

A Jew Walks Into a Lutheran Church And Look What Happens

By Michael Gold

When the pastor of the local Lutheran church asked me to write and edit articles for his congregation's monthly newsletter, he'd caught me at a difficult moment.

After reflexively agreeing, I then thought I must have been out of my mind.

Several months earlier, the central Westchester community paper for which I'd been writing for five years, stopped publishing. The editor of another newspaper, which I also worked for as a freelancer, who was in a fight to the death with the publisher over money issues, told me that he was thinking of running into the woods and never coming out.

And my best friend in town, a Jewish guy from Long Island, just like me, had thrown himself in front of a Metro-North train two years before. I was still angry with him.

I didn't think my youthful rabbi was going to be able to help me find renewed meaning.

He wore black Converse All-Star high-top sneakers and jeans. I wasn't expecting the rabbi to walk around in a long black coat and hat and wear a beard, and I could have forgiven him his twenty-first century style of dress, but his advice to me when my mother died was the final blow.

He said, "God is both invisible and absent."

Thanks a lot for that, pal. Even if it's true, Rebbe, you've got terrible timing.

And if you believe that, why be a rabbi?

In contrast, the Lutheran pastor was warm from the start.

I had met the pastor in 2024, to write a profile of his church. The idea was to highlight how welcoming the church was to everyone, which I found important in our polarized time, where Americans let fly with all kinds of poisonous invective directed at the other side on social media, cable TV and talk radio.

The lies spewed about the Jewish people at the time were very troubling, with the Jews being accused of causing the California wildfires with space lasers and directing millions of immigrants to come to the U.S.

The pastor was a refreshing change from the hate. I started calling him "Rabbi" in my mind.

The church had held a recent Pride event, which attracted about 1,000 people from all over Westchester. They hired an African American youth director who's Presbyterian, transgender, has a ring in his nose and paints his fingernails in alternating colors of red and green.

I then wrote a Christmas piece on the pastor in late 2024. He explained that Christmas is about marginalized people, condemned immigrant roundups and talked about the evils of racism.

The pastor and I met for coffee every few months. The pastor means to live and impart Christ's message of compassion.

So, several months ago, looking to meet new people, I went to see the pastor to ask him if I could join the church book club.

The pastor said, sure, you can join the book club. Then I realized I might have to talk about Jesus. I don't believe that Jesus is the son of God, that he was crucified for the sake of redeeming humankind and that he was resurrected and ascended to heaven. Church book club discussions might get pretty uncomfortable pretty fast.

However, the pastor quickly pivoted to ask if I would write the church newsletter. I said yes.

Meeting again a week later, he showed me why he wanted help. The previous newsletters had ponderous articles with little space for the reader to breathe.

I told the pastor, if anyone in the church calls me out because I'm Jewish, that's a red line for me, even if they say something Jewishly positive.

The pastor agreed. His office manager is Jewish. He introduced me to her, to try to ensure that I felt some kinship with somebody else in the place, I'm guessing.

He talked about some of the newsletter contributors. For instance, the church has a handbell director who writes a column. People ring bells during the service. Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church, loved music.

When I told a college buddy that I would be writing and editing a church newsletter, he said, "What do you know about Lutherans?"

Nothing.

But I intended to learn. I read a biography of Martin Luther. I also used the Internet to teach myself about the Lutheran Church and its liturgical calendar.

For instance, Lutherans celebrate the Month of the Holy Cross, in September. It celebrates Christ's cross as a symbol of Jesus' sacrifice in order to redeem the world from sin. In this way, they convert Christ's death from a tragedy to triumph – Christ's victory for humanity.

Reformation Day commemorates October 31st, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses arguing against the corruption of the medieval Catholic Church.

I created a dummy newsletter, with a streamlined format, writing sample articles about the Month of the Holy Cross and other Lutheran events.

I emailed the dummy to the pastor. He was very happy with it.

With the new format set, the office manager asked me to interview two people for the next newsletter. The first was the parish nurse, also director of infection control at a Bronx hospital.

The parish nurse talked about the importance of getting a flu vaccine. I was relieved that here was a church aligned with the germ theory of disease.

She also said that “Visiting people when they are sick and praying for them is an important part of my ministry.”

For the second interview, I spoke with a church parishioner who for decades had been a Lutheran pastor herself.

She explained that Lutherans are called by God to serve the world. Lutheran groups had cleaned up after Hurricane Katrina, served food to the hungry and read books to kids.

Lutheran World Relief helps poor, rural farmers grow their crops sustainably, provides humanitarian assistance to those in need and runs schools in Africa.

When she said the church was “founded in the love God has for us. Love God. Love one another,” I felt blissed out. She offered up the best of Christianity, in one short phone call.

But these types of phone calls don’t come along often. Most days, I’m left with my own Jewish self.

In order to do my work for the newsletter, I had to try to place that self in a black box, store it in a closet several miles away and pretend I was someone else. It didn’t work.

I’m pretty sure my second interviewee knew I was Jewish, because she also said that Lutherans are not afraid to renounce their past sins, particularly in terms of what Martin Luther wrote about the Jews.

Luther penned a 65,000-word book toward the end of his life titled, “The Jews and Their Lies,” which was used by the Nazis in their propaganda to spread anti-Jewish hatred and steam up the German population to help in getting rid of them.

Enraged that the Jews would not convert after years of evangelizing them, Luther wrote, "God's wrath has consigned them to the Devil, who has robbed them not only of a proper understanding of the Scriptures, but also of common human reason, modesty and sense..."

He recommended burning synagogues and Jewish schools, to honor God and Christianity, razing Jewish homes and confiscating the Talmud and all Jewish prayer books. If the Jews would not convert, Luther said they should be expelled from Germany.

Luther was legendarily constipated, something he complained about for much of his life, but we can't blame that for his dyspeptic views toward the Jews.

In 1983, Lutheran church groups in Germany and America repudiated Luther's writings about the Jews.

"In the spirit of . . . truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribe, and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. . . . We particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern antisemites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day," the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stated.

The second interviewee told me at the end of our call, "It's a joy to say most days that I'm a Lutheran."

I wish I could say the same thing about Judaism. Unfortunately, to be a Jew often means carrying around the weight of history. I can forget it for a while, but I recall what Larry David said about the subject. You can try to pretend you're not Jewish, but someone will often remind you.

For instance, at the recent memorial ceremony for Charlie Kirk, Tucker Carlson implicitly blamed the Jews for killing Jesus and linked that ancient lie to the present day by suggesting that somehow Israel was responsible for Kirk's assassination.

Candace Owens, a black right-wing podcaster, regularly slurs the Jews. Insanely, she said Judaism is a "pedophile-centric religion" that believes in demons and child sacrifice. She's also claimed that the "Israel lobby" had Kirk killed and that Israel murdered President Kennedy.

On the left, we've experienced two years of college students harassing Jewish kids on campus for a war being fought 5,600 miles away, thereby demonstrating the same tribal hatred they decry daily.

After writing the two articles, I emailed the pastor and told him I wanted to stop working on the newsletter.

The pastor asked to meet in his office. He understood my issues, then thanked me for helping provide the parish with a new format for the newsletter. We agreed to keep meeting for coffee.

Virtually every parishioner I met was nice to me. I was glad to see kindness flowing out of these people, as generous as fruit trees during the harvest.

But as I was writing the articles, I kept typing “Chabad” on my computer.

The people of Chabad could not be more different than me. My first college roommate, an Irish giant from an upstate New York Catholic high school, told me within a day of meeting me that he didn’t mind that I was Jewish, as long as I didn’t wear a funny hat and dance around the room all day.

I barely knew what the Hasidim were at that point. But I was certain I wasn’t one of *those* people. While the Hasidim and I were both Jewish, the types of Jewish we were couldn’t be more different. My family barely went to synagogue. Getting my bar mitzvah meant being freed from Hebrew School and getting more time for baseball, basketball and football.

And yet, here I was, decades later, writing for a Lutheran newsletter and feeling like an outsider, a classic Jewish issue.

The Chabadniks, on the other hand, would welcome me without hesitation. I fantasized about becoming one of them, joining them in prayer three times a day, reading the Talmud and debating Jewish law at the Chabad House in Bedford Corners. They could solve my lone wolf problem.

The Hasidim also would have directly challenged my Converse-clad rabbi’s contention that God is both invisible and absent. I easily see them shouting down Rabbi Converse All-Star and winning the argument that Yod he vav he may be invisible, but He is definitely here and constantly contemplating our actions, keeping score of every single thing.

In that sense, the Hasidim and the Lutheran parishioners I interviewed have more in common than one might think. They are both certain in their faith.

That’s where I’m falling down. I am constitutionally unable to feel certain about God.

But I have more of a kinship with Chabad than the Lutheran Church. The Chabadniks wrestle with God. So do I, but in a radically different way. I spend a lot of time weighing our place in the universe, and our obligations to others. Reading is my prayer. That makes me Jewish.

I can’t go with the Lutherans. I can’t go with Chabad. But I still think of the Chabadniks as part of my tribe. In case of apocalypse, I may well go over to their house.