, maybe drive a wagon in at harvest time. But our American system pretty much says, June the 30th, you're done.

Robert: Yeah. And of course that wasn't my experience at all, but I've observed that in so many people. With much the same result, either finding another activity that really engages you or just withering. And I think you're right in saying that the church needs to be there in ways that we haven't really thought about. I don't teach pastoral theology, so I don't know what the latest literature in pastoral theology is. But I know that what I read is done by people who are well situated in life, upper middle-class people. There's an MD named Gene Cohen, who maybe 10 years ago, maybe a little longer than that, wrote a book called Creative Age, Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life. And he says there are four stages from the mid 30s to 50s. Where have I been? Where am I going? And you start thinking about death, but you're more willing to let things happen and so forth. And then there's a sense of liberation in the late 50s into the 70s, where you can experiment, you can do new and different things. And then you sum up in your late 60s through your 80s. And finally, he had a stage in the late 70s to the end of life called Encore, where you just reflect and celebrate. And that's all well fine and good if you've got the money and you've got the health, and you've probably got your spouse. But struggles with illness, diminishing physical and mental health, all that, disappointments with yourself can lead to a lot of bitterness. And so the old phrase, let go and let God, is a difficult one to realize. Once 65 is behind you.

Dale: I appreciate what your saying. The thing that struck me about that and I'm sure it's true is it is depressing to a Christian.
It's kind of like looking back and remember Peggy Lee sang, Is that all there is?
And a Christian in his time of retirement there is many a reason to be thankful for the time of retirement. We got here.

Robert: What a blessing.

Dale: And then, yeah, the next chapter is going to close with death, but there's a chapter after that. And this is where I'm coming from. The church has not, and I, this is not to be critical of the church because it's a new time in lifespans, but the church has not prepared me at least spiritually how to understand what I hope are 10, 20, 30 years between my last paycheck and my home going. And being active, which I am, you are, so many people in the church are active, that dodges the issue. I'm going to croak.

Robert: Yeah. Well, I think for me, it's helped. First of all, that my calling as a professor has continued pretty much as it was before.

Dale: Well, you never had to work too hard as a professor.

Robert: No, they sent me overseas all the time.

Dale: Yeah, you kept coming back.

Robert: Yeah. Well, and I keep doing that, see, and so I haven't really experienced this,

but it does seem to me that Luther's understanding of our Christian calling really helps. And calling not just in the sense of an occupation, but he says God places us in all sorts of different life situations. But we have home, we have an occupation, we have our societal connections in neighborhood organizations, sports clubs, whatever, politics.

And we have our congregations. And God places us in those places. Well, when we have changes, a spouse dies or a job disappears, God's still the one who's placing us. And we have to look around and see where God is placing us. He's placing some of us in nursing homes where we can't do much but pray. But we can pray at least if we feel the need to do something.

Otherwise, we can just enjoy being children of God. And so when one form of a calling disappears,

the caller doesn't disappear. He's present for Luther no matter what. And I think if we could help people our age understand that, that God's still with them and God's still calling them to be his person and to be his person in contact with other people whenever that's possible and to be in contact with him when that's not possible.

Dale: That's the great thing I'm experiencing about retirement is now theology, which was my job.

Theology now is pure, purer than it used to be. I mean, as a professor and administrator at the seminary, theology got mixed up in a whole lot of other things that were going on.

Now I can sit on the back porch and watch the stars and have theological thoughts without the kerfuffle of the institutional church.

Robert: Yeah, or without an audience that you're planning to please. You're not planning a sermon. You're

not planning a lesson. But you're looking at God's creation and saying, wow. And I think that's

the case so often. You and I, when we're in the saddle, are always looking at the Bible. But we're

always looking at the Bible for some professional purpose. And having the time that frees you to just talk with God because God's there. That's sort of neat.

Dale: So you're an expert on the Reformation era. You know the name of Philip Melanchthon. I have a quotation here from Philip Melanchthon. He wrote this a few days before he died. The reasons why you should not fear death. You will be freed from sin. You will be liberated from hardships and from the raging of the theologians. You will come into the light.

You will see God. You will gaze in amazement at the Son of God. You will learn those wonderful

mysteries that in this life you have not been able to understand. Why we are formed as we are. In what union of the natures in Christ consists. Yeah, that's where we're at.

What's lacking to me is this forward-looking retirement. That the best is yet to come.

Melanchthon had that. And I just don't get that forward-looking anticipation of the future in the church today. That may just be me. And if I hear anything in the church it's about be active, volunteer. Fine, fine. But that's not to me forward-looking. I mean, I'm not morbid.

And I want to live for many, many more years. My mom was almost 97.

Your mother-in-law was what, 100?

Robert: 101.

Dale: Yeah. Well, so I want to be like that. But I want to know that

the best is yet to come. That when the day of home going comes, man, that's going to be cool. And I'm looking forward to that. Not to the museum that we so often make the church out to be. Look

what Jesus did in the first century. I get it. He had to do that in the first century to save me. To save us all. But I want to look forward to seeing Jesus. That's the spiritual thing that's lacking to me in our ministry to retired people.

Robert: I've had probably 50 years of good preaching. I've had a succession of pastors who have really proclaimed the word well. A privilege and a blessing that not everybody has. But one of them in particular, Bill Wilson, would once a month, well, once every two months fit into his sermon. Something I think that was specifically aimed at preparing us to die at any age. We can die at any age. But I think we are so focused on the problems of this next week. And that's proper, I think, in our sermons. That's where most of us are going to be for the next week. But I think you're right in that we don't talk enough about the framework for life one week after another, slogging it through. Which is the framework of God's presence already here

Dale: and now in the midst of the slime and grease of today. But also then with the brightest of futures. So, I mean, here's how I've come to understand this in my own mind. Observe and choose, observe the Sabbath. In a legalistic way, okay. Friday is the day of preparation. When they're

all busy, they're active, they're getting ready because the Sabbath is coming. And the Sabbath to an observant Jew is like a queen. It's like a wedding night. It's the best. You pull away from

the troubles of the six days in the week and wow, Sabbath is just, it's a delight to an observant Jew. Well, the Bible teaches that we have an eternal Sabbath coming. And the way I'm

understanding retirement is that this is Friday, the day, quote unquote, of preparation before I

go to the eternal Sabbath. Hebrews chapter three, Sabbath rest remains for the people of God. And this is Friday, TGIF. Thank God it's Friday. I'm preparing myself for that great eternal

Sabbath. Now that's the way I've come to understand my own situation in retirement spiritually. Yes, I'm active. Yes, if I sit in the car for two or three hours, it's real hard to get out and

Robert: stretch, all that stuff. Yes, I have to look at the finances, but spiritually, the best is yet to come. And I think living in that anticipation is good for people like us who are active, but it's also

good for those who don't move as quickly as they want to, who are confined to a home, who are battling a growing tumor, et cetera. In that sense, what you've just said serves the whole spectrum

of retirement because it frames what our activities are all about, which don't make a big splash in the world in my case.

Dale:

But that's a great point because someday these activities are going to be taken away from us.

Yeah. I remember visiting Mrs. Henze. She was homebound,

80s, 90s, I don't know what she was. I was a kid at the time, took her communion, and she sat and looked at the traffic coming out the window, I mean, outside of her window. Well, that's what she was doing. She was preparing herself, using this time to thank God and to anticipate the future. And I'd give her communion, and every time I'd finish giving her communion,

she would always say, thousand, thousand thanks shall be dearest Jesus, for all the days that

are unto thee. So you're so right, Bob. It's not just being those of us who are able to be active. The whole spectrum from activity to non-activity still has to focus on Jesus.

Robert: On what we ought to be focusing on our entire lives. In the Middle Ages, when they started writing these works called The Art of Dying, the whole point was the best preparation for death is a good life. And the good life, as Luther would define it, at least is one that finds the presence of Christ in the scriptures, finds the presence of Christ through prayer, finds the presence of God providing in everything we experience. And so that sense that Immanuel really means that God is with

us. And it also means we are like a thief on the cross, got the promise with God. And that there'll be this dramatic break where we transcend this life and move into the next.

But it's the presence of God that provides the Shalom on both sides.

Dale: I love the book by this medieval monk, Brother Lawrence. The title of it is The Practice of the Presence of God.

And it is exactly what you described. He was a cook in a monastery wherever in Europe,

and he was always talking with God. A cook, but God was always with him. And it's an amazing,

amazing book that always shuts me up because I don't practice that presence of God the way I ought to. And now I'm getting a better chance to do it.

