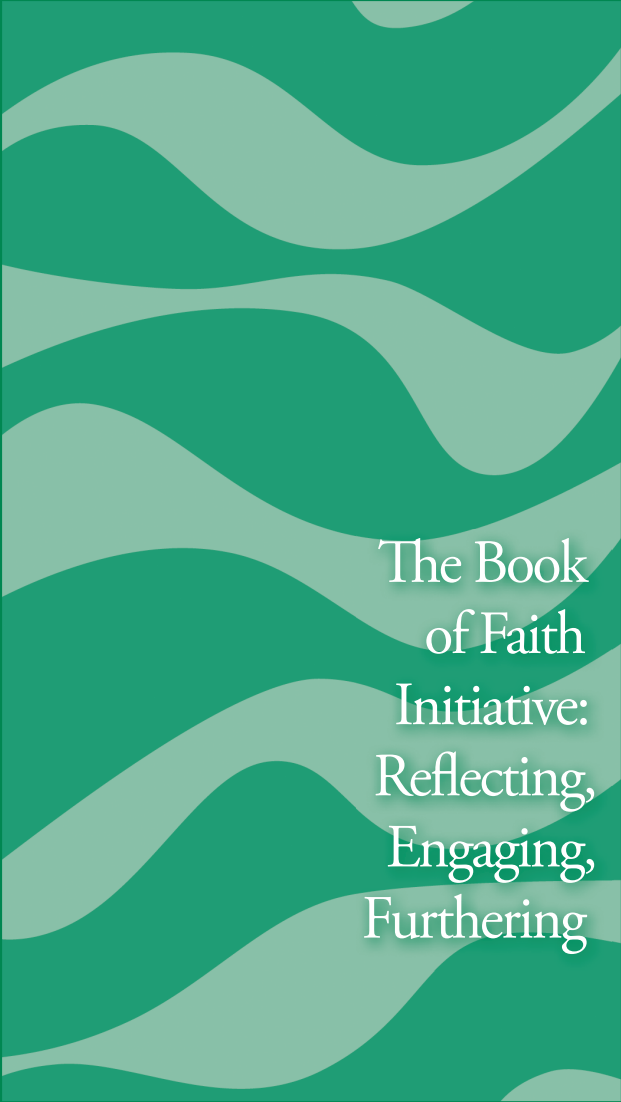


June 2014 Volume 41 Number 3



The Book
of Faith
Initiative:
Reflecting,
Engaging,
Furthering

CURRENTS
in Theology and Mission

Currents in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Editors: **Kathleen D. Billman, S.D. Giere, Craig L. Nessian**

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary
kbillman@lstc.edu, sgiere@wartburgseminary.edu,
cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu

Assistant Editor: **Ann Rezny**

arezny@lstc.edu

Copy Editor: **Connie Sletto**

Editors of Book Reviews:

Ralph W. Klein (Old Testament)

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773-256-0773)
rklein@lstc.edu

Edgar M. Krentz (New Testament)

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773-256-0752)
ekrentz@lstc.edu

Craig L. Nessian (history, theology, ethics and ministry)

Wartburg Theological Seminary (563-589-0207)
cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu

Circulation Office: 773-256-0751

currents@lstc.edu

Editorial Board: **Michael Aune (PLTS), James Erdman (WTS), Robert Kugler (PLTS),
Kristine Stache (WTS), Vitor Westhelle (LSTC).**

CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: \$24.00 in the U.S.A., \$28.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: \$44.00 in the U.S.A., \$52.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: \$60.00 in the U.S.A., \$72.00 elsewhere. Many back issues are available for \$5.00, postage included. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a nonprofit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *ATLA Religion Database, Elenchus, IZBW, NTA, OTA, Religion Index I (formerly IRPL), Religious and Theological Abstracts, and Theologische Literaturzeitung.*

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through NA Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 998, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

Unless otherwise noted scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contents

The Book of Faith Initiative: Reflecting, Engaging, Furthering S.D. Giere	154
Book of Faith: Retrospective and Prospective Diane L. Jacobson	159
A Perspective on the Establishment of the Book of Faith Initiative Mark Wilhelm	166
Biblical Fluency: Living under God's Influence David Vásquez-Levy	173
From Resolution to Reality: A Synod's Engagement with the Book of Faith Initiative Gregory P. Kaufmann	180
Our Book of Faith: God's Invitation to God's Mission in the World Michelle Angalet	186
Story Matters: One Congregation's Perspective Bob Lewis	191
Fruits of Engagement: A Congregation's Encounter with the Book of Faith Initiative Jana L. Howson	195
Scripture and Life in Kuala Lumpur Emily Lynn Shipman and Zachariah Shipman	198
Book Reviews	203

Preaching Helps

A Season for Considering Power Kathleen Billman	209
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Stephanie Salinasy	210

The Book of Faith Initiative: Reflecting, Engaging, Furthering

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa 55:10–11).

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* is dedicated to reflecting upon, learning from, celebrating, and furthering the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Book of Faith Initiative. In the pages that follow you will find voices, perspectives, and ideas of many leaders within this church committed to the importance of engagement with God's written word for the life of the church.

The occasion that gives rise to the issue is the renewed support of the Book of Faith Initiative last summer by the 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. I was privileged, as a teacher of the church, to attend the assembly as one of the representatives of the ELCA's eight seminaries. Throughout the week, I was struck frequently (and sometimes ironically!) by the timeliness of the assembly's theme: "Always Being Made New." One of the many things made new last summer in Pittsburgh was this church's support and continued prioritization of the Book of Faith Initiative within our life together in faith.

The renewed affirmation of the initiative came on Tuesday, August 13, 2013, when the assembly voted overwhelmingly to extend the ELCA's commitment to the Book of Faith Initiative into the future.¹ This prayerful legislative work is significant as it reaffirms the ELCA's commitment to inviting people to engage the Bible as God's written word—as "the Book of Faith." Lest the witness of the legislative minutes of the assembly stand alone, however, it is important to recall the non-legislative aspects the assembly. The daily work, worship, and prayer of the assembly was grounded in the collective study of Scripture by all those involved—Bible studies that were informed by and flowed from the Book of Faith Initiative for the life of the church. This is to say that the initiative was far more than a business item on the assembly's agenda. It was central to the assembly's being church. The collective engagement in daily Bible study throughout the week grounded

1. ELCA Churchwide Assembly resolution CA 13.02.04 passed (872 Yes / 17 No) on Tuesday, August 13, 2013. [download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/2013_Legislative_Updates_All.pdf]

and formed the church's business as a whole with the prayerful expectation of "Always Being Made New."

At the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, then Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson introduced the initiative to the church by inviting "the whole church to become fluent in the first language of faith—the language of Scripture—and to be renewed for lives of witness and service as the Holy Spirit engages each person."² While no initiative or program is perfect, this Book of Faith Initiative has done well to draw many people into faithful and creative engagement with the Bible.

As the essays that follow testify, so many of the developments that have resulted from the initiative are organic—home, congregationally, synodically grown—grassroots, if you will. The initiative has adopted an "open source" model whereby the many are invited to contribute their wisdom and creativity for the good of the whole. Given the organic, open source nature of the initiative, the leadership of the initiative is in many ways disseminated across the church. The essays in this issue represent this dissemination of leadership, organic growth, and open sourcing of the Book of Faith Initiative.

Diane L. Jacobson has served as Director of the Book of Faith Initiative since its inception. She has shared her deep wisdom and infectious passion for engaging and being engaged by God's written word. Her essay in this issue provides an outline of the initiative's central and guiding convictions, questions, and strategies. **Mark Wilhelm**, who serves as the point person within the ELCA churchwide organization for the Book of Faith Initiative, locates, narrates, and evaluates the initiative within historical commitments of the ELCA relative to the broader horizon of the understanding and use of Scripture within Protestant Christianity in North America. **David Vásquez-Levy**, a campus pastor at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and author of Book of Faith resources published by Augsburg Fortress, explores the concept of biblical fluency in terms of being shaped by God's "in-fluence," with the story of Samuel and Eli (1 Samuel 3) as a guide. He argues that "fluency, whether in a modern language or in the language of faith, is accessible to all, and is developed by hearing and speaking in community." **Greg Kaufmann**, an ELCA pastor who serves as Assistant to the Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, writes about the impact of the initiative from a synodical perspective, including his work as the synod's Book of Faith advocate and as the coordinator for the synod's lay school of theology.

Michelle Angalet, an ELCA associate in ministry now serves as Assistant to the Bishop of the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA, reflects upon the involvement of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Woodstock, Georgia, where she served before joining the synod staff, in a project promoting biblical fluency.

2. "2007 Churchwide Assembly Minutes," p. 56. [download.elca.org/ELCA%20Repository/CWA2007.pdf]

Bob Lewis, now pastor of Faith Lutheran Church and School, Redmond, Washington, reflects upon the engagement of his former parish, Nativity Lutheran Church, Renton, Washington, in the Story Matters portion of the Book of Faith Initiative. **Jana L. Howson**, a 2014 M.Div. graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, draws the reader into a Book of Faith project in which she participated with her internship congregation, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Wheaton, Illinois. **Emily Shipman** and **Zachariah Shipman**, 2014 M.Div. graduates of Wartburg Theological Seminary, reflect upon cross-cultural engagements with Scripture during their internships in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, through the ELCA Global Mission Horizon International Internship Program.

From this disseminated leadership, three of the primary “open sourcers,” Diane Jacobson, the Director of the Book of Faith Initiative, Mark Wilhelm, ELCA Director for Schools and the primary ELCA churchwide staff member responsible for the initiative, and Beth Lewis, President and CEO of Augsburg Fortress, the publishing ministry of the ELCA, are to be commended for shepherding what has come to be. For your shepherding, we are grateful.

As the ELCA Book of Faith Initiative moves into the future, I turn back to the Lord’s promise that the word of the Lord shall not return empty, but that it shall accomplish that which the Lord purposes, and succeed in the thing for which Lord sends it (Isa 55:11). As it has been in the past and the present, may God’s written word that testifies to the eternal, incarnate, crucified, and risen Word continue to water, bring forth, and sustain faith and life in the world as we move into God’s future.

S.D. Giere
Issue Editor



I'm a
Seminary
Advocate!

What does this mean?

We all benefit from the excellent leaders prepared by the ELCA seminaries and everyone has a role to play in supporting our seminaries.

How can I do this?

As grateful, creative, empowered people of God you are invited to be part of a cadre of volunteers who will plan and carry out programs appropriate for your setting to share how seminaries unleash the power of the gospel and to invite the support of others.

Call 773-256-0710 or e-mail
SeminaryAdvocates@lstc.edu
and say, "Martin sent me."

LS⁺**C** LUTHERAN SCHOOL
of THEOLOGY at CHICAGO



**How many books make
up the Protestant Bible?**



Find out this and more at:

bookoffaith.org/question



book of faith

Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Book of Faith: Retrospective and Prospective

Diane L. Jacobson

Director of the Book of Faith Initiative, Professor Emerita of Old Testament, Luther Seminary

The Spirit often moves in unanticipated ways. In 2005, the Philadelphia Evangelical Lutheran Church in Dallas, North Carolina, (How is that for “glocal” on a national scale!) took a resolution to their synod assembly which, in turn, brought a resolution to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Florida. The heart of the resolution was that we, the ELCA, as a church, were not doing a very good job of attending to the authority of Scripture or teaching Lutherans how to read the Bible, and that we ought to do something to address this. I served as a lay delegate at that assembly and can testify to the stirrings of the Spirit. The resolution unexpectedly took hold. “Yes, it is true,” we said to one another. “We should do something—but what?” The Churchwide Assembly passed the resolution and formed a committee. What else should we do? The truth was that we recognized the problem, but we also knew that the answers would need to be deep and far-reaching.

One of the actions of the newly mandated committee was to call together a group of leaders from throughout the ELCA to discuss how we should respond to this challenge. We gathered in workgroups to discuss the Bible among adults, youth and young adults, and children, within hermeneutics, worship, theological education, faith and daily life, and mission

and outreach. The excitement over new possibilities was palpable. The committee settled on a strategy of calling on the church to establish a five-year initiative inviting the whole of the ELCA into broad and deep engagement with the Bible. In 2007 at Navy Pier in Chicago, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly passed a five-year Book of Faith Initiative.

The initiative began with a vision, a number of convictions, and many questions.

Visions of biblical fluency

The vision was and is that individuals throughout the whole church become more fluent in the language of Scripture, what we talk about as the first language of faith. We understand fluency to be more than literacy, that is, knowing the Bible. Fluency implies facility and imagination. Fluency implies that the Bible functions in our lives and in the lives of our congregations and institutions so that Christ is shown forth. Fluency implies that through our engagement with Scripture we are empowered to live into our callings as a people of God. If Scripture is our primary language of faith, then biblical fluency implies that we know the Bible well enough to dream in its language—with visions of biblical stories, laws, prophecies, letters, gospels, and prayers dancing in our lives and inviting us to see, to know, and to be known by God.

Convictions informing the Book of Faith Initiative

Undergirding this vision lies a rich Lutheran conviction that we are or should be less concerned about a theoretical argument around the authority of Scripture and more concerned with real experiences of the Bible's power in our lives. Our desire was that people experience what the Bible does, rather than simply talk about what the Bible is.

Bringing this vision to life, putting flesh on the bones was and is not easy, because it involves an ever-evolving twenty-first-century culture that seems to have less and less of a place for Scripture and tradition. We knew we needed to understand the culture(s) in which we live and to speak to those realities.

Given a predominant attitude of questioning authority in our culture, we arrived at the conviction that another top-down church program would never suffice. The ELCA and its predecessor church bodies have had marvelous Bible programs in the past such as Bethel, Word and Witness, and Search. These programs have been very important but have often returned to business as usual when completed. In order to work, the vision of the Book of Faith Initiative has had to be owned as a common vision of the whole church: individuals, congregations, synods, churchwide staff and ministries, and other institutions. Individuals and communities need to come to their own ways of bringing the Book of Faith vision to reality using a variety of means that suit individual circumstances. We also wished to celebrate, name, and claim what is and has always been taking place around faithful engagement with Scripture in our church. The hope was, and remains, that all such engagement would be recognized as fulfilling the vision of the initiative.

So as an alternative to a centralized

program and in keeping with the origins of the initiative in North Carolina, the Book of Faith Initiative has operated using a decentralized, grassroots approach centered on our common vision. This decentralized approach has meant that our major strategy has been to work with partners throughout the church. The role of leadership for myself and the committee has been to cast the vision, invite participation, convene the partners, connect people and resources, and to provide helpful networks and networking opportunities.

The initiative's convictions about biblical engagement

The convictions listed thus far have centered on the working of the initiative as a whole. Other sorts of convictions about the nature of biblical engagement itself have also formed our work.

While we recognize the importance of individual study of the Bible, the initiative has emphasized reading and studying with others, as part of a community. The conviction is that we are greatly enriched by the questions, beliefs, experiences, and insights of others. Something happens when you work through a passage or book alongside of others. This conviction, as well as the emphases on real experiences and the grassroots, is captured in the initiative's tagline: "Open Scripture. Join the conversation."

We also, from the beginning, took seriously our need to meet the challenge not only of widespread biblical illiteracy but also of how to help the church engage our rich Lutheran heritage of scriptural understanding and interpretation. This heritage is varied and deep, sharing many insights with other denominations and traditions. Many of our Lutheran insights can help us to negotiate the twin traps of secularism and biblical illiteracy on the one hand and fundamentalism and American Biblicism on the other. Among

our Lutheran convictions is understanding the Bible as a threefold understanding of the Word of God: Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God, proclamation is the spoken Word of God, and Scripture is the written word of God.¹

Five other insights also inform our Lutheran convictions about engaging the Bible.²

First, we experience time and again that proclamation works on us as law and gospel. That is, we understand that as we are addressed by the Word of God in Christ through both Scripture and proclamation, we experience the demands and promises of God. Law and gospel are about what the Bible does to us when we read it, about the effects of being encountered by the Word.

Second, we have learned from Luther that the true meaning of the Bible, the core of biblical truth, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or as Luther famously said, "Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies."³ Through this image of Scripture as the manger of Christ, Luther shows us how the Bible both is the Word of God and contains the Word of God, cradles it, if you will. It is not so much that the text talks about and teaches us about Jesus

Christ (though it certainly does that) but rather that the text points us, drives us, leads us to Jesus Christ.

Third, as Lutherans we do not read biblical passages in isolation from each other. The whole of Scripture helps us to understand the particular and keeps passages in proper perspective. This means both that difficult parts of the Bible should be read in the light of clearer or more central passages and that not all passages of the Bible are equally important. Lutherans come to all Scripture with certain biblical ideas having pride of place such as the centrality of the cross and Paul's insight that we are justified by grace through faith.

Fourth, the Bible should be read in the sense that would have seemed obvious to the original readers. We come from a tradition that values common sense, straight talk, and the insights of scholarship.

Finally we understand the truths of the Bible to be public, not private. So we talk about meaning in community, valuing insights from a variety of people and cultures.

All of these insights are valuable and potentially helpful, but they are not all immediately accessible or clear to people who are not theologically trained. So, these insights themselves led to two more convictions. We have to learn to avoid technical language without abandoning the insights that lie beneath the lingo. Those who are theologically trained need to be open to learning from people who bring wisdom from other quarters. We need to help all people with very practical ways of reading and studying the Bible that enable them both to hear the insights of scholarship and the theological tradition and invite them to share their own insights and observations.

From the beginning, the Book of Faith Initiative has emphasized that biblical engagement is greatly enriched by employing "multiple methods" in conversation with

1. This threefold understanding of the Word is written about in many ways and places. One might take particular note of the "Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," 2.02.

2. For a fine summary of these ideas see Mark Allen Powell, "How Can Lutheran Insights Open Up the Bible?" *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* (Diane Jacobson, Mark Allan Powell and Stan Olson, eds.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 20–45.

3. "Preface to the Old Testament," *Luther's Works* 35:236.

the text and other people. The “methods” suggested by the initiative have centered on four different ways of reading the Bible: devotional, historical, literary, and Lutheran theological.⁴ These methods have not been intended to be exclusionary or overly systematic. They are intended rather to be different sorts of accessible lenses individuals can use to open Scripture and join the conversation. They offer multiple ways to ask questions and to listen for wisdom, direction, and good news.

Having said all of this we also have known from the beginning that the initiative needed to be for all ages, not just adults. Our goal has also been to foster a love of the Bible and increase biblical understanding among children and young people. This conviction necessitates engagement with families and in homes as well as in congregations and other institutions. All of our convictions have also depended and continue to depend on the equipping and engaging of educators and leaders. The challenge rising out of these convictions is considerable.

Questions

In, with, and under these convictions are all manner of questions we have wished to address. Somehow thinking about questions alongside of convictions changes one’s perspective. So here are just a few questions we have been pondering:

- Why is the Bible important to us individually and as a church?
- Can we connect to the general spiritual

4. These four methods were first explored by Diane Jacobson, “How Can the Bible Be Studied?” *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*, 46–65. They have been gradually refined and expanded. See www.bookoffaith.org/biblemethods.html and Book of Faith Bookmarks at www.bookoffaith.org/graphics.html.

hunger in our culture leading people to Scripture as a place to drink deeply?

- How do we teach Scripture to both “traditional” church members and to seekers?
- What are the best practices of reading Scripture with others?
- What is the proper and most helpful role of expertise and knowledge?
- What sort of leadership and resources are needed?
- How can we learn more multi-culturally and creatively from others?
- How can we function better as an interconnected network of theological education providers?
- How can we make creative use of multiple media, making sure that the conversation is genuinely open to all across cultural and class divides?
- Can we design an initiative that emphasizes learning over teaching, hearing over speaking?
- What constitutes a missional reading of Scripture?
- How can we best communicate in such a way that individuals learn not just for themselves but from others as well?

Finally, questions to ask ourselves that cut to the heart of the matter for each of us in our congregations and institutions:

- What would it look like in our place if we actually began to dream in Scripture?
- How might we develop a plan to get there?

Strategies of the Book of Faith Initiative

With these convictions and questions in mind, the Book of Faith Initiative devel-

oped a number of strategies, all of which have born both fruit and challenges.

Working with congregations

On the level of congregations we developed a number of strategies. We invited congregations to sign a commitment to become a Book of Faith congregation. More than 1,300 congregations officially self-identified as such on our website, and 2,962 congregations indicated that they had participated in the initiative on the 2009 ELCA Congregational Report Form C. These congregations and many others have reported adopting long-term initiative practices (e.g., Dwelling in the Word at meetings; new ways of engaging Scripture in homes and group studies and hosting creative events). We highlighted such events and encouraged the leaders to post details so that other congregations might learn from them. We developed several assessment tools and a checklist for individuals and congregations. Each tool has been helpful, though tools are static and can become outdated rather quickly. We are currently working on developing a strategy that will facilitate the sharing of best practices across congregations.

Working with synods

We imagined that the most productive way to become a decentralized initiative was to work with individuals from all of the synods and to invite them to cast their own visions of the initiative within their home synods. We asked each bishop to appoint a synodical Book of Faith advocate. We gathered this group of advocates together on two occasions for training, study, brainstorming, and the exchange of ideas. We developed an advocate leadership team. We helped the advocates with worksheets, asset-mapping, resources, and toolkits. We publicized the advocate list on our website so that they could be easily contacted

within their synod. This approach worked fabulously in some synods and not as well in others. Many synods passed Book of Faith Resolutions committing themselves to the initiative. Many advocates hosted their own Book of Faith events. Many synods have or have had a Book of Faith presence on their synodical website. Some synods have adopted regular “Dwelling in the Word” moments at council meetings, synodical assemblies, and elsewhere. Some synod advocates have continued working within their synod ministries on behalf of the initiative. Through the advocate program, synods became vital partners in the initiative and have provided significant leadership. We have experienced two challenges in working with synods. The high level of commitment has been difficult to sustain—people move on. Also, the decentralized nature of the events made it difficult to track them in a meaningful way.

Working with Augsburg Fortress and Select

One of our crucial strategies has been to partner with Augsburg Fortress, the publishing ministry of the ELCA.⁵ As a full partner in the initiative, Augsburg Fortress has published more than 160 Book of Faith resources including Foundational Courses, Seasonal Courses (Advent and Lenten Journeys), *Books of Faith, Together in Faith, People of Faith, Making Sense of...* Series, and the *Lutheran Study Bible*. The challenge for the publishing company has been how to publish and promote helpful material for an initiative rather than for a program. No one is “required” to use this material to be part of the initiative. And yet much of the material has been compelling. This dilemma is part of our changing times.

Select Learning⁶ has also developed

5. www.augsburgfortress.org

6. www.selectlearning.org

a number of helpful resources including *How Lutherans Interpret the Bible*; *Teaching the Bible: Hosting the Conversation*; *Teaching the Bible with Children, Youth and Families: Equipping Households of Faith*; and *Teaching the Bible with Children, Youth and Families: Service and Learning*.

From the perspective of the initiative we want to promote these excellent materials as well as to encourage conversation around the church as to what resources have been most helpful for faithful and deep engagement with the Bible.

Working in social media

In order to help provide and promote resources as well as to exchange ideas, the Book of Faith Initiative has developed an ongoing Web presence. Our website—bookoffaith.org—houses many of our resources, ideas for engagement, and more. We have also been active on Facebook and Twitter.

Developing Web resources takes time, knowledge, and creative engagement by leadership. These are a different set of skills than most leaders have needed in the past. The social media landscape changes daily. Many of us know that working on and through the Web is critical, but sustaining a dynamic presence is a continual challenge.

Working in lay schools

Some lay schools have used Book of Faith Initiative materials or centered their curriculum on exploring ways of engaging the initiative. For example, in 2012–2013 Northwest Synod of Wisconsin's Lay School of Ministry took on the overall topic of *Book of Faith Meets Missional Church*. Greg Kaufman has written about this in this issue of *Currents*.⁷ Lifelong Learning at Luther Seminary partnered with neighboring synods to sponsor two Book of Faith Jubilee events which were

highly engaging. The challenge is how we sustain the effects of such gatherings.

Working at churchwide events

The Book of Faith Initiative has had a significant presence at various churchwide events. Under the leadership of the Book of Faith Initiative, the 2011 and 2013 Churchwide Assemblies began the practice of inviting the whole assembly to engage in Bible studies through small group discussions using the fourfold method of asking questions. This pattern of encouraging discussion and studying the Bible together has been picked up in numerous other event venues influencing Bible study practices throughout the ELCA.

At the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans, the Book of Faith Initiative partnered in the training of Bible study leaders, participated in the “hot spot challenges,” and sponsored a “Road to Shalom” room that explored the deeper meanings of the word “shalom” throughout the Bible. So as not to confine this work to one event, the script and supply list for Road to Shalom was promoted on our website for use in synods, congregations, and other gatherings.

Working in partnership with other churchwide ministries

The initiative has also worked with a variety of other ELCA churchwide ministries. One major partnership with ELCA Faith Practices has resulted in a resource posted on the website called, *Story Matters: Claiming our Biblical Identity for the Sake of the World*.⁸ *Story Matters* is designed to help each congregation discover and articulate, in a deep and biblically based conversation,

8. The resource, *Story Matters*, can be found by following the link to “Resources” on the ELCA Faith Practices website: www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices.

7. See page 180.

its unique identity and mission so that it might discern its congregational story, help people deepen their practice of faith by exploring and living into its story, and be challenged by this engagement to live out its mission. The resource, which has been tested and improved by pilot congregations, could be enormously helpful in a variety of venues. The challenge is in getting the word out in such a way that congregations become engaged and excited.

Continuing challenges for the Book of Faith Initiative

From the beginning, the Book of Faith Initiative was envisioned to be more than a theme or emphasis that would be succeeded by other emphases. Rather, the intent was and is to form practices and customs across the ELCA that will open us to a new level of valuing and being shaped by the power of the Word. While much has been accomplished, much work remains. Productive and lasting change in practices and customs takes time. Old challenges have deepened, and new challenges have arisen.

Gathering up all of the challenges thus far discussed will determine our future work. The major task of the initiative continues to be addressing the ongoing biblical illiteracy and lack of engagement. We do this in the context of the two extremes of secularism and Biblicism. We have a growing number of individuals in society claiming to be “spiritual but not religious,” and others who struggle to find ways to open the Bible that faithfully show forth Christ. Our role is to be helpful not autocratic. For this reason we need to encourage engagement of the Book of Faith Initiative by the colleges, universities, and seminaries of this church, recognizing the continuing challenge of assisting rostered and lay leaders in taking up their roles as teachers of the Bible in ways that engage and

inspire both current and future members of this church. We need to address and learn from the great variety of cultures that make up this church and world. This is certainly for the sake of mission outreach, but it is also for the sake of a more faithful hearing of the Word. We continue to need to recognize the importance of family and home as centers of faith development for the sake of our youth and children, for the sake of both our future and present. And finally, though no doubt not completely, we continue to need to improve our creative use of social media. If we are truly to exchange best practices with one another, if we are to be receptive to new ideas and questions, if we are to operate well as a decentralized initiative with a vision common among the people throughout the church, then our facility in this arena is crucial.

We continue to give thanks to God for all of the individuals, congregations, synods, and ELCA churchwide ministries for their deep and abiding commitment to the centrality of God’s transforming Word in Christ, in proclamation, and in Scripture.

We invite everyone in the ELCA involved in faithful engagement with the Bible, whatever your context or resources might be, to see your work as contributing toward fulfilling the goals of this initiative. Whenever we faithfully and fruitfully engage the Scriptures, we are a Book of Faith church!



book of faith

Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.

www.bookoffaith.org

Join the *Book of Faith* Facebook Group
@bookoffaith

A Perspective on the Establishment of the Book of Faith Initiative

Mark Wilhelm

Program Director for Schools, Congregational and Synodical Mission, ELCA

The purpose of this article is to describe some of the concerns in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) that spurred the creation of the Book of Faith Initiative (BFI). To do so, I will briefly summarize the purposes of the BFI as enshrined in the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly's resolutions that established the initiative. This will be followed by a discussion of some of the impulses driving interest in creating the BFI from my perspective as a churchwide staff member involved in planning, implementation, and continuing oversight of the BFI.

The 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly resolutions

The ELCA Church Council brought two lengthy resolutions to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly about the BFI. The first resolution reaffirmed the centrality of the Bible in the ELCA. The second established the BFI as an effort to strengthen and deepen engagement with the Bible throughout the church. The upshot of both was that the churchwide staff, Church Council, and Churchwide Assembly agreed with the North Carolina Synod's memorial to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly that it was time for the ELCA to explore anew this church's engagement with the Bible, the authority of the Word, and the Lutheran understanding of the interpretation of

the Bible. These were the concerns to be addressed through the BFI.

The first resolution affirmed the ELCA's constitutional statement of faith about the Word of God and that the Bible is the written Word of God. It described the historic commitments of the Lutheran tradition to the Scripture, beginning with Martin Luther and continuing through the ministries of the ELCA. It recognized that "...one of the six constitutionally stated purposes for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through its congregations, synods, churchwide ministries, and related institutions and agencies is to nurture members 'in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for their calling in the world.'" The resolution noted that thankfulness for the Word of God is shared with the church universal and that several anniversaries and celebrations, including the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran reformation in 2017, provided a context for fresh attention to the Bible in the life of the whole church. Finally the first resolution thanked the North Carolina Synod for inviting the ELCA to explore the authority of the Scripture in the life of this church.

Having set the context for creating the BFI through the first resolution, the second resolution called for establishing the initiative. The resolution called upon the

ELCA to collectively “invite and encourage all members, expressions, institutions, and partners of this church to commit themselves regularly and increasingly to hearing, reading, studying, sharing, and being formed by God’s Word.” The resolution further asked the “members, congregations, synods, churchwide ministries, and institutions and agencies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to engage in a five-year collaborative initiative—identified as “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible”—with the goal of raising to a new level this church’s individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency, deeper worship and devotion, and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture.” The resolution specified no tactics, other than to refer the concerns to staff of units in the churchwide organization, but outcomes set forth in the resolution defined the goals of the BFI.¹

A personal recollection

What follows below is a personal reflection based on my involvement with creating, implementing and managing the BFI. The themes and topics described below as motivating creation of the BFI are my own construction. They come out of my experience with the initiative, and they are my own. In other words, they are not a list, with my commentary, of concerns that churchwide staff collectively established between 2005 and 2007 as a rationale for creating the initiative.

Having said that, my recollection of important themes or concerns leading to establishing the BFI include the following.

1. Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes, 2007 Churchwide Assembly, August 6-11, 2007, Minneapolis, Minnesota, (Chicago: Office of the Secretary, ELCA, 2008), 55–69.

1. Creating a locus for the ELCA’s commitment to the Bible

Early discussions leading to the creation of the BFI focused on the vocation of the ELCA’s churchwide organization to lift up the centrality of the Bible in the life of this church. As noted above, the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly received a memorial from the North Carolina Synod urging a churchwide program on the authority of the word and this church’s engagement with the Bible. The 2005 assembly referred the resolution to the Office of the Secretary, in consultation with the Presiding Bishop, the Division for Ministry (soon to be merged into a new unit for Vocation and Education), and the Conference of Bishops.

Churchwide staff decided to respond to the resolution through a project that would serve as a locus for identifying this church’s commitment to the Bible and the churchwide organization’s responsibility for promoting engagement with the Bible. How this would occur was complicated from the outset because it was clear that declining financial support for churchwide ministries precluded making significant funding available to support the effort, akin to monies provided for past programs such as *Word and Witness*. Nonetheless, planners decided to move ahead with the development of what became the BFI.

2. Encouraging an open conversation about the Bible to promote fluency in the “first language of faith,” not a debate about interpretation

It was also decided quite early that the new effort should focus on the process of biblical engagement, not the substance of biblical teaching. This decision deeply disappointed partisans of all stripes who hoped that the new program would embrace their perspective on “what the Bible teaches.” Nonetheless, the BFI is not an

effort to label how this church will engage the Bible to decide controverted issues of the day. To say it differently, the BFI encourages questioning and exploring the Scripture without being an effort to define what the outcome of the questioning and exploring should be. For that reason, planners decided against recommending an over-arching narrative for understanding and interpreting the Bible as part of the initiative. The BFI instead focused on encouraging engagement with the Bible in its complexity and diversity.

In the earliest months of the initiative, a great deal of staff time was devoted to insisting that the BFI was not about supporting either a liberal or conservative viewpoint on American culture-war issues or other themes in public debate in the United States. To this end, despite the BFI's purpose of embracing a Lutheran understanding of biblical authority, the initiative avoided identifying "the definitive Lutheran principles" of biblical interpretation for fear that a definitive description of principles would be construed legalistically as a mechanism for compelling certain interpretive outcomes. Instead, the BFI spoke of mining the Lutheran tradition for options and wisdom about biblical interpretation and kept the program focused on the process of biblical engagement. This eventually led to Diane Jacobson's combining contemporary scholarly methods for studying the Bible with the idea of mining the Lutheran tradition into her four-fold method for reading the Scripture: devotional, historical, literary, and Lutheran theological. We hoped thereby to express that the Lutheran understanding of the authority of Scripture could be best unpacked if multiple ways into reading and interpreting the text were employed.

A great deal of effort was spent convincing more conservative leaders in this

church that the BFI was not a churchwide tool to support progressive viewpoints on human sexuality. From the outset of the BFI, some members of this church believed that the initiative was created as a cover for other agendas in the charged ecclesiastical climate attendant to discussions across the church—and in the context of American culture wars—about human sexuality and ministry policies. Churchwide staff worked to convince those voices that the BFI masked no hidden agendas. Avoiding defining "principles" was particularly important in relating to these individuals.

In addition to the idea of mining Lutheran insights for reading and interpreting Scripture, "fluency" became a key concept in the development of the initiative in lieu of defining principles. The concept of fluency was first proposed by my colleague in the churchwide organization, Jonathan Strandjord, Program Director for Seminaries. His idea arose during a January 2007 consultation of leaders from around this church about constructing a response to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly resolution. During the conference, the well-known concept of biblical literacy was invoked often. Strandjord countered that we should encourage an engagement with the Scripture that went beyond literacy to fluency. The concept was subsequently enshrined in the vision statement for the BFI which was drafted by Diane Jacobson after she was named Director for the BFI. Open conversation about the Scripture, supported by insights from the Lutheran tradition, to increase fluency in "the first language of faith, the Scripture," for the sake of the world became hallmarks of the BFI.

"Engagement" with the Bible, a concept used in American Bible Society circles and elsewhere, was intentionally adopted as a key term for the BFI. It

reflected a focus on a broader reflection upon the Bible as the Word of God than the term “study” denotes. The purpose of the initiative was, and remains, to claim and label this church’s insistence that its people become people of the Bible who “engage” Scripture as the Word of God.

3. BFI as an initiative, not a program

In planning the BFI, all agreed that the initiative should encourage more regular reading of the Scripture. Hence the now formally abandoned — and largely forgotten — original subtitle for the initiative, “Lutherans Read the Bible.” Some felt that a centrally organized program of reading and reflection should be developed whereas others felt that no form of centralized programming could succeed in the ELCA today. The latter argument won the day, but not primarily on its merits. The BFI became a decentralized effort primarily because the churchwide organization could not provide funding for developing, managing and promoting participation in a centrally directed, common program of Bible reading promulgated simultaneously throughout this church. It is difficult to know how the BFI might have developed if significant funding for centralized program development and marketing had been available.

4. Response to fears that ELCA members know little about the Bible

Planners for the BFI believed that inadequate understanding of the Scripture prevailed among members of the ELCA. This concern was supported by survey research reported by the Research and Evaluation staff of the churchwide organization. A 2006 report by Kenneth Inskeep, Director for Research and Evaluation, noted that only 22 percent of ELCA members said in 2001 that they participated in a prayer, discussion, or Bible study group. Only 23 percent reported regular participation in

a Sunday or church school group. That fewer than a quarter of ELCA members participated in Christian education and Bible study groups supported perceptions that limited understanding of the Bible was prevalent, and it encouraged planners to move ahead with developing the BFI.²

Some involved with planning for the BFI believed that the initiative was

The purpose of
the initiative
was, and remains, to
claim and label this
church’s insistence
that its people
become people of the
Bible who “engage”
Scripture as the Word
of God.

addressing a problem of limited biblical knowledge common throughout the centuries. Others thought that this was a problem more specific to and urgent in our generation. All involved shared a concern that members of the ELCA should improve their knowledge of biblical content.

A more subtle concern among those involved with founding the initiative was a fear that the widespread acceptance in

2. Kenneth W. Inskeep, “Research Related to the Bible in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” unpublished paper, December 6, 2006, 4.

the ELCA of historical methods for interpreting the Bible had unintentionally contributed to a reduced knowledge of the Bible among most ELCA members. It was hypothesized that the beneficial introduction of historically informed methods into our congregations had also unintentionally and ironically reduced biblical competency among members of the ELCA. It was feared that the Bible had become a book primarily for pastors and lay leaders conversant in the technical tools of historical methods, especially as these methods came to be considered the primary or even singular legitimate mode for Bible study in our community. The approach of using multiple methods and the concept of engagement — instead of study — with the Scripture was developed in response to this fear. Frequent positive reaction to the suggested four-fold method, and specifically the positive response to the devotional method as a legitimate form of biblical engagement, reinforced our belief that the hypothesis about the impact of historical methods on levels of engagement with the Bible was probably correct.

5. Rising influence of literalistic biblical interpretation

The same report issued by Research and Evaluation that described low participation in Bible study groups also reported a sharp increase in the percentage of ELCA members who believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible. The report found:

Between 1991 and 2001, there was a significant increase in the number of lay members indicating they believe the Bible is “the actual word of God to be taken literally word for word.” While the percent of lay persons saying the Bible is “the inspired word of God without errors but some verses are symbolic” remained roughly the same, the percent of lay persons who allowed

for historical and scientific errors in the Bible decreased.³

The BFI was created in part to reverse the religious culture of the ELCA that had become increasingly influenced by the wider American Protestant culture of biblical literalism. It is not in the scope of this article to describe the profound differences between the dominant American Protestant paradigm of biblical literalism and the Lutheran understanding of Scripture. Suffice it to say that the BFI’s emphases on using multiple methods for engaging Scripture and engaging in conversation with others were intended to counter the practice of literalism.

Addressing misunderstandings about biblical interpretation remains a major task facing the BFI. Misunderstandings, large and small, pedestrian and sophisticated, abound about the wisest practices for articulating a Lutheran understanding of the authority of the Word and the interpretation of Scripture. The problems in an ahistorical, literalist interpretation of the Bible remain opaque to many in the ELCA who believe that a literalist perspective faithfully articulates the Lutheran tradition’s high view of Scripture as the Word of God. At the same time, many theologically astute leaders, who reject biblical literalism, believe that the ELCA’s three-fold constitutional description of the Word of God (the person of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of Christ, and the Bible) reflects a Barthian, neo-orthodox theology instead of a faithful articulation of a Lutheran understanding of the Word of God. This is true despite the fact that scholarship definitively demonstrated, just prior to the founding of the ELCA, that the three-fold understanding of the Word expressed in this church’s constitution is directly drawn from Martin Luther’s

3. Ibid., 1.

writings about the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.⁴

Helping this church do better in its common conversations about all issues attendant to a Lutheran understanding of the Word and the Bible remains a major unfulfilled task of the BFI. Planners for the initiative were generally aware that a Bible project from the early years of The American Lutheran Church (ALC) had been called, "Bible: Book of Faith." I argued (as did others, I am sure, although I cannot recall) for the selection of the term "Book of Faith" to label our effort because our discussion had yielded no other name that articulated the Lutheran understanding that the Bible is written from faith, for faith. I continue to believe that the label resonates with our church's theological and confessional perspective on the authority of the Bible as the Word of God from faith, for faith. That may be claiming too much, but continuing to point this church toward a more faithful shared understanding about biblical interpretation remains high on the BFI agenda.⁵

6. *Renewing biblical piety within the ELCA*

By the early twentieth century, much of American Lutheranism lacked a sacramental piety. Despite the resurgence of Lutheran confessionalism in nineteenth century America, the dominant, Bible-centered culture of American Protestantism had deeply influenced the Lutheran

community as it moved into the twentieth century. A leading mid-twentieth century American church historian, Sidney Mead, believed that only the steady practice of using the historic western liturgy had kept American Lutheranism from being fully absorbed into the faith practices of general American Protestantism, including its focus on the Bible and a minimizing of the sacraments.⁶

The liturgical renewal movement of the twentieth century reversed this reality as it succeeded in renewing sacramental piety among Lutherans who became part of the ELCA. Renewed faith practices related to Baptism and the signature move toward weekly celebration of Holy Communion in our congregations marked an important cultural shift and reclaiming of authentic Lutheran practices. Liturgical scholars and leaders resist describing the outcome of the liturgical renewal movement as a renewal of sacramental piety. They rightly point out that the movement had a goal of reestablishing the Lutheran focus on both Word and Sacrament as the means of grace and marks of the church. The intention of the liturgical renewal movement, however, is irrelevant to the point being made here. The indisputable cultural impact of the liturgical renewal movement was the reestablishment of a lost sacramental piety among American Lutherans. The BFI was undertaken in part to reinforce the liturgical renewal movement's success in reestablishing this church's sacramental piety by renewing the culture of our church's practices of engagement with the Bible.

This renewal largely, but not exclusively, focused on practices outside of worship. Lutherans in America had never lost their appreciation for Scripture as the

4. David W. Lotz, "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority," *Interpretation* (July 1981) 35: 258–273.

5. Memo from Mark Wilhelm to the churchwide staff planning committee for the "North Carolina Synod Resolution Project," personal electronic file, date stamped January 19, 2006. The memo records that in January 2006, a name proposed for what became the BFI was "Reading the Bible, Proclaiming Christ: Lutheran Perspectives."

6. Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

Word of God, and its use as a means of grace in worship. Interpretation of the Bible and an understanding of the authority of Scripture from a Lutheran perspective, as mentioned above, had become difficult to sustain in the sea of American biblicism, but the Lutheran community never swerved from devotion to Scripture as the Word of God and a faithful adherence to the use of Scripture in worship. We came close to doing so in the 1960s when discussions frequently occurred about substituting other pious readings or readings that reflected Christian perspectives for one (or more) of the three lectionary readings in the liturgy. This substitution occurred to some extent in Protestant communions, but the shift never occurred in our congregations. It is ironic that the BFI would have had an easy focal point if our congregations had succumbed to the practice of using other readings in the liturgy. Had this been so, a primary tactic of the initiative would have been to urge a return to the traditional reading of biblical texts in worship. Nonetheless, the BFI remains committed to renewing the culture of this church by urging a deeper engagement with the Bible as the Word of God in a Lutheran key.

Conclusion

We are now far removed from the 2005 memorial of the North Carolina Synod that resulted in the BFI. Even though the memorial no longer has force or authority within this church, I believe that the 2005 memorial continues to express the best hope for the BFI. In that memorial, the North Carolina Synod resolved that the entire ELCA should join together in:

an ongoing effort to address issues surrounding the authority of Scripture, the development of a coherent and credible hermeneutic that is faithful to the Gospel as revealed most clearly in Jesus

Christ, God's Living Word, and to develop an ecclesial climate, process, and means for fostering healthy and spirited conversation that faithfully relates the truths revealed in the Scripture and affirmed in the Lutheran Confessions to the faith and life of both individual Christians and the corporate life of this whole church.⁷

In the wake of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly resolution that affirmed the BFI as "a continuing emphasis and priority in this church,"⁸ my hope is that the BFI will increasingly serve as the label collectively used for any activity that expresses the importance of the Bible in this church by "fostering of a healthy and spirited conversation" among our members. I hope the ELCA in all its expressions claims the BFI, making its name the rhetoric used by all leaders in the ELCA to identify any effort to deepen engagement with the Bible through the wisdom of the Lutheran tradition. We will become a Book of Faith church when all its members use the phrase as a synonym for the Bible and as a label for our continuing desire to know the Word of God truly.

7. Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes, 2005 Churchwide Assembly, August 8-14, 2005, Orlando, Florida, (Chicago: Office of the Secretary, ELCA, 2006), 389.

8. "2013 Report to the Church Council and Churchwide Assembly," personal electronic file, date stamped June 24, 2013, 3. Minutes of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly were not available when this article was written.

Biblical Fluency: Living under God's Influence

David Vásquez-Levy

Campus Pastor, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa

Lori and Brian Smith visited St. Mark's Lutheran Church one Sunday morning. As I went through the visitors' Welcome Cards later in the week, I came across their information and called them. Lori answered the phone with a friendly greeting. After I thanked her for their visit, I shared my excitement for the ministry at St. Mark's where I had served for three years. From our conversation, I gathered that they had been living in town for about a year and had been visiting a number of churches. Lori noted that they were "church shopping," and added: "We are looking for a church, because we want to make sure our children grow up with *that influence*."

In later conversations, I found out that the Smiths had both grown up going to church and had drifted away when they left home for college. Now that they were raising two small children, they felt the need to provide them with some version of the church experience with which they themselves had grown up. This all happened back in the mid 1990s, when such a return to church was more commonplace. While making an effort to sound agreeable over the phone, internally I felt a tinge of indignation at the idea that church is a good thing for kids—like immunizations or the occasional civic parade, a source of morality and values. Hearing the church called an "influence" really bothered me at first. But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if Lori was on to something. I realized that

what the Smiths were hoping to find in the church was not all that different from what I hoped our community could offer to everyone, children and adults alike: a place to be shaped by God's *in-fluence*, a community to be immersed (in-) in the flow (Latin "fluere") of God's love. That hope for the church, I believe, was also at the core of the vision of the ELCA Book of Faith Initiative when it first began in 2007:

That the whole church become more *fluent* in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.

Young Samuel came under God's *influence* during the first-recorded, middle-school church lock-in in 1 Samuel 3. Samuel was spending the night in a sanctuary, when suddenly God called his name. Samuel did not recognize the voice as being God's, the text says, because "visions were rare in those days." Thinking the one calling him was his mentor Eli, Samuel ran up to the old priest who was sleeping in the room next door. "Here I am for you called me," the child said wiping sleep from his eyes. This scene was to be repeated two more times before Eli was awake enough to realize what was going on. It was God who was calling the child, and Samuel did not recognize God's voice because he had never heard it before. So Eli gave Samuel

a quick course in *God-speech*, and the next time God spoke, Samuel was ready: "Speak, for your servant is listening." The simple liturgical phrase Eli gave to Samuel opened the child to God's *influence*. By helping him recognize that it was God who was speaking, Eli set Samuel on his journey to becoming *fluent* in God-speech.

Like a child learning a language for the first time, Samuel's basic ability to learn and repeat a phrase opened him up to recognize God's voice in the darkness. The first step toward fluency in any language is the ability to recognize when that particular language is being spoken. Once a person has worked out that they are being addressed in English or in Spanish, for example, their brain tunes itself to the sounds and cadences of the speaker to sort out any recognizable patterns or words they may know in the specific language.

Thanks to Eli's quick tutorial, Samuel develops a basic fluency in God-speech; he was able to recognize that God was speaking to him. He does not yet fully understand what he is hearing, and we are told that it will be some time before he can more fully understand God-speech as well as speak authoritatively on behalf of God. According to 1 Sam 3:19, he will acquire those abilities as he matures. For now, all he can do is mimic the words given to him by Eli. Even this, he undertakes with some uncertainty. When he utters Eli's phrase into the night, he omits the word, "Lord," signaling that he is not totally sure whether he is really addressing God or not!

In spite of his uncertainty, Samuel has developed basic *aural fluency*. In learning a language, one becomes fluent in hearing the language well before one is able to speak it. While it usually takes a long time to become fluent in speaking a language—oral fluency—a person's ability to understand the language—aural fluency—is developed at a rather early

stage.¹ Young children can understand words much earlier than they can speak them. This aural fluency is on a continuum from the very basic ability to recognize the language that is being spoken to the ability to understand what is being said regardless of accent or complexity. This flexibility, this fluidity, is one of the reasons that makes the image of fluency an excellent term to use when setting out a vision for a church that hopes to become "more fluent in the first language of faith." For more than mere semantic reasons, the choice of the image of *fluency* rather than the more commonly used *literacy* is an important one. First, the flexibility indicated in the term fluency more accurately reflects the diversity of voices, accents, and regional flavors available to a church immersed in God's language. Second, both as an image and in reality, fluency is more accessible than literacy. While not all human beings are literate, virtually everyone is fluent in a language. Even people who are non-verbal are fluent in some form of communication. Emphasizing the difference between literacy and fluency in language acquisition, Professor Peter K. Austin writes:

Only about a third of the world's languages have a written form so there are many thousands of languages spoken across the world that you can only learn by speaking and hearing them. I have met (and worked with as a linguist) Aus-

1. Fluency is often understood as something that comes after literacy. When learning a second language, we often begin by becoming "literate" in that language—learning to read or write the language—and then later hope to become "fluent" in it (i.e. very good at it!). When learning a mother tongue or another language as a child, however, the process is somewhat reversed. We begin first by becoming fluent in the language and only later—with the guidance and support of an educational system—learning to read and write it.

tralian Aboriginal people who speak 5 or 6 languages (including English) with no difficulty and yet are not literate in any of them.²

Fluency, whether in a modern language or in the language of faith, is accessible to all, and is developed by hearing and speaking in community. Literacy, on the other hand, is an abstract process of coding and decoding established linguistic symbols, and is therefore more rigid, difficult to acquire, and less egalitarian.

Third, fluency as an image is better suited than literacy to incorporate the shift in our society, driven by developments in electronic media, from a predominantly literate to a more aural/oral culture.³ Finally, the dynamic nature of fluency helps better capture the process by which we develop the ability to recognize God's voice in our daily lives. A number of years ago the WWJD? bracelets (What Would Jesus Do?) popularized a particular way of discerning God's will in our lives. In simple terms, the idea behind WWJD? is that we can go to the biblical text with the specific circumstances of a situation we are facing and find a similar situation

Jesus may have encountered. Discernment comes as we imitate Jesus' response to that particular, equivalent situation. While this approach to Scripture has its merits, it often fails to account for the complexity of life's situations as well as for the broad diversity of ways in which God is revealed in the biblical text. As an alternative, by becoming familiar with a broad spectrum of biblical texts and stories—by immersing ourselves in God-speech—we can become more attuned to God's voice and be better able to discern God's will in specific situations. Samuel's trouble in identifying God's voice in the middle of the night stemmed from the fact that he did not yet know the Lord (1 Sam 3:7). Alerted by Eli to who was speaking, Samuel over time came to know the Lord. The narrative nature of much of the biblical text clearly indicates that the way to recognize and enter into conversation with the Lord—to become fluent in God-speech—is through the stories that tell us who God is and how God has acted in the past. It is through this familiarity that we can begin to glimpse how God might act in the future. Rather than trying to guess at what Jesus would do based on a particular instance in the biblical text, we are invited to immerse ourselves in the flow of God's word so that we are able to recognize God's voice as it comes to us today.

Why fluency? The healthy dissonance of an alternative vision

As a pastor I often hear apologetic remarks from congregational members who lament their lack of familiarity with the biblical text. At the same time, both children and adults in the congregation have an incredible ability to remember the plots of movies and other pop-culture stories they hear, see, or experience. They are fluent in the language of the culture because Holly-

2. "Language Documentation and Description," Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.hrelp.org/>

3. Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). Sample writes: "Nearly all experts in communication agree that the world has experienced three communication eras. The first era was an era of oral communication; the second began with writing and continued with print; the third is the era of electronic communication which is now coming to birth. The unique reality of our generation is that we are living on the forefront of a shift from one communication era to another. We are living on the boundary between the print era and the electronic era" (14).

wood and the entertainment industry have managed to harness the power of story to communicate. Once in a children's sermon I explored this by recording short sections of various popular children's movies and then playing them for the children in worship. With audio clips that contained only a few words and some background music, they immediately recognized Toy Story's Buzz Lightyear from his phrase "to infinity and beyond!" They had no trouble identifying Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* from "we are not in Kansas anymore." Hearing brief excerpts from each movie was all it took to bring specific characters to the children's minds. Along with the images of the characters, the children were immediately able to recall plots as well—they were eager to share right in the middle of my sermon! Their quick recognition of movie characters greatly helped raise my awareness, as well as that of the congregation, about the impact that cultural stories—particularly those masterfully shared through movies—have on children. Further, it opened up the possibility of discussing as a community of faith how we as adults might be equally influenced by the stories we consume.

In his book *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World*, Tex Sample argues that stories carry meaning and help shape and inform people's everyday lives. Therefore, what is at stake when we talk about our congregations' biblical fluency is not just their knowledge of a specific Bible story along with chapter and verse. What matters is that the stories that manage to find their way into the minds and hearts of congregants have the power to shape their views of the world. Sample argues that as Christians, we need to develop a set of counter-images that can enable us to engage in a healthy critique of our culture.⁴

What the Smiths (in my first congregation) were searching for and what our congregations need is more familiarity with biblical stories. This is increased familiarity *not* for the sake of winning a game of Bible trivia. It is increased familiarity for the sake of providing the dissonance we need when we encounter life situations or events that go against God's intent for our lives and for the life of the world.

Let me be clear about the fact that this is *not* a conversation about salvation—as if those who know the most Bible stories have a better chance of getting into heaven. Rather, it is about how our familiarity with biblical stories can attune our minds and hearts to the influence of God's voice in our lives right here and right now.

Parents of small children know the power of narratives better than most. These parents must constantly respond to their kids' questions about whether an action is right or wrong or a character is good or bad. Kids also challenge their parents' responses (their categories of good and evil) forcing the parents to dig more deeply into what influences their own decision-making processes. Maybe these relentless questions are behind the reason why many thirty-something parents with small children (like the Smiths!) return to church. Absent that external push from small inquisitive minds to examine what influences us, we often make our day-to-day decisions automatically, paying little attention to the complex set of filters we apply. Developing biblical fluency is in part about being intentional about what narratives shape what we believe, for whether we are conscious of it or not, narratives shape the way we view the world.

That stories have a significant influence in our lives does not need to be cause for alarm. On the contrary, it is good news for those of us who share a faith that is based on the sharing of the most powerful

4. Sample, 99.

story — the good news of Jesus Christ. Walter Bruggemann, in his book *Finally Comes the Poet*, masterfully explores the impact of stories in shaping an alternative vision of the world. He proposes that the church today lives in the culture as an exile. No longer is the Christian church, along with individual members of our congregations, part of the establishment. The establishment does not promote and tell our stories. So, like the people of Israel, we find ourselves needing to reconnect with the stories that shape us. These stories are often at odds with the stories, the versions of reality, of the empire. The role of the prophets during Israel's exile, argues Bruggemann, was to provide an alternative vision of the world—a God-given vision. Similarly, I believe the role of the church is to offer alternative visions and stories that can influence those who sit in our pews.

Images and fluency development: There is Dick. There is Jane. See Spot run.

I am originally from Guatemala and my first language is Spanish. I learned English right before attending college at Texas Lutheran University. One of my English as a Second Language instructors told me repeatedly that if I wanted to become fluent in English, I needed to think in English. She meant I needed to stop thinking of what I wanted to say in Spanish before translating it into English as I spoke. To help me with the transition to thinking in English, she suggested a change in the way I was learning new vocabulary words. Rather than handing me a deck of vocabulary flash cards, she gave me a stack of children's books. She explained that children's books capitalize on the power of images to connect abstract words and concepts with concrete

No longer is the Christian church, along with individual members of our congregations, part of the establishment. The establishment does not promote and tell our stories...we find ourselves needing to reconnect with the stories that shape us.

graphics. This would allow me to associate any new words I learned, not with their Spanish translation, but with the actual object or idea that the word stood for in English—helping me to think in English.

As I reflect on my preaching throughout my ministry, I see some meaningful connections between this way of developing language fluency and the development of biblical fluency. Just as children's books support the development of language fluency through the use of vivid images, biblical stories—which are also heavily image based—can help us connect the abstract words and concepts of the biblical world with embodied word-images that make them come alive.

While changes in electronic media and communication have resulted in a shift toward a heavier reliance on image

and narrative, preaching (or at least my preaching early on in my ministry) remained grounded in a literate approach to communication. I graduated from seminary in the mid 1990s. The two courses in homiletics I took provided me with a fair ability to articulate the ideas I encountered through my exegesis of the text, complimented with a cautious dose of my own views. My homiletical training hinted at the changes going on in the world of communication at the time, reading about how some homileticsians were responding to changes in communication. However, when I landed in the parish, I resorted to what was familiar. Since I wrote many more papers than sermons during seminary, my early sermons sounded more like academic papers than creative attempts at telling God's story!

The books I read and journals I subscribed to for sermon preparation approached the task of preaching in a very similar way, what Richard Jensen calls "Preaching in a Literate Culture": linear development of ideas, structure of ideas in space, propositions as the main points, analytical in nature, left brain communication, metaphors of illustration, thinking in ideas.⁵ Even sermon resources distributed through modern media, like sermon discussion groups on the Internet or services televised on Sunday mornings, followed a similar pattern of sermons that effectively communicated to a literate society. The trouble is that we are no longer living in a primarily, and certainly not exclusively, literate society. Media in all its forms has transformed the way people engage one another; it has transformed the way we communicate. It has made our communication significantly more story- and image-based than it was just a century

ago, before the widespread introduction of electronic media which began with the transistor radio.

Regardless of what else one might conclude, there is no denying that technology has affected the way we communicate. A key part of that shift has been this increased reliance on image and narrative. This, of course, is nothing new. Modern media did not create story; rather, it has returned to us something that is central to who we are. Stories permeate human culture. Every time we introduce ourselves, we do so by sharing a story—a story about our work, about how we ended up in the town in which we now live, about a recent crisis or joy in our lives. Stories define people.

Similarly, biblical stories are central in defining our religious identity. Joshua 24, for example, exemplifies this defining role of story. Knowing the time of his death was coming, Joshua gathered all the people of Israel for his final farewell and admonition (Josh 24:1). His address is primarily in the form of storytelling—from the calling of Abraham through the people's entrance into the promised land. Speaking for God to a generation who had neither experienced slavery in Egypt nor witnessed firsthand the saving acts of God, Joshua addresses them in a rather peculiar fashion. In his speech, he alternates between the third person plural and the second person plural, effectively inviting the people to claim those past stories as their own:

When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, *you* came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between *you* and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them to cover them; and *your* eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards *you* lived in the wilderness a long time (Josh 24:6-7).

5. Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in A Post-literate Age* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1993), 43.

As Joshua prepares the people for a transition in leadership, he clearly believes in the importance of this new generation being defined by the stories of their past. They have just settled in a land of abundance, and it is critical that they be defined not by what they now possess, but by what God has done for them. The people's response to Joshua's address, spoken in the first person plural, indicates their acceptance of these stories' claims on their lives:

Then the people answered, "Far be it from *us* that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought *us* and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery and who did those great signs in *our* sight" (Josh 24:16-17a).

The importance of being defined by God's actions in our lives is just as critical today as it was in the time of transition that followed Joshua's leadership of his people. The biblical witness calls us to tell the stories time and again, from one generation to the next. As I noted earlier, seeing where God has acted can help us determine how God is acting in our world today and will continue to act in our future. Our proclamation must draw deeply on the whole of the biblical story, which means significantly expanding the repertoire of texts we include in our preaching. The Narrative Lectionary, for example, provides a broader set of texts for preaching. Similarly, a fuller use of the Revised Common Lectionary that draws from all the texts and not only from the Gospel pericope can give depth to the congregation's engagement of God's full story.

Through the Book of Faith Initiative, our church has committed to delving into God's story as it shapes and influences our lives. In this article, I have focused primarily on the role narrative sermons can play in growing a congregation's biblical fluency. But there are many ways to

engage the Book of Faith's Initiative that go well beyond sermons. It includes an invitation to Bible study that places the Bible in the hands of all of our congregation's members—not only the young. It is an invitation to explore the biblical context of our liturgy and hymns, to celebrate the biblical story as it is enacted at the traditional Christmas pageant as well as in considering a similar exploration of the biblical story at other times in the church calendar—like Lent and Holy Week. It is an invitation to learn from others, like the Jewish community, where biblical fluency is also developed by the liturgical reading of fuller texts of Scripture connected with various festival celebrations. For example, the entire congregation gets involved in a reading of the book of Esther on the celebration of Purim, and the entire book of Jonah is read out loud as part of the liturgy for the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur.

Biblical stories hold the powerful promise of aiding us in our efforts to identify God's word for our lives. The success of movies in shaping our understanding of the world speak loudly of the power of story to shape not only our way of thinking, but even our identity. As Tex Sample argues, "...it is through the story of our lives that we come to understand ourselves."⁶

6. Sample, 89. Conversely, Anderson-Folley warns: "It is nonetheless true that in preaching and in praying, between the opening hymn and the final benediction, the weekend church often demonstrates itself as inadequate and sometimes wholly incapable of honoring and integrating the stories of the faithful who week after week fill the pews. In this sense, much weekend worship might be characterized as ritual without story." Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 152.

From Resolution to Reality: A Synod's Engagement with the Book of Faith Initiative

Gregory P. Kaufmann

Assistant to the Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin

It was early morning, May 30, 2008. People were streaming into the auditorium where the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin was holding its annual Synod Assembly. The excitement was palpable. Dr. Diane Jacobson was with us, and we knew we were going to vote on becoming a Book of Faith Synod. Throughout the two days of that assembly, we attended to the normal business of such assemblies: electing leaders, passing resolutions, and attending workshops. However, it was Dr. Jacobson's keynotes and Bible study that pulled people away from the coffee dispensers in the hallways and into the auditorium. For the record, here is a summary of Dr. Jacobson's presentations, Bible study and workshop:

Welcome to the Book of Faith Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities

An exploration of why the ELCA is embarking on this initiative and how individuals, congregations, and other institutions can join and build the initiative together.

How Lutherans Read the Bible

A glimpse into some of the central insights and convictions that Lutherans bring to our engagement with the Bible.

Reading Together: An Interactive Study of Acts 16:11–15

Workshop: Opening and Studying the Bible Together: Four Helpful Methods

This workshop will be a hands-on Bible study of Exodus 3:1–15. We will explore the four methods commended in *Opening the Book of Faith* (available to assembly participants for free at Augsburg Fortress) with special emphasis on the particular questions that Lutherans ask as we read the Bible together.

The remainder of this article documents the varied ways the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin has lived out the ideas and challenges Dr. Jacobson and then Bishop Pederson gave us. As is no doubt the case in other synods, implementing the Book of Faith Initiative remains a work in progress, and the renewal of the Book of Faith Initiative at our 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly reminds us that we are not alone. Together, the ELCA is finding intersections between the biblical story and our own stories in order to make a difference in the world.

At that 2008 Synod Assembly, Bishop Duane Pederson and Dr. Diane Jacobson signed a document proclaiming our synod to be a Book of Faith Synod. Later that summer, Bishop Pederson pulled his staff together and challenged us to use our annual gatherings of rostered leaders and future synod assemblies to live into our

commitment to be a Book of Faith Synod. He asked me to be our Book of Faith Synod Advocate, and to use the resources of our synod to help make our status as a Book of Faith Synod more than just a signed document on a synod office wall.

So, that is exactly what we did.

Synod-wide strategies for engaging the Book of Faith Initiative

As we planned our annual Winter Theological Event for rostered leaders, we were intentional about inviting learned presenters who could connect the rich biblical story with our faith and lives of service in God's world. The following list demonstrates the results of those efforts to model for our rostered leaders and congregations what a Book of Faith Synod looks like. From 2008 to 2013, the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin welcomed the following teachers of the church to our winter theological conference: David Balch, Barbara Rossing, Mark Allan Powell, David Lose, Ralph Klein, and Craig Nesson.

Video is also a powerful tool to draw people into a conversation about any topic. The explosion of the popularity of YouTube and other video hosting websites certainly demonstrates this. We chose to create a series of videos to help our synod's congregations share how they were living into the Book of Faith Initiative. We invited videographer Tim Frakes from the ELCA Mosaic Project to spend a week in our synod, traveling from congregation to congregation with his camera and gear, filming what he thought were interesting examples of how the Book of Faith Initiative was taking root in our synod. The goal was to show them at the next synod assembly, which we did, and to make these videos available to the entire ELCA through the Book of Faith website. I was privileged to travel with Tim and was amazed at how

excited people were to tell their story and share what they were doing with the synod and the whole ELCA. When we did show them at the next synod assembly, the buzz of conversation they generated exceeded our expectations. They are all available to you and your congregation on the Book of Faith website.¹

Both the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin and the East Central Synod of Wisconsin have Synod Resource Centers. The directors of the two centers, Darlene Kalfahs, and I, are both Book of Faith Synod Advocates. We met and decided to join forces to encourage and equip congregations to begin to live into the Book of Faith Initiative. We chose to offer joint learning events, which would provide tools and motivation to do just that. I will share two examples.

In 2009 we hosted a learning event titled: "Teaching the Bible: Joining the Conversation." With the support of the synod bishops, James Justman and Duane Pederson, the one-day event provided opportunities to explore biblical insights, to attend workshops led by congregational practitioners and Augsburg Fortress staff, and to discover how to bring the Bible to life in participants' homes and congregations.

In 2010, our two synods held a joint assembly and invited Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson to join us. He did. More importantly Darlene Kalfahs and I hosted a pre-assembly Book of Faith gathering for both synods. We invited Dr. Diane Jacobson to lead us in a study of the book of Ruth. We hoped to provide an opportunity for participants to actually experience how

1. These videos can be found by googling "YouTube" and "ELCA Book of Faith Synod," or by entering: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2x-omfz3DA816LgXeiNyKQ>.

the four methods² of engaging Scripture worked. In addition to benefiting from Dr. Jacobson's study of Ruth, the participants (over 400!) heard how congregations in each of our two synods were living into the Book of Faith Initiative.

Lay School for Ministry

One of the primary resources for promoting the Book of Faith Initiative in our synod has been the Lay School of Ministry of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin,³ a ministry that has been thriving in the synod for the last 21 years—an organic ministry that has been serving the Book of Faith long before there was a formal initiative.

In cooperation with the Revs. Richard Bruesehoff, Don Wisner, and James Homme, we began to imagine a synod-wide learning opportunity that would take participants on a journey through the biblical and confessional stories toward a renewed sense of baptismal calling in service of God in the world. While we initially did not give any thought to what graduates of this two-year program might do next, it did not take long before we had to envision a next step in the learning journey. Once people tasted the incredible richness of the biblical story, they wanted to go deeper and explore more broadly. They wanted to do this as part of the synod-wide learning experience we call the Lay School of Ministry.

As the years went by, lay school participants engaged a variety of topics from "Our Neighbor's Faith" to "Christian Education." Once the Book of Faith

Initiative was passed in 2008, the board of directors of the Lay School of Ministry decided that the continuing education opportunities would focus largely on helping the participants connect the biblical story with their own stories. The list of topics since the 2006-7 academic year highlight the commitment of the lay school to be one of the vehicles our synod used to live into the Book of Faith Initiative. They include:

- 2006-7 Paul and the First Century World
- 2007-8 From Exodus to Jesus: A Look at the History, Literature and People
- 2008-9 The Gospels: Canonical and Noncanonical
- 2009-10 The Old Testament Prophets
- 2010-11 An Overview of the History of the Church
- 2011-12 Lutheran Answers to Real Questions
- 2012-13 The Book of Faith Meets the Missional Church
- 2013-14 Imagine Together: Practice Discipleship 2 on Steroids
- 2014-15 The Torah

Has this Book of Faith focus had the desired effect within the goals and ministry of the synod's lay school? Has the study of our biblical story coupled with other topics helped participants go deeper and wider into the biblical material and find confidence to live out their faith in their daily lives? These were the questions that instructor Rozella White, ELCA church-wide staff for Young Adult Ministry, asked participants during the October 2013 meeting of the lay school. A sampling of what she heard:

2. The four-fold method of reading Scripture suggested by the ELCA Book of Faith Initiative includes: (1) devotional reading, (2) historical reading, (3) literary reading, and (4) Lutheran theological reading. For more information: <http://www.bookoffaith.org/biblemethods.html>.

3. www.layschoolofministry.org

- “a phenomenal change in my life”
- “I’m from a small congregation and I’ve attended because it helps me figure out what we can do to make a difference.”
- “I thought about becoming a pastor, but went to lay school first and learned that I can do ministry as a doctor.”

I was very pleased when our Lay School of Ministry board had the vision to share some of what they are doing to live into the Book of Faith Initiative with the whole church. I’ll share several examples, which include resources that can be accessed and shared across the church.

First, Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones has contributed by teaching on the Gospel of Mark. He was one of the nine faculty members who taught at our Lay School of Ministry in 2008-9 on the topic of the Gospels. Building on the work of Dr. David Rhoads on the orality of Scripture, Dr. Ruge-Jones has memorized the entire Gospel of Mark. He gave the board permission to invite Select Learning’s film crew to record his presentation of the Gospel of Mark, which they were happy to do. It is now available for use in congregations and synods as a means of connecting the power of the biblical *story* to life’s journey.⁴

Second, in conjunction with a 2012-13 Lay School of Ministry course titled, “The Book of Faith Meets the Missional Church,” Graeme Fehr recorded a series of seven podcasts that explore how the church can be missional and do so out of a deep understanding of our biblical heritage. The board of the Lay School of Ministry has been very pleased to share these beyond the bounds of the Northwest

Synod of Wisconsin.⁵ That is what the Book of Faith Initiative has encouraged all synods to do!

Third, in 2009, Diane Kaufmann, the companion synod coordinator for the Northwest Wisconsin Synod, approached our Lay School of Ministry board and invited them to partner with the Training Department of our companion church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi. The director of the program in Malawi, the Rev. Feston Phiri, wanted each of the pastors in Malawi to have a copy of the Lutheran Study Bible. The board agreed and invited the members of the three lay school classes in session that year to help purchase sixty copies of the Lutheran Study Bible. In just a month, all sixty were paid for. Each Bible was signed by a member of one of the classes with that person sharing their favorite Bible story/passage. The Bibles were flown to Malawi and distributed with much joy and celebration by our bishop and our companion synod coordinator. A video, “Bible Hands,” was made of the entire process and was chosen as one of the top ten finalists in the 2009 ELCA video contest, “God’s work. Our hands.”⁶

A Book of Faith Synod Advocate reaches out

The Northwest Synod of Wisconsin is part of the Wisconsin Council of Churches for whom we have hosted a number of events over the past years. Since Bishop Pederson had challenged us to use all the resources at our disposal to live into our claim to be a Book of Faith Synod, I approached the Rev. Scott Anderson, the director of the

4. You can learn more about this excellent Book of Faith resource at: <http://www.selectlearning.org/category/New%20Testament>.

5. These podcasts can be accessed at: <http://www.selectlearning.org/catalog/lsm-podcasts-2012-2013?page=1>.

6. The video can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oJX2atiWzw>.

Wisconsin Council of Churches, about offering a Book of Faith event. He thought it was a great idea, and encouraged me to plan and host one in our synod. That was all the encouragement we needed. We invited Dr. David Tiede to spend a day with our synod lay and rostered leaders, and our ecumenical partners. On February 23, 2010, Dr. Tiede engaged the packed house on the topic, "Acts as a Missional Document." As one might expect, after a day studying Acts with Dr. Tiede, the participants wanted to learn more about the missional trajectory of Luke/Acts, which

While I appreciated having access to all of these excellent resources as a Book of Faith Synod Advocate, I knew that they needed to get out to the people in the congregations.

many did by continuing with Dr. Tiede's Select Learning DVD course, "Learning Luke: The Apostolic Gospel."⁷

As the Book of Faith Synod Advocate and our Synod Resource Center director, one of my roles has been to help congregations

access the best Lutheran resources available. I realized as I visited congregation after congregation on Sunday mornings, that congregational leaders were simply unaware of the many excellent Book of Faith resources available to them through Augsburg Fortress.⁸ While I appreciated having access to all of these excellent resources as a Book of Faith Synod Advocate, I knew that they needed to get out to the people in the congregations. Over time, I collected additional copies of these useful resources, loaded all of them up in two large rolling tubs, and displayed them in the congregations that I visited throughout the synod. This afforded opportunities for congregational members to actually get their hands on the resources they needed. They could ask me questions about the resources, and they could even "borrow" them for a short period of time to become more familiar with them before actually purchasing them for their own congregation's use. One of the most helpful resources for our synod has been Dr. Mark Allan Powell's DVD, "How Lutherans Interpret the Bible."⁹

Book of Faith Jubilees

The 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. While the vote on the human sexuality social statement was garnering all the pre-assembly press in late 2008, Dr. Diane Jacobson invited a small group of people to plan a pre-assembly Book of Faith event, which came to be known as the Book of Faith Jubilee. Our synod was invited to join several others, along with

8. To access the Book of Faith resources developed by Augsburg Fortress: <http://store.augsburgfortress.org/store/productfamily/130/Book-of-Faith?c=285662>.

9. See <http://www.selectlearning.org/store/all/how-lutherans-interpret-bible>.

7. For more about this Select Learning resource, see: <http://www.selectlearning.org/store/all/learning-luke-apostolic-gospel>.

Augsburg College, Augsburg Fortress and Luther Seminary, in planning what would become the first of two Book of Faith Jubilees hosted by Luther Seminary. My bishop encouraged me to be part of the planning group, since he believed that our synod would greatly benefit from the presentations and workshops that were being planned. We met monthly for almost a year, and it was worth all the effort. Gathered under the theme, "Equipping Everyday People to Read the Bible," the first Jubilee featured presentations by Eugene Pederson, David Anderson, Rolf Jacobson and Deanna Thompson, along with a host of workshops.

The second Book of Faith Jubilee, held at Luther Seminary in 2011, was hosted by the same planning group. Working with the theme, "Inspiring Everyday People to Engage the Bible," this gathering featured presentations by Nadia Bolz-Weber, Craig Koester, Jessica Duckworth and John Roberto, in addition to workshops and opportunities to Dwell in the Word. The planning team chose to focus all of the worship opportunities and the Dwelling in the Word presentations on Isaiah 55. In light of participation in other gatherings across the ELCA, many on the planning team experienced the value of spending significant time with one biblical text. It proved such a powerful experience for all of us who participated at the second Book of Faith Jubilee that it has impacted how we do things in our own synods to this day.

"The Road to Shalom"

An outgrowth for our synod of our participation in the planning of the first two Book of Faith Jubilees, was an invitation to join Dr. Jacobson and others in planning and leading a Bible experience for the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans. Dr. Jacobson had written an article about shalom, and this served as the basis for a

45-minute biblical experience for youth attending the Gathering. Titled, "Road to Shalom," it combined Dr. Jacobson's biblical work and Darlene Kalfahs' creative genius. The resulting hands- and feet-on experience ran non-stop for all three days that the convention hall was open. Bishops were invited to journey alongside of the youth who chose to journey on the Road to Shalom. Many did. Often those who participated indicated it was one of the most powerful experiences of the Gathering for them.

The entire Road to Shalom experience, including the script and the list of materials needed to set up the journey in your congregation, is available on the Book of Faith website.¹⁰ A number of congregations in our synod have hosted a Road to Shalom evening for youth and adults. In order to encourage others to do the same, our youth workers network has put together a kit of all the supplies needed to set up the Road to Shalom, which congregations can borrow for their own use. Your synod could do the same thing!

This is just one creative way to help congregations, and in particular the youth and young adults in our congregations experience the powerful impact of Dwelling in the Word. There are very few young people who do not want to change the world for the better. Very few are not interested in some version of a just peace on earth. This Book of Faith resource opens up a biblical perspective on how that might be accomplished. I encourage you to use it!

The above examples are but some of the ways our synod has intentionally lived into the Book of Faith Initiative shared from the perspective of a Book of Faith Synod Advocate. It remains a work in progress.

10. See: <http://www.bookoffaith.org/dwelling.html>.

Our Book of Faith: God's Invitation to God's Mission in the World

Michelle Angalet

Assistant to the Bishop, ELCA Southeastern Synod

The ELCA Book of Faith Initiative invited individuals and congregations to engage in Scripture for the sake of world. As a grassroots initiative, rather than provide a framework or model for what this would look like, congregations were invited to use their imaginations to think about what would work in their contexts. Congregational experimentation and leaders who are willing to equip and encourage members to lead Bible conversations and engage in Scripture for themselves create valuable opportunities for learning, for faith formation, and for calling the church into God's mission in the world.

I remember the first time I heard about the ELCA Book of Faith Initiative. I was a voting member of the Southeastern Synod Assembly in 2008. I had been commissioned as an Associate in Ministry in the ELCA just a few years before. Though I grew up in the Lutheran church, Scripture was not something I knew well or even felt particularly comfortable spending time in as I began my seminary education. I knew I was supposed to be inspired and influenced in my faith journey by the Bible, but it wasn't accessible to me. As I dug around in Christian book stores and looked for Bible studies in congregations to guide me, what I read and what I heard presented as gospel just did not seem to me to be good news, or honest, faithful reflection of the God in whom I believed. Despite my biblical illiteracy,

my Lutheran understanding of faith and grace provided me with just enough of a filter to suspect that what I often heard presented as gospel in Christ's church was not all there was to Scripture. I was hungry for something more.

It was an Old Testament survey course taught by Dr. William Brown and Dr. Christine Yoder at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, that opened my eyes and ears to a new way of seeing and hearing Scripture. Their passion for making the text come alive was infectious. I left that class knowing that part of what I wanted to do as a called leader in the ELCA was to help make Scripture accessible to people who were hungry for a word that spoke the good news of a loving God who came into the world in the person of Jesus, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

So when I heard about the Book of Faith Initiative, I called our Synod's Book of Faith Advocate and said, "Sign me up!" I wanted to be part of the ELCA's grassroots effort to encourage people to open Scripture and see what the Holy Spirit has been doing, and continues to do, in the world. In time, I became one of the Southeastern Synod's Book of Faith Advocates. In a synod that covers four states (Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi), our advocacy efforts were primarily directed at connecting rostered and lay leaders in congregations with resources they could use for Bible study and faith formation

and encouraging congregations to make intentional engagement with Scripture a priority. At synod assemblies and leadership gatherings we offered workshops on what the Book of Faith was (and was not) and on what resources were available to congregations. The hunger for hearing and for understanding Scripture was evident. Pastors, Bible study leaders, faith formation and Christian education leaders were appreciative of new Book of Faith resources. The four-fold approach to Scripture (devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological) that shaped these studies provided a new and different way for many in the pews to experience and engage the Bible. While we occasionally heard from leaders who were looking more for a particular curriculum or programmatic way to “do” the Book of Faith Initiative, more often we heard people say that they were glad the ELCA was intentionally encouraging, challenging, and equipping people to engage with Scripture, the first language of faith.

Then in 2011, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Woodstock, Georgia, the congregation in which I served as Associate in Ministry, was chosen as one of eleven congregations (eight ELCA, one Episcopalian, one UCC, and one ELCA/LCMC) to participate in Luther Seminary’s Vibrant Congregations/Biblical Fluency Project.¹ The seminary had received a grant from the Lilly Foundation to study how vibrant congregations engaged in particular practices which nurtured congregational health. The six focus areas that the project explored were stewardship, preaching, vocation, missional leadership, children, youth and family, and biblical fluency.

As part of the project, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and the other ten congregations entered into an eighteen-

month project around biblical fluency. The process included an initial assessment tool to document member attitudes toward and experience with Scripture, an experiment designed to impact biblical fluency, and then a post-experiment assessment tool to measure the intended impact. This project provided the framework and opportunity for creative exploration with Scripture in all eleven congregations and for sharing what we learned and experienced within the learning group. Luther faculty working with the Biblical Fluency Project included Dr. Rolf Jacobson, Dr. Craig Koester, and Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker.

What follows are my own observations about our congregation’s experience with the project as well as a few comments on some of the discoveries that we made as a learning community about intentional congregational engagement with Scripture.

As we engaged the people at Good Shepherd with an experiment designed to increase biblical fluency, one of the first realities was discomfort with the word “fluency.” People were quick to point out that they were interested in learning Scripture, but the word “fluency” intimidated them. They associated fluency with expertise and doubted their ability to achieve this level of mastery. “Improved literacy” may have been a better way to describe our intended outcome. In the end we tried to avoid the word fluency over the course of our experiment. Our project team, made up of five lay members and two rostered leaders, believed that our project would be deemed successful if people expressed the following outcomes: 1) a better understanding of the big story that Scripture tells; 2) a better understanding (and less fear) of the Old Testament; and 3) a better sense of what the Bible says to them about how we live our daily lives. These goals were derived from the results of the initial assessment surveys. While fluency can still be an

1. <https://www.luthersem.edu/vcp/default.aspx?m=3734>

individual or congregational goal in such learning initiatives, success is also realized when incremental changes are made and when people become more comfortable simply being in Scripture.

Another reality that most congregations acknowledged early in the Biblical Fluency Project, and affirmed by initial survey responses, is that the best opportunity to impact biblical fluency/literacy is in worship. Worship attendance two or three times a month is the primary way that most congregation members participate in the life of the congregation. Bible study groups and small groups existed at these congregations and most still had Sunday school ministries, but the potential for the largest impact was to be found in focusing on the time when most people would be exposed to Scripture. That led to our decision at Good Shepherd to experiment by stepping away from the Revised Common Lectionary for ten months and moving into a Narrative Lectionary.

The Narrative Lectionary,² developed by Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester, helps hearers understand the wide sweep of the biblical narrative by beginning in Genesis and working its way through Acts by Pentecost. At Good Shepherd, we called our initiative "God's Story. Our Story." In addition to the sermon, weekly worship preparation notes were provided for adults and the Sunday school curriculum for elementary, middle and high school learners was also adapted to mirror or complement the Narrative Lectionary in hopes of encouraging family conversation during the week. Our pastor-artist drew a coloring sheet each week to go along with the text. It was given to children during the children's message in worship. Every week a child was assigned coloring responsibility and a collection of these colored

sheets hang in the sanctuary to this day as a reminder of "God's Story. Our Story." Two Bible study groups used the weekly worship preparation notes, along with the weekly texts, as their source material. In addition, David Lose's *Making Sense of Scripture*³ was used as the text for an additional Bible conversation opportunity. Though we recognized that weekly worship was going to be the primary way that people experienced Scripture during the period of experimentation, we tried to make the focus on learning the biblical narrative as much a part of our community life as possible.

A few other congregations in the project used the Narrative Lectionary (or some version of it) and many used "The Essential 100 Bible Reading Plan" or E100⁴ as their lectionary over a period of time. E100 is a collection of fifty short Bible passages from the Old Testament and fifty from the New Testament selected for their ability to depict the grand story of Scripture and encourage regular Bible reading.

The success of our experiment at Good Shepherd was realized throughout the project. We repeatedly heard anecdotal stories over the ten months of "God's Story. Our Story." about how people heard of God's grace and forgiveness in the Old Testament for the first time. We heard people say that for the first time they had an appreciation for how the books of the Bible are connected in a narrative sequence and that they tell a story of God's relationship with humanity. We heard people say that they had a new appreciation for the humanity of people in the Bible and for how they could see themselves in these stories rather than understanding biblical figures as people who have nothing in com-

2. http://www.workingpreacher.org/?lect_date=01/19/2014&lectionary=nl

3. David Lose, *Making Sense of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

4. <http://e100challenge.com/>

mon with us today. One member who was interviewed by the project faculty during a site visit to Good Shepherd reported:

What helps me the most is how they relate the biblical story to my life today. It's not just back then. It's a living story. When I come to church on Sunday, I want to hear something [that] helps me get through the coming week. I get that here.

As we suspected, those who were most invested in the process and engaged in weekly worship preparation and other opportunities for Bible conversation were the ones who described significant transformation in their view of Scripture and their faith. Even those who participated by virtue of being in worship two or three Sundays a month reported that they had a better sense of the biblical narrative and that they had an improved appreciation for the Old Testament as a result of spending four months working through it.

As a learning community of congregations and seminary faculty engaged in this project, our discoveries were revealing. I believe these discoveries have implications for how congregations can live into the Book of Faith Initiative in the future. We discovered the importance of being willing to take risks and experiment with biblical engagement for the sake of learning Scripture and ultimately for the sake of the church and the world. People's commitment to church and to life as part of a faith community is changing rapidly. There is a hunger to hear and to learn how to read Scripture, especially in those who are coming into our faith communities. While our numbers are declining, many continue to look to the church in hope of hearing and experiencing good news. Christ's church would benefit from a corresponding sense of urgency in our willingness to try new ap-

proaches to making Scripture accessible.

We learned that in congregations that demonstrate biblical fluency (or biblical engagement or literacy), there is a leader, often a pastor, who champions biblical engagement and curiosity. We learned that those same champions as the resident Bible "expert" often minimize

While our numbers are declining, many continue to look to the church in hope of hearing and experiencing good news. Christ's church would benefit from a corresponding sense of urgency in our willingness to try new approaches to making Scripture accessible.

their need to lead all of the Bible studies and opportunities for Bible conversation but rather encourage and equip congregational members to have their own Bible conversations and become leaders themselves. This can be especially difficult

in settings where members look to their leaders and ask, "What does this mean?" Encouraging members to explore and ask questions for themselves and together with others in the faith community can be transformational in how people experience the Book of Faith. Methods such as *Lectio Divina* and Dwelling in the Word lend themselves well to engaging Scripture without an expert leader.

As a learning community we recognized that what worked in one congregation would not necessarily work in another. As we look back on the first five years of the Book of Faith Initiative and forward to its future in the life of the ELCA, this fact encourages us to continue to look to the Initiative as a grassroots endeavor. It is grassroots in the sense that real learning and transformational living will only take place when congregations and people who are part of those faith communities commit to engaging Scripture with one another in their own contexts. The Book of Faith resources published by Augsburg Fortress are excellent tools for both rostered and lay leaders to open a conversation about Scripture. They were designed for people who are not biblical experts to facilitate conversations around Scripture. But Book of Faith resources are not the Book of Faith Initiative. The "initiative" part comes from within faith communities. It is an intentional engagement with Scripture in a way that works to open people's eyes to God's movement in the world since the beginning of time and into today.

As a mainline church, more and more ELCA congregations are wrestling with questions: Who are we? What role

do I—does our congregation—play in our community, in nurturing faith formation and faithful living in our community of faith? We are grappling with questions of how to be church in a day and time when being church is changing at an increasingly rapid pace. Scripture has much to say to us about how God has always worked through people, including people who are often outsiders, in order to bring the fullness of the kingdom of God into the world. It has much to say to us about how God has worked through people in difficult and anxious times. It has much to say to us about God's faithfulness, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and in his death and resurrection, even in spite of our unfaithfulness. It has much to say about hope and love and reconciliation and forgiveness. Jesus invites us to see ourselves in the story of God's love for us and for the world. He invites us to see how God's mission is playing out all around us to this day. He invites us to join in that mission to bring hope and healing one day at a time. The Bible, the Book of Faith, is filled with stories that help us imagine how we can be part of bringing the kingdom of God here on earth.

As we think about what it means for our congregations to be centers for God's mission, Scripture offers us a welcome and a holy place to begin. My hope is that we in the ELCA will look to the Bible and to the Book of Faith Initiative to inform, inspire, and propel us into the mission that God is already doing in the world. It is a living, breathing story. And it is our story.

Story Matters: One Congregation's Perspective

Bob Lewis

Former pastor, Nativity Lutheran Church; Current pastor, Faith Lutheran Church and School

Introduction: Finding our story

Nativity Lutheran Church is by Pacific Northwest standards an average-sized congregation in the Northwest Washington Synod of the ELCA located in the suburban bedroom community of Fairwood, about twenty-five miles southeast of Seattle. After a decade of decline, the congregation nearly closed in 2000. As the result of a dynamic interim pastorate, however, the congregation turned toward a new vision for ministry and mission in the community. By the spring of 2012, Nativity was in its ninth year of growth in attendance, membership, stewardship and serving in the community.

That was when Nativity received the invitation to serve as a pilot congregation with the Story Matters project.¹

Nativity was one of four congregations in the synod invited to take part in the project. The pilot emerged because four pastors, all part of a monthly "huddle" gathering for mission and ministry support and encouragement, held a series of conference calls with the Rev. Brenda Smith, ELCA Program Director for Faith Practices and Missional Leadership, who was directing the Story Matters initiative

for the ELCA. Three of the four congregations planned a joint council retreat to begin the pilot.

I was serving as pastor of Nativity at this time, and I presented the basic outline of Story Matters to several of our key leaders. The main points included:

- Discover and Name Our Biblical Story: What biblical story best captures our own stories of who we are and who God is calling us to be?
- Explore and Live into Our Biblical Story: How might our biblical story gather us together and help to form us as a community of disciples?
- Live Out of Our Biblical Story: How is God calling us through our biblical story into mission in God's world?

Nativity's leaders were interested in participating, primarily because they were interested in how the congregation's finding its story in Scripture could inform taking the message of Christ out into our community.

As background work for the retreat, each council member was invited to pray, meditate, converse, and journal on the question: "What is your Scripture-story for your faith-life?" Though a sample list of Scripture-stories was provided by the leaders of the initiative, I chose not to send them out, curious to see where God's Spirit might lead and guide.

1. For additional information on the ELCA Story Matters Project: www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-Practices.

On the day of the joint council retreat, Nativity council participants shared their own Scripture-stories with each other. This was an enlightening time for all of us. The stories ranged from the Raising of Lazarus, to the 23rd Psalm, to Proverbs 22's "bring up a child." By engaging with Scripture and with one another in this way, we found out some things about each other that we hadn't known before!

Next we discussed where our individual stories intersected with what we thought Nativity's shared story might be. We prayerfully discerned and discussed what the common or shared threads were between our individual stories. We found these in particular:

- Each story was authentic and not pretentious;
- Each story showed God's continual care and generosity to us.

We also determined that celebration and hospitality were central to our perceptions of Nativity's story.

Finally, after much discussion, we chose John 2:1-11, the wedding at Cana, as Nativity's story. The story "fit" us well. We also came up with a descriptive phrase which summed up this story for Nativity:

- Nativity has been through times when there was no wine. Now there is much wine...much to celebrate...Jesus has turned our water into wine...so now it is time to share it with our community.

We also formulated a motivational question:

- What is the wine Jesus has blessed you/ us with, to share into this community?

Sharing our story within the congregation

Following the council retreat, we felt it important to "roll out" Story Matters to

the whole congregation through a letter. That letter included the process the congregation council had used to choose our story, and how we were going to implement steps two and three of the initiative: Explore and Live into Our Biblical Story *and* Live Out of our Biblical Story.

Soon after the letter came out, Nativity's congregation council, mission teams, and sub-teams at each of their meetings or gatherings began to use our story text together with a devotional tool called "Dwelling in the Word." The tool, provided to us at the joint council retreat, allowed for spending both quiet devotional time and discussion time with the story text. The tool invited participants to share where God was meeting them: in this text, at this time, with each other. We also began to compile our answers from each gathering in a way that helped us measure and keep track of where God was leading and guiding us through this text and our encounters with it.

The other way we rolled Story Matters out to the entire congregation was through worship. The four Sundays of June were Story Matters Sundays.

- First Sunday: On June 2, the sermon texts were not the usual lectionary texts, but instead focused on the centrality of story to our faith. Deuteronomy 26, 2 Timothy 4, and Matthew 28 helped inform the sermon and liturgy for the day.
- Second Sunday: On June 9, the Old Testament and New Testament readings were the same as the previous Sunday, but the Gospel text was our Story Matters Scripture: the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). The preached message was a review of the previous week's introduction to the centrality of story to our faith; then, the congregation was turned loose on the John text using a modified "Dwelling in the Word" tool. There was plenty of time to discuss the

text in pairs and small groups, and then some sharing time for the whole congregation to hear how the Story Matters text spoke to them in their own lives.

- Third Sunday: June 16 was Youth Sunday. Once again, we used the same texts as on June 2, with the youth of the congregation sharing how the story matters for them in their lives.
- Final Sunday: June 23 was the congregation's annual meeting Sunday. Worship returned to the lectionary texts that day, but I focused in the message on the year just past at Nativity. The descriptive phrase for our Story Matters text was a guide and lens through which the congregation could see that year of ministry and mission.

Sharing our story: Inside and outside of the congregation

At this point, Nativity moved solidly into implementing steps two and three of the Story Matters initiative. This happened in the following ways:

Congregational budget: Living into the congregation's biblical story was central to how Nativity formed their budget for the next fiscal year. The way the council specifically determined the congregation would share their wine with the community in the coming year (a proposal unanimously adopted by the congregation at its annual meeting!) was to double benevolence giving to the ELCA through the Northwest Washington Synod, as well as an overall double-digit increase in Nativity's total budget. In addition to increased benevolence, the congregation voted to increase the budget in two additional areas: overall youth ministry support and staff compensation (getting closer to synod and community guidelines).

Youth and education ministries: Story Matters informed Nativity's summer Bible school planning process for the year. The congregation always developed its own curriculum. This year's focus was: "Christmas in July." The difference this year was that a specific service component was added—"sharing our wine" with the world through

Nativity has
been through
times when there was
no wine. Now there is
much wine...much to
celebrate...Jesus has
turned our water into
wine...so now it is
time to share it with
our community.

Operation Christmas Child. This involved the entire congregation not just those who participated in summer Bible school.

Like many congregations, Nativity struggled with having a critical mass large enough for Sunday morning Christian education for children and youth. However, Story Matters helped lead the Youth and Kids' Church leaders to design a mission-minded program for the year.

Nativity hired a nursery attendant and an assistant nursery attendant, even though current numbers hardly warranted

this. They implemented a model for Kids' Church that could be easily and readily expanded as numbers were expected to increase during the year, which they did! Nativity also teamed-up with three other area ELCA congregations for confirmation ministry and youth ministry, so that the combined numbers in these areas reached the critical mass necessary to provide quality, varied, and ambitious ministry opportunities for the youth of these four congregations. A full-color brochure was created, "Nativity is a Place for Kids," which highlights all these ministries, and which was distributed throughout the community.

Service and small group ministries: Story Matters "sharing our wine" showed up in a couple of other new places for Nativity. A day shelter for homeless women and children, called "The Center of Hope," opened in the nearby city of Renton. Several key leaders at Nativity made sure that the financial and staffing needs were consistently brought before the congregation, so Nativity people could help support this new shelter ministry through offerings of financial support and time spent in service as shelter workers.

Two small groups also formed at Nativity: one specifically focusing on prayer for individuals and needs within the con-

gregation and community, and the other using a small-group Bible study model for learning and fellowship. Both groups' leaders cited our Story Matters theme of abundance and sharing as motivation for starting these small groups.

Epilogue: The story continues

In December 2012, Nativity's pastoral leadership changed, when I accepted a call to another congregation in the Northwest Washington Synod, a congregation that was not a part of the Story Matters pilot process.

In the midst of a transition of pastoral leadership, the concepts and truths that Nativity discovered by being part of the Story Matters initiative continue to inform the congregation's leadership and decisions, as they move into the interim process of discovery and preparation for calling a new pastor. As I was leaving Nativity, I heard the phrases we developed through the Story Matters initiative, "sharing our wine into our community," as an ongoing focus even as the pastoral leadership was changing. I look forward to seeing and hearing about where that wine is shared, as Nativity continues to live into and out of their story for the sake of mission and ministry in their community.

Fruits of Engagement: A Congregation's Encounter with the Book of Faith Initiative

Jana L. Howson

Master of Divinity Student, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

"I have an idea. Maybe the intern can help." These are words that can send chills down the spine of anyone completing their internship in a congregation. In this case, however, the task was both relevant and an interesting ministry challenge: Help the congregation I was serving shape a congregation-wide event to mark the end of their four-year commitment to the ELCA's Book of Faith Initiative. St. Paul Lutheran Church, in Wheaton, Illinois, had been a faithful participant in the Book of Faith Initiative. They had offered Bible studies using the Book of Faith series, promoted the four-fold way of encountering Scripture, and worked to increase fluency in biblical stories and familiarity across the congregation. The centerpiece of the congregation's commitment to the Book of Faith Initiative took the form of a beautifully painted tree on the wall of the entrance to the sanctuary. The tree was painted with no leaves. The leaves were provided by the congregation. Paper leaves and flowers were taped along the branches, each one bearing the name of a congregant, and a book of the Bible they read. Over the four years of the initiative, the tree slowly came to life as the congregation, leaf by leaf, book by book, added to the tree. This growth marked their journeys into Scripture in response to the call to become more fluent in the first language of faith and served as a

visual symbol of the fruit resulting from the Book of Faith commitment taking root in the congregation.

As the congregation approached the end of their original commitment to the Book of Faith program, there was a deep-felt need to mark this occasion with an event that would help the entire congregation both celebrate and honor the commitment they had made to become more deeply engaged with the Book of Faith. Ideas flowed. Whatever we did had to be Bible-centered. It had to reflect the values of the Book of Faith Initiative. It had to include the whole congregation. It had to be something that people would attend. It had to be significant enough to reflect the depth of the congregation's commitment to this initiative.

With some time and brainstorming, we—the Adult Education committee, the associate pastor, the youth and family minister, and I—developed a plan for a Sunday morning event that would happen between services during the education hour. We titled it: "Your Faith Family's Favorite Bible Story." The plan was to invite members of the congregation to group themselves in "faith families," which included not only the expected combination of parents and children, but also Bible study members, senior couples, choir mates, church friends, confirmation mentors and mentees, grandparents and

grandchildren, or any other definition of “family.” Each family would select a Bible story and design two pages to share it with the rest of the congregation—not just the basics, like the plot of the story, but also why that Bible story had a special place in the family. It was an ambitious goal—to have as many members of the congregation as possible come together and produce something like that in this short amount of time.

On the day of the event over twenty-five faith families participated and completed their pages. Eight families completed sample pages in advance in order to help promote the event, so at the end of the day, thirty-six sets of pages covering twenty-nine unique Bible stories were completed and displayed on cork-board walls for the congregation to see, discuss, and share. In the following weeks, the pages were scanned and compiled into both a full color book which was printed for congregation members and a digital site¹ as a link on the congregation's webpage.

By all measures, the event was a success, highlighting several key concepts upon which the Book of Faith Initiative focuses.

First, both the Book of Faith Initiative and the Bible story event communicated that the Bible is for everyone. The event was unique in that it broke down key divisions that often exist in program-sized churches such as St. Paul, primarily division by age. During a normal education hour, the congregation would divide into a traditional, rotation model Sunday school, an adult forum, confirmation class, and youth discussion/reflection group. However, during the Book of Faith wrap-up event, the congregation participated together in a single activity, helping to emphasize that

the Bible plays a key role in faith across age groups.

Second, the adult education committee and church staff responsible for planning the event were deliberate in designing an event that could be completed by all in the community, making engaging with the Bible accessible for all. To help congregation members complete their two pages between services, we provided a series of fill in the blank boxes that families could mix and match to complete their pages. These boxes had a number of different prompts encouraging families to focus on different aspects of the stories, from the basics, like drawing a picture of the main character, to the slightly more complex, like creating a comic strip based on the events of the Bible story, or writing a prayer based on the passage. These prompts gave different ways for different age levels to engage with the story that their family had chosen. They also helped to soothe the “but I’m not creative” anxiety that such a project triggered in some people. Having a clear and easy starting point also allowed congregants to engage in the activity with minimal instruction and guidance—each family was responsible for their own leadership, rather than it being a staff- or pastor-led experience.

Third, the event drew new connections between people in the faith community, highlighting the core role that the Scriptures and faith stories play in forming common identity. One of the goals of the planning group was to make this a cross-generational event. Rather than making this an individual activity, the focus was on faith families in the congregation, with “family” being defined as any group brought together through their faith. These different groupings were modeled in the weeks leading up to the event: at each service, a faith family would present their favorite Bible story and pages, encouraging

1. www.stpaulwheaton.org/bof_stories.html

others in the congregation to participate. It was fascinating to watch the congregation divide itself in different ways, highlighting the unique relationships that can be formed in faith communities.

The richness and diversity of Bible stories told by the participants was a testimony to the success of the Book of Faith Initiative in the congregation. In thirty-six submissions, there were only three duplicates—Noah's Ark, Daniel in the Lions' Den, and the Prodigal Son. Even in the duplicates, however, there was a uniqueness—a way in which each family claimed that story as their own and used that particular story to invoke a common language by which they could communicate something about their faith to other members of the congregation.

Another testimony to the success of the Book of Faith Initiative in improving biblical fluency in the congregation was the distribution between Old and New Testament stories. While many Christian communities tend to have a greater familiarity with the stories of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, the distribution of stories picked by St. Paul families was almost 50-50 between the Old and the New Testament, speaking to the broad base of biblical knowledge that had been formed over the four years of deliberate engagement with a wide range of biblical stories.

As the intern, stepping in at the end of the journey, it was interesting to watch the effect this event had on the congregation. The connection with biblical stories resonated with the congregation, so much so that both the Lent midweek services and the adult catechumenate retreat took

a special focus on these stories of our faith. During Lent, midweek worship was centered around the retelling of a new story each week, with members of the congregation acting out the biblical narrative, claiming it in a powerful, embodied way. Worship was held centered around an assembly of logs and candles designed to simulate a campfire, and give a storytelling feel to the worship. The adult catechumenate retreat, themed, "Telling Our Story, Telling the Story," focused on drawing parallels and connections between the biblical narratives and our own faith journeys. Both of these events came out of the Book of Faith Initiative's emphasis on emergent connections between the biblical story and congregants' lives.

If the purpose of the Book of Faith Initiative is to increase biblical literacy and fluency for the sake of the world, then the Book of Faith wrap-up event held at St. Paul was a chance to practice this language across the usual barriers of age and discrete family units. This event united the congregation in their common language—the foundational stories that make up the Christian faith. In sharing their favorite stories with one another, they shared something much deeper about themselves. These stories became a way to express core values, to highlight what in the Christian faith was of particular importance to each family, to take ownership of these narratives as a part of their own stories. As a guest to the congregation, it was truly a chance to witness a congregation engaging Scripture in a way that made clear that this place was indeed a dwelling place of God.

Scripture and Life in Kuala Lumpur

Emily Lynn Shipman and Zachariah Shipman

Master of Divinity Final Year Students, Wartburg Theological Seminary

Emily

Scripture is living and breathing, and it makes a difference in our lives. I have known this for as long as I can remember, but it took on a new form for me in Kuala Lumpur. My husband, Zachariah, and I were completing our pastoral internships in Malaysia through the Horizon International internship program of the ELCA. Among the countless components that impacted me were the multitude of faiths that took each other seriously, and the genuine witness of those who believe in Christ. This is despite the fact that Christians are a minority and that there are laws against proselytizing. I was challenged with countless diverse experiences that impact me greatly. One experience early on really got the ball rolling for making me think differently—more seriously and more concretely—about Scripture. Forced into a lot of quick, on-the-spot discerning, this experience led me to be more prepared for the pastoral opportunities that lay ahead.

When Mei Lin called, she had asked me to join her for a “prayer walk.” Though I was unsure what that meant, I was eager to participate in my new call to serve in this multicultural setting.

Climbing into the car, Mei Lin asked if I had eaten—a typical Malaysian greeting. “Yes, thank you,” I replied. I was quickly reminded, however, that I was somewhere new and unfamiliar when she responded, “Oh, we are going for breakfast.”

I was still strategizing on how I could

be polite and accept a second meal in my already well-fed, prepared-to-face-unknown-adventures stomach, when Mei Lin asked: “Can you eat the food that is sacrificed?”

Huh. I did not see that one coming.

Numerous random experiences already in the first few weeks left me lacking the luxury of assuming this was a hypothetical question. My mind raced as I wondered what I had walked into, even as I furiously tried to recall all the “eating food from idols” passages I could: “*Whatever you do, eat or drink unto the Lord.*” “*If it harms your brother*”...*something about faith being strong or weak and contextual decisions*... *Oh, man... God, help, please! Guidance?*

Somewhere in the midst of this mental sprinting I spotted the soft pink Guan Yin goddess, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, perched on Mei Lin's dashboard, sitting on a rose-colored lotus leaf as she poured out her jar. *Note to self: Don't make assumptions about the faith practices of someone I meet at church.* I had met Mei Lin at a Moon Cake festival our congregation had held.

I gave Mei Lin an answer that lacked confidence, and texted my supervisor as Mei Lin stepped out to purchase flowers, not even sure of what I was asking or getting myself into. His reply: “For now, don't eat. We will talk.”

Hoping that my presence itself was not inappropriate, I chose to observe and not participate as Mei Lin invited her god-mother from the multi-story columbarium downstairs to the temple. She laid out a meal of her loved one's favorite foods,

burned prayers, lit joss sticks, and lit a candle to indicate the start of the meal. Before her godmother's death, Mei Lin did not practice any particular tradition. Now, however, she felt moved to practice given she was the only one around to care for her deceased godmother. Another friend of Mei Lin's arrived, whom I had met. She was a Christian who had given up such practices. Even so, the friend aided Mei Lin with the order of things and how to fold the paper prayers. The large candle that was lit indicated Mei Lin's grandmother eating the food, and when it burned through it meant she was finished and others may partake. We all struggled together lighting and relighting the candle, fighting against the fierce windy day. I cannot recall if that candle ever did burn down. In chairs off to the side we sat and ate strange hotdog variants, which the friend had brought along. She refuses to eat the food sacrificed.

Needless to say, when I at last returned to our bungalow, I read through 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Acts 15—any passages I could find that spoke to food sacrificed to idols. Suddenly Scripture was stripped bare of the layers of doctrine, hypothetical situations, and theorizing. It truly became contextual as I mulled over the various opinions shared by my supervising pastor and other local Christians I met. Suddenly the 2000 year gap between me and the writers of the New Testament was bridged not only by theology and spiritualizing of the text, but by *life*.

Back home in the United States, I would read these passages and think about the other local dominant religions—secularism, individualism, consumerism—and which practices I should abstain from for my own sake and the sake of other believers. I thought this was a pretty good take-away, given all the years and cultures of separation between me and these passages. Yet here I was, challenged by these words in a

new way, reminded of how different one's encounter with Scripture is depending on where one reads from. Kuala Lumpur's metropolitan area is home to 7.2 million people. Islam, Buddhism, Chinese ancestral religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism are just *some* of the religions that are vibrantly present. A few years before I arrived at the congregation I served among while in Malaysia, they had witnessed an animal slaughtering that took place in the neighboring lot. In the United States those instances are far more rare and hidden.

I continued to discern what it meant to live as a faithful Christian in that particular context, and held Scripture in tension with the local stories as I read Scripture and proclaimed Christ in that setting. Countless other questions of what was right or not right inevitably arose throughout the year, and I struggled to navigate the many cultures and what it meant to live as a faithful biblical witness.

So there I was, a few months later, discerning my role in yet another situation I had not expected: Is it right for a Christian pastor to attend a Buddhist funeral? Would the sight of her be offensive to those in attendance? Would the congregation be in an uproar upon hearing of it?

Before my pastoral internship in Kuala Lumpur, *if* I had given any thought to these questions, it would have been hypothetical and far removed from me. And yet, there I was. Amidst the hum of countless bits of advice from everyone and their aunties, there I was listening for God's call in just such a situation.

The funeral was for the grandmother of Soo Chin, a young, strong follower of Christ who attended the congregation I served. Soo Chin was the only Christian in her family besides an uncle and an aunt who were estranged from the family. She was close with her grandmother and shocked by her passing.

There were countless options. I knew some Christians avoided such places because of the spiritual power believed to be present at religious sites of any faith. Others kept distance as a matter of principle or differentiation from those who do not believe in Christ, a way of marking their change in faith. Yet others would choose to attend seeing no issue in the matter.

Even as these thoughts of cultural practices, stigmas, and potential impact were bickering with each other in my head, I knew what my response would be. How could it be anything different after reading of Jesus' presence at the death of Peter's mother-in-law, or of his grief upon visiting Lazarus' tomb? Stories of Jesus stooping to speak with the ill, listening to the yearnings of the blind, walking alongside the grief-stricken disciples as they walked the road to Emmaus, and bringing healing all along. *What am I called to do here and now?*

We serve a God who comforts those who grieve, who is present with those who are sick or mourning or imprisoned or *fill in the blank* even when everyone else casts them aside. Jesus calls us to be present. My one thought prevailed: *I am going to the funeral.*

My intent was to be present for Soo Chin, to remind her of God's grace and presence with her, to show her that her faith community grieves with her, to offer support, to let her know she was not alone. This is what Scripture led me to do. It wasn't about issues or stances or theoretical situations, it was about *presence*—the presence of Christ.

This act marked the start of one of the closest relationships I would form while in Malaysia, a culture where a year is a very short time to build a foundation for a relationship. As I got to know her, Soo Chin astounded me with her strong faith and astute scriptural awareness, and she also taught me to cook some fantastic

Chinese food. I experienced profound biblical witness: all because Scripture led me to be present and helped me to realize that despite our many differences, we are not so far removed after all. Scripture is living and breathing, and it makes a difference in our lives—whoever we are and wherever we are—because there Christ is also.

Zachariah

My experience in Malaysia has changed how I read Scripture. Many of my experiences there have enriched my engagement with and by Scripture. I want to reflect on the impact of one of these experiences in relation to a portion of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

I had the opportunity to meet with the Lutheran Church of Malaysia's mission partners in their annual meeting. There were representatives from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church of Bavaria, the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Lutheran Church of Singapore and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission. These partners were gathered together to discuss ways they could help the Lutheran Church of Malaysia (LCM) in their mission efforts. As I sat in on this meeting and listened to all the missions in which the LCM was involved, I could not help but think about Paul's image of the body of Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes concerning the body of Christ:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many... But as it is, God arranged the members in the

body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body (1 Cor 12:12–14, 18–20).

This passage came alive as I sat in this meeting where the members of the body of Christ were coordinating with one another to better serve God's mission in the world. Not only was there coordination. There was also a definite recognition of the many and varied gifts for service for the sake of God and God's glory. The LCM lifted up their ability to work with the surrounding countries whose languages they speak and which then prepare them to help provide education to build up leaders of partner churches. There are many in Malaysia who speak many different languages (Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil, Hindi, Bahasa Malayu, and many others). This gift of tongues is used to serve God's mission. It struck me at that moment how strange things can be in the United States in terms of missions. There are people who spend much time and effort to learn another language (a wonderful and beneficial undertaking!). Before my time in Malaysia, I thought language learning was the necessary foundation for missions around the world. I operated with an unconscious "colonial" mission understanding whereby people from one culture would learn the language and culture of the other in order to spread the news of Jesus Christ. While learning another's language remains a good mission practice, it is not the only way, nor is it always the best use of resources. My

eyes were opened to the gifts of the global church and to how Christians around the world (and outside of my home culture and language!) are already equipped with a knowledge of cultures and languages and how they are working to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Another aspect of this passage from 1 Corinthians that I began to think about differently was the global horizon of the body of Christ. Paul writes: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" (1 Cor 12:13). My understanding of this passage was quite narrow before my experience in Malaysia and before this meeting. I had a general sense that Christians should work together, possibly with other local congregations, etc. It was always a comforting passage which conveyed to me a sense of camaraderie and fellowship with other Christians. This was about as far as I had taken this passage. Thanks be to God that the Holy Spirit by way of this privileged experience in Malaysia opened my eyes to the richness of this passage. Now when I think of this passage, I think globally. I think about all those around the world serving in Jesus' name. I have faces that come to mind—those around the table in Malaysia and many, many others working in partnership with other churches, nations, cultures, peoples, and languages. I have a greater sense of how beautiful it is when the members of the body of Christ work together in unison for the sake of the world. I will never read this passage the same, and I praise God for the work of the body of Christ throughout the world.

Become an author for *Currents in Theology and Mission*

Currents in Theology and Mission publishes essays, book reviews, and resources for lectionary preaching to a Christian audience that is ecumenical and predominantly Lutheran. Readers come from a variety of settings—congregations, seminaries, universities, and specialized ministries. The journal especially seeks to foster deep theological reflection at the interface with the ministry and mission of the church.

Essays on a wide range of topics are welcome: biblical interpretation, theological and doctrinal themes, church history, worship, music, and all the arts of ministry. Authors seek to engage issues of church leadership for urban, rural, multicultural contexts and to promote ecumenical and interfaith dialogue at the intersection of theological reflection, religion and culture. The journal seeks well-reasoned and provocative essays that will serve the life of the church.

The journal welcomes unsolicited manuscripts and queries (contact currents@lstc.edu). The editors and editorial board review and evaluate submissions, deciding which essays will be published, as well as the timing of the publications.

If you have interest in contributing exegetical studies or write pastoral reflections based on the Revised Common Lectionary for “Preaching Helps,” please notify us at currents@lstc.edu.

Book reviews are edited by Edgar Krentz (New Testament; ekrentz@lstc.edu), Ralph W. Klein (Old Testament; rklein@lstc.edu), and Craig L. Nesson (history, theology, ethics, and ministry; cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu). Readers who would like to write a book review should contact the appropriate editor for review guidelines and assignment of a book.



Book Reviews

The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus.

Translated and annotated by Jonathan Franzen. A Bilingual Edition. New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-3741-8221-2. Cloth. 318 pages. \$27.00.

Well known for brilliantly insightful novels depicting the stressed state of contemporary society (*Freedom, The Corrections*), Jonathan Franzen here retrieves, through translation and commentary, the legacy of contrarian journalist Karl Kraus (1874–1936). Kraus, especially through the publication of a literary and political review, *Die Fackel* (The Torch), offered critical, satirical, and sometimes brutal commentary on fin de siècle Vienna, leading up to the rise of German fascism. Franzen finds in Kraus a fascinating social critic, whose commentary cuts to the chase also for an analysis of our generation.

Franzen first encountered the work of Kraus as an exchange student in Germany and his fascination finally culminated in this book. Four texts by Kraus are reproduced in this volume, both in the German and English translation. The ostensible subjects of the essays are the German author, Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), and Austrian playwright, Johann Nestoy (1801–1862). However, the heart of the matter, both in the originals by Kraus and in the annotations by Franzen, is social criticism then and now. As Kraus lampooned the shallowness of journalism and popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century in Vienna, Franzen scrutinizes the foibles of social media, TV news, and what passes today for journalism.

Franzen observes about cable news “the phony coziness that tolerates the grotesque ‘expansion’ of trivial news, traffics touristically in stories that ought to have no place in public discourse, and makes no tonal distinctions in its blending of serious and meaning-

less news items” (247). Franzen comments: “Amazon wants a world in which books are either self-published or published by Amazon itself... The work of yakkers and tweeters and braggers, and of people with the money to pay somebody to churn out hundreds of five-star reviews for them, will flourish in that world” (273). Franzen laments “the inherent antagonisms between the ascendant mass media and the (privileged) kind of spirituality/imaginativeness that, as Kraus saw it, makes us human” (277). Such reflections are increasingly astute, given we are the fish lacking perspective to notice the waters in which we are swimming (cf. David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water,” Commencement Speech at Kenyon College).

While the writings of Kraus are exceedingly dense, Franzen’s annotations—reflecting also about “progress,” war, propaganda, and the need for resistance—provide prophetic challenges too seldom raised about what is becoming also of this generation. I give it five-stars.

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi—Resisters against Hitler in Church and State. By Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Stern. New York: New York Review, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-5901-7681-8. Cloth. 157 pages. \$19.95.

Fascination with the legacy of Bonhoeffer and the German resistance continues to generate insightful research and publications. This book provides a historically accurate, well-documented, and clear narrative of the activities organized within the Wehrmacht’s counterintelligence department. This book expands the focus from Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself to incorporate especially the role of his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, a lawyer, who was involved together with Bonhoeffer both in the conspiracy to assassinate



Hitler and as an architect designing a post-Nazi German government.

The wider participation of the entire Bonhoeffer family in early and persistent opposition to the Third Reich is a story less well known than the life and legacy of Bonhoeffer himself. Dohnanyi, married to Bonhoeffer's sister Christine, together with two other lawyers in the Bonhoeffer family—brother, Klaus, and brother-in-law, Rudiger Schleicher (married to another Bonhoeffer sister, Ursula)—were all active conspirators. All four of these family members were executed for their complicity in the conspiracy before the end of the war. In 1947 Bonhoeffer's father, Karl, remarked with characteristic modesty: "The war and the Nazi years, with all their evil consequences for our family, did somewhat drain us" (133). While Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains central to this account, his role is here located within the larger network of other collaborators, with special attention to his connection to Dohnanyi.

Sifton, the daughter of Reinhold Niebuhr, and Stern have helped to remedy the deficit they name at the book's conclusion: "Though the world knows of Bonhoeffer in detail and hardly at all of Dohnanyi, they deserve to be remembered together. The Third Reich has no greater, more courageous, and more admirable enemies than they. Dohnanyi aptly summed up their work and spirit when he said they simply took 'the path that a decent person inevitably takes.' So few traveled that path—anywhere" (141–142). While Dohnanyi was recognized in 2003 as a "righteous Gentile" by Vad Yashem, this is an honor thus far not bestowed upon Bonhoeffer. The book includes several photos of historical interest to the story told.

Craig L. Nesson

The Mark of the Sacred (Cultural Memory in the Present). By Jean-Pierre Dupuy.

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8047-7690-5. xvi & 214 pages. Paper. \$21.00.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy incorporates insights gained in collaboration with Rene Girard and Ivan Illich, which leads him to the discovery that Christianity is not a "religion" like those produced through violence and the concealing of victims, systems that further condone resentment and violence. Dupuy shows that our current crises of global climate change, nuclear arms, genetic technology (including the impending creation of artificial life), the breakdown of democracy, and the economics of inequality—all driven by globalization—will doom us, unless we realize how the violent religion of old has infected all of the above, including science and technology.

In reality Dupuy is taking on both fundamentalists and atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, to show the reader that they are in the same camp, all violent, as are the rest of us who think that we can grab onto science and technology to alter the path to self-destruction that humanity is now on. Dupuy keenly identifies the idolatry of our power, which denies human self-transcendence (God), as well as unforeseen consequences, insofar as the violence of religion and its dynamics follow us into all our scientific and technological claims of triumph.

Dupuy writes: "The lesson of Christianity can be applied only if it has been completely and thoroughly understood: human beings must renounce violence once and for all" (119). Dupuy argues: "Christianity is not a morality, but an epistemology" (124). That is, Christianity is a belief system in a God who has revealed and confronted us with our own violence through the cross of Jesus Christ, and whose risen life is the very power that leads us beyond resentment to the rejection of violence. It is this belief, argues Dupuy, that constitutes our future (salvation) beyond self-destruction.



As a pastor with two degrees in Religious Studies, I find Dupuy's work truly groundbreaking and timely. Dupuy's insights are worthy of renewed dialogue, the convening of another Vatican council, and the gathering together of people of all cultures and faiths to come to terms with the present crisis of humanity.

*David R. Froemming, Pastor
Christ Lutheran Church, Lancaster; Wis.
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Potosi, Wis.*

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. By Michelle Alexander. New York: The New Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-5955-8643-8. xvii and 312 pages. Paper. \$19.95.

How could a new Jim Crow system be implemented in our own lifetimes with scarcely a moment of public recognition? "Jim Crow" refers originally to the system of racial segregation and legal discrimination that was instituted after the Civil War and that began to be deconstructed through the Civil Rights movement. The "new" Jim Crow refers to the mass removal of a generation of young black men from our society by the policies of law enforcement and imprisonment introduced through the War on Drugs in the 1980s and which continues to this day. Michelle Alexander unveils the mask of colorblindness that clouds our vision from seeing and comprehending what has happened to staggering numbers of black men in America: "The racial bias in the drug war is a major reason that 1 in every 14 black men was behind bars in 2006, compared with 1 in 106 white men. For young black men, the statistics are even worse. One in 9 black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five was behind bars in 2006, far more were under some kind of penal control—such as probation or parole" (100). The statistics cited in this book about mass incarceration of black men in our society are stunning.

Although the use of illegal drugs by white people is equal to or higher than that among blacks, the disparity in incarceration rates goes to the heart of the new Jim Crow. Unequal law enforcement efforts concentrated in black neighborhoods, unequal arrest rates, unequal legal charges, unequal legal representation, unequal plea bargaining, unequal sentencing and unequal judicial review have filled America's prisons with millions of young black men. Many of them are labelled for life as felons, who will face forever discrimination in seeking essentials like employment and housing, basic to building a good life. Moreover, many face a life of monitoring as ex-cons and the loss of many civil rights, including the right to vote. "At its core, then, mass incarceration, like Jim Crow, is a 'race-making' institution. It serves to define the meaning of race in America" (200).

The construction and maintenance of prisons has become a \$55 billion per year cost. "[T]here are more people in prisons and jails today just for drug offenses than were incarcerated for *all* reasons in 1980" (60). Staged as the War on Drugs, over the last 30+ years we have been carefully taught to equate blackness with criminality. While we claim to be a colorblind society, in truth the word "criminal" has become a code word for "black." By polarizing poor whites against poor blacks over an issue like affirmative action and by inoculating ourselves about the educational, employment, and economic challenges facing black communities whenever we focus excessively on certain black figures as examples of success (Obama as prime instance), we choose to ignore the acute challenges confronting black people in our time.

Only by constructing a new social movement, based on economic justice for all people, can we begin to reclaim the imagination cast by Martin Luther King Jr. when he inaugurated the Poor Peoples Movement in 1968. Alexander summons civil rights organizations to this agenda: "Fully committing to a vision of racial justice that includes grassroots, bottom-up advocacy on behalf of 'all of us' will require a major reconsideration of



priorities, staffing, strategies, and messages” (260). The basic impulse behind the Occupy movement regarding economic disparity in American society resonates with this call to dismantle the new Jim Crow by letting “the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

Craig L. Nesson

Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary.

By C. L. Seow. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. ISBN:978-0-8028-4895-6. xxviii and 971 pages. Cloth. \$95.00.

This commentary, when completed in its second volume, will be the best in the field.

It is the first volume in a new series *Iluminations*, in which each portion of the text begins with the author’s “Interpretation,” written in non-technical fashion, that will be followed by “Commentary” in which the author explores the text in its original language and enters into dialogue with other scholars. “Interpretation” will be sufficient for most readers. The series also examines how the work has been interpreted over the centuries and what it has come to mean. This history produced results both witting and unwitting and is labelled in this series as “the history of consequences.”

The 248-page introduction to this commentary alone justifies the price of this book. Seow gives exhaustive, fair, and well-argued attention to texts and versions, language, integrity (which parts of the book, if any, are secondary?), provenance (6th–5th century in Yehud), setting (a legendary figure from long ago in the desert region of southern Edom), genre, structure, artistry, and theology. The author looks at the theology of Job, the friends, Elihu (a character whom Seow takes seriously!), Yahweh, and the narrator. He sums up the section on God in this way: “The God one encounters in these speeches is one who refuses to conform to any human expectation or demand for order or right. There is no claim of divine righteousness, no hint of resistance to cosmic chaos and dis-

order...Rather, God is simply God, and the world—with all that is in it that is disorderly, strange, dangerous, and tragic—is ruled not according to the demands of human ‘right’ (the demand for justice), but according to the ‘right’ of God alone. This is an utterly free God.” The book of Job is ultimately not about theodicy, in Seow’s view, but how one speaks of God in the face of chaos.

Then Seow turns for almost 140 pages to the consequences the book of Job has had for Jews and Christians. In each era Seow pays attention to the consequences in literature, visual arts, and music, in addition to the expected exegetes and theologians. There is even a short chapter on consequences in the Muslim tradition.

At this point comes Seow’s nearly 650-page commentary on the first 21 chapters. But remember how this is structured, taking ch. 1 as an example: translation 1.5 pages; interpretation (the well-written results of Seow’s research) 11.5 pages; history of consequences 1.5 pages; commentary (philological notes, discussion with other scholars) 20.5 pages; bibliography 6 pages—on this chapter alone. A reader can really get by quite well by reading less than 15 pages. But advanced students who know Seow for the master philologist he is will relish every line of the commentary section.

You will have noticed my enthusiasm for this volume. If you care at all about suffering and/or the book of Job, you will not want to do without this book.

Ralph W. Klein
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



Briefly Noted

In twenty-one chapters, Don C. Benjamin's *Stones and Stories: An Introduction to Archaeology and the Bible* (Fortress, \$39) provides a history of the field, describes its methods (including processual archaeology, ethnoarchaeology, and post-processual archaeology), discusses findings at specific sites (Qumran, Arad, Ekron, Gezer, and a nautical site called Cape Gelidonya), and even surmises what its future course will be. The language and layout are inviting to the non-specialist and study questions are provided with each chapter. There is also a glossary and a marvelously annotated bibliography. The "Stories" in the title indicates that archaeological finds are frequently related to biblical narratives.

Ralph W. Klein

A Commentary on the Psalms. Volume 1 (1-41) and Volume 2 (42-89). By Allen B. Ross. (Kregel Academic, \$44.99 each volume). In these volumes Ross uses some of the resources of historical criticism and provides a helpful but fairly conservative exegesis. I wish he were more venturesome in translation ("Kiss the son, lest he be angry" sticks with a corrupt text in 2:12; "in the valley of the shadow of death" 23:4 should be "in a very dark valley." Death is not the only dark valley we face). He sticks too often to Davidic authorship. What does it mean for "David" to return to the house of the Lord when the temple was not built until Solomon's time? Is it really true that there is no reason to doubt that Psalm 51 was written after the Bathsheba affair? I think he misses the importance of the setting in the divine council for the meaning of Psalm 82. By the way, he always spells the word incorrectly as "divine counsel." Ross has read widely and provides many fine comments from other commentaries and journal articles.

Ralph W. Klein

The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation. By Berndt Hamm. Translated by Martin J. Lohrmann (Eerdmans, \$36). Hamm traces the developments in Luther's theology from his entry into the monastery to his essay on the freedom of a Christian in 1520. Luther gradually left behind the medieval theology of love for the certainty of faith. He was, however, both medieval and evangelical at the same time. Luther's theology of dying separated the Christian's approach to death from anxieties over mortal sin to concentrate instead on the only thing he saw as necessary for the dying: faith in God's promise outside of us. Luther knew medieval mysticism well and this tradition structured his theology in terms of law and gospel and helped him view justification experientially. Hamm concludes that Luther's adaptation or break with existing tradition was a gradual change and that there was not a single heroic moment. We need to differentiate between Luther's accounts of surprising discoveries and the varied attempts of modern scholarship to nail down a central biographical Reformation insight or a decisive moment of discovery. This is one of the *Lutheran Quarterly* books.

Ralph W. Klein

Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy. By Samuel A. Meier (InterVarsity Press, \$11.50 on IVP website). Meier scrutinizes features of the prophets that run throughout the prophetic books like leitmotifs: the divine council, the manner of revelation, angels, thus said Yahweh, miracles, prophets as king-makers, etc. The intimate relationships between prophet and God in the earlier prophets, for example, was later replaced by a distancing between the two that was bridged by angels. He detects a gradual transformation of prophecy and suggests that change was not always for the better. In post-exilic times prophecy declined as a prominent force and even ceased. Already in the sixth century exile prophecy exhibited the beginnings of its diminution and disappearance.

Ralph W. Klein

Forming Valued Leaders for God's Mission.



Learn more at
www.wartburgseminary.edu

Preaching Helps

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

A Season for Considering Power

The author of Preaching Helps for the June issue of *Currents* is the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Salinas, pastor of the First Baptist Church (ABCUSA) of Bangor, Maine, where she resides with her husband, the younger of two sons, and a house rabbit named Prudence. She earned the Master of Divinity degree from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and the Doctor of Ministry degree from McCormick Theological Seminary, one of the participating theological seminaries in the Association of Chicago Theological Schools Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program.

Craig Satterlee, the former editor of Preaching Helps, served as Dean of that program, and over the years called many of its participants into service as writers for Preaching Helps. When Dr. Satterlee resigned his faculty position at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and the editorship of Preaching Helps to become Bishop of the North West Lower Michigan Synod ELCA, he left the *Currents* staff with a list of authors already recruited for 2013-14. As we come nearly to the end of that list of authors and begin preparing for a new editor, Barbara Lundblad, