

MMU – September 28, 2026

Note from Lisa – What I am/What we are

The Presbyterian Church is a confessional church. In the Book of Order, we read that the creeds and confessions “guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian traditions; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.” (F=2.01).

Many of us were raised having to memorize the Apostles’ Creed, some the Nicene Creed as well. Many went to confirmation classes in which the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession of Faith, or the Shorter or Larger Catechism served as the foundational curriculum. These confessions helped to guide training in the doctrines of the Reformed Christian traditions. All come from a specific time in history and address a specific issue.

Our modern Confessions help us address complex theological and spiritual questions arising from modern warfare and the rise of authoritarian regimes. For the next few months, I’ll share a little on these modern confessions, beginning with the Theological Declaration of Barmen.

The Book of Confessions notes that the Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party and of the so-called ‘German Christians,’ a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism.” (p. 280).

The Theological Declaration of Barmen reminds us that the church is not only shaped by religious belief but also by fear, social change, nationalism, and isolationism.

Written primarily by theologian Karl Barth, with input from other Lutheran pastors, it was adopted by the Confessing Church, which opposed National Socialism. The Confessing Church represented only one-fifth of the German Churches during the Nazi regime. The Declaration has six main theses:

1. Jesus is the one true Word of God and worldly powers and truths should be rejected as false doctrine
2. Jesus Christ is our only true Lord, and there should be no other authority in our lives
3. The Church’s message is from Jesus and should not be influenced by politicians
4. Church leadership and its ministry are entrusted to all members, and there is no special leader apart from that ministry

5. The state has its functions, and the Church has its domain, and they should both be limited to their own business.
6. The Church is commissioned to deliver the message of God's free grace to the world and that Word is not subordinate to the Church or the Church to the state.

This confessional document reminds us not only of the church's role in the world, but also of how easy it is for churches to become subservient to the state's politics and social norms. It is a reminder that the Church stands apart, providing not only the Gospel message to the world but also sharing God's grace and mercy with those most in need.

After the war, Martin Niemöller, a prominent German Protestant Pastor, began preaching about the collective guilt of the Germans for Nazi persecution and crimes against humanity. He was the primary author of the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt, whose call for national repentance and hope for the future helped prevent revenge on Germany and paved the way for the Marshall Plan.

Both the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the later Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt remind us that the Church must remain faithful to Christ and bear responsibility for sins of commission and omission.

A translation of the text of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt is below:

After the collapse of National Socialist rule and the situation of starting completely anew at the end of war, in Treysa (Hessen) in August 1945 at a church meeting it was decided to make a new beginning by creating a union called the "Protestant Church in Germany". The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt from October 1945 made further progress towards this goal possible. It sought to address unresolved questions of the immediate past and make admission to the world-wide Oekumene [place of God's reconciling mission] possible.

"The Council of the Protestant Church in Germany welcomes representatives of the Ecumenical Council of Churches at its meeting in Stuttgart on 18.-19. October 1945.

We are all the more grateful for this visit, as we not only know that we are with our people in a large community of suffering, but also in a solidarity of guilt.

With great pain we say: By us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole Church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more

courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not not loving more ardently.

Now a new beginning is to be made in our churches. Based on the Holy Scripture, with complete seriousness directed to the Lord of the Church, they start to cleanse themselves of the influences of beliefs foreign to the faith and to reorganize themselves. We hope to the God of grace and mercy that He will use our churches as His tools and give them license to proclaim His word and to obtain obedience for His will, amongst ourselves and among our whole people.

The fact that we, in this new beginning, find ourselves sincerely connected with the other churches of the ecumenical community fills us with great joy.

We hope to God that by the common service of the churches the spirit of violence and revenge, which again today wants to become powerful, will be directed to the whole world, and that the spirit of peace and love will come to predominate, in which alone tortured humanity can find healing.

Thus we ask at a time, in which the whole world needs a new beginning: Veni creator Spiritus! (Come, Spirit of the Creator!)”

Signatures:

D Worm (Württemberg state bishop)

Asmussen of dd (president of the Church Chancellory of the EKD)

H. Meiser (state bishop Bavaria)

Held (minister in Essen, later Praeses of the Rhine Church)

Dr. Lilje (Secretary-General of the Lutheran World Convention, later state bishop in Hanover)

Hahn (minister, later Saxony state bishop)

Lic. Drizzle (minister, theology professor)

Smend D.Dr. (theology professor)

Dr. G. Heinemann (attorney, later federal politician and Federal President)

Dibelius (bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg)

Martin Niemöller D.D. (minister, later church president of Hessen-Nassau)¹

¹ marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/projects/niem/StuttgartDecalaration.htm. Accessed September 23, 2026.