Robert: Yeah. Well, it's hard to do. It's hard to do in the midst of all the activities we have in home and job and community and congregation. But

it's what scripture presents to us as the reality of life that God somehow likes to be around us. He likes to hang out with his people. One of the most important things I would say that other people can do for somebody my age is to keep contact and keep conversation. There in the last magazine of the American Association of Retired People,

an 80-year-old clinical psychologist who is still practicing this kind of privileged life that some of us can have, had four tips for enjoying the 80s. And one of them was keep in contact with people, keep up conversations. And so I think that just recognizing that old people need conversation too, whether they're in a home and need visitation or are just a part of a more active part of a congregation and need invitations to do things, maybe that they've never done before.

Those are things that I think the whole congregation can contribute to.

And sometimes I think congregational life gets layered. And it's right that we have youth groups and children's groups and opportunities for older people to get together and do things. But to see the congregation as a whole, to see three and four generations of a family, for instance, in worship, I think that's very encouraging and helps support and give a sense that people my age are still part of the whole picture.

Dale: If I were going back 30, 40, 50 years, I would be in a place where I would be able to do that. Knowing what I know now, I think I would try everything within my power to

lighten the schedule of the institutional church, seminary too probably, to do less and to spend more time just being together, being together with older people, but being together with younger people and with the kids, one generation to another. We're way too overbooked. I mean, this is insane.

Robert: When I was teaching at the college level, there were six of us in the Religion department. Three were old enough to have grandchildren but didn't have grandchildren in St. Paul, at least as I recall. And three of us were too young to have gotten into the, where do we need to drive the kids this afternoon syndrome. And we-

Jessica: Oh no, that's my syndrome.

Robert:

Yeah. Yeah. And what we did in those years was gather in the hall in the late afternoon and have conversations. And then there was a breaking point as the other two younger of us had kids

that had to be driven places. All of a sudden, the conversation didn't go on because there were other commitments. And so I think you're absolutely right to just sit back and have a moment to just bicker like you and I do in the morning.

Dale: It's easily said. It's easily said, but it's hard to do. I remember as a pastor, and our congregation was big. We had

2,400 members. And I said in May or June, I said to the boards, I said, let's not meet in summer, unless there is some business. And they looked at me like a cow looking at a new fence.

They had, we meet, we're saved by our meetings. So it's easily said, harder to do. One of the

things that, and I'm thinking my own mission in life, I want to share what I've learned spiritually

with those who are coming after me. And it's Psalm 102 says, let this be written as a memorial

for the coming generation. Well, you, Bob, you've done that in an exemplary way. I'm trying to do that, but I want young people, I want seminarians to sometimes forget the class assignment and say,

tell me, how was Jesus in your life? And so, oh, then I can lean back and say, yeah,

let me tell you about Jesus in my life. The times that he saw what I planned and he smashed my plans

down so that I could have something better. See, at least as I'm looking at where I'm at, and I'm sure that you're this way too. We have been blessed beyond any merit of our own

to have tremendous spiritual knowledge. I mean, in a lot of ways we know squat. So I don't want

to be like Job and get slapped down. But we've got a lot to share with the coming generation and things are not structured for us to share that generally. It happens by happenstance.

Robert: Yeah, but maybe it happens best by happenstance.

Dale: Well, a teachable moment.

Robert: But I remember teaching an elective on theology's use in evangelism. And on the first day,

whenever I taught that, I had the students go one-on-one and just say what Jesus means to me. And I can remember more than one seminarian saying, I just never had to do that before. And that kind of experiential learning is something that needs to be cultivated in

congregations as well. So that we have moments where people who haven't practiced prayer in public get to practice prayer in public or who haven't had to tell others about Jesus, get to tell others about Jesus.

Dale: You know, I preached yesterday on John 3:30. John the Baptist says, he must increase, but I must decrease. And that's what I think retirement is, at least for me. It's a time of diminishment, of decreasing, of getting smaller. But here's the neat thing. I'm increasingly getting comfortable with my smallness. You know, in the Old Testament, it talks about some king died. It says he went to sleep with the fathers. I'm getting comfortable with my smallness. It reminds me of what Reverend Arnold Kunz,

Sainted LCMS pastor said. This is a direct quote. Life narrows down and crisis comes and suddenly only one thing matters. And there in the narrow place stands Jesus. He must increase in my retirement thoughts. I must decrease. And I'm comfortable with that.

Robert: Now, I think that's a very important point. At every stage of life, we need to remember what Mr. Lincoln said at Gettysburg. People will little note nor long remember. So we enjoy the impacts we're able to make in the smallest of kindnesses to our grandchildren or to our neighbor children or to the neighbors in general or someone at work. But finally,

thinking about the end focuses on the one thing needful. And he's just there the whole time. And he's the great one, especially when they don't note and remember.

Dale: I've taken great comfort from John Ylvisaker's hymn.

Robert: Yeah.

Dale: I was there at your morning cry. I'll be there when you're old.

And that traces the seasons of life. And it is just gorgeous. I think that should be sung at my funeral. It's beautiful the way he puts it. Three relatively short verses. Ylvisaker. Morning cry.

Robert: That's a wonderful thing.

Jessica: So if I had a retired friend come to me and say, I'm really struggling with retirement, it's not going well for me, what should I say to them?

Dale:

You tell them what former Senator Lowell Weicker said. Weicker was governor of Connecticut, had been a senator. I'm reading now from the New York Times.

In a 2012 interview with Connecticut Magazine, Mr. Weicker,

and again, he had been senator and governor of Connecticut, he was asked what was harder,

being a senator, being a governor, or being retired? I think probably being retired, he said. To sit here and watch this world go by, and this world is having a rough time, and I can't do anything about it. So if somebody came to you, Jessica, I'd say, deal with it. Deal with it. Your time on the stage is passing. I'd say it. Send them to me. I'd say it. And get ready for what's coming. Understand your retirement as a vocation, as we've been talking about, in anticipation of the great Sabbath that's coming.

Jessica:

But what about people who are not ready to face their own death? They don't want to just sit and wait until they die. They're still active. They're still healthy and want to live out their vocation. What would I say to them?

Dale:

This is just my take.

It's the day of preparation. TGIF. Thank God it's Friday because the eternal Sabbath is coming. Friday, retirement, is a time of great activity, if we're able to do it. So yeah,

be as active as your body and mind permits you to be. But it's preparation for the Sabbath. It's not just because you need to be doing something to stay busy.

Robert:

It's not the source of my identity, security, and meaning.

Dale:

My mother would think so.

Robert:

We all think so. That's called works righteousness. Well, I have to tell my favorite Bible story. It happened in 1971 when I went to the last pastoral conference of our partner church, of the Saxon Free Church. The people in the West were going to merge into our current partner church in Germany, the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church. They were used to getting together in East Berlin. The West people had to go over. Pauline and I went over Checkpoint Charlie. There were all this communist propaganda. And then we heard all the stories of the harassment of the church. Walter Ulbricht was the head of both party and state at the time. So as a young American, I asked one of the brothers, how in the world can the church survive, humanly speaking, in a situation like that? And he said, Walter Ulbricht is not the Lord of the church. And I think it's important for us to remember in these times of worry and crisis and for some people despair as they look back at their lives and wish they'd done things differently, Walter Ulbricht is not the Lord of your life and neither are you. Jesus Christ is and he makes all things new.

Jessica:

Here's your final question. I'd like each of you to tell me what you want our listeners to remember.

Dale:

The best is yet to come.

Robert:

Jesus is still hanging out with you and he'll continue that.

Jessica:

Thank you. Dr. Meyer, you had a closing prayer that you wanted to share with us and I'd love to
Dale: Yes, thank you, Jessica. This prayer sounds contemporary, but it is attributed to a mother superior in the 17th century. Lord, you know better than I know myself that I am growing older and will someday be old.

Keep me from getting talkative and particularly from the fatal habit of thinking that I must say

everything on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Keep my mind from the recital of endless details. Give me wings to come to the point. I ask for grace enough to listen to the tales of others pain, but seal my lips on my own lips on my own aches and pains. They are increasing and my love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. Help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cock sureness

when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible that I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint, some of them are so hard to live with. But a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people and give me, O Lord, the grace

to tell them so. Make me thoughtful, but not moody, helpful, but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all, but thou knowest, Lord, that I want to have a few friends at the end.

friends at the end. Amen.

Robert: Amen.

Jessica: That prayer is not just for retired people. I should probably pray that as well. That's it for today. I'd like to thank our guests. Dr. Meyer, thanks for being on the show. Dr. Kolb, thanks for being here.

Robert: Thank you.

Jessica: And thank you for listening.

You can find more episodes of Tangible on all the major hosting apps and on our website, ConcordiaTheology.org.

Check it out. We've got a lot more resources there. If you'd like to see the show continue, please subscribe, share, and leave a review. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, when it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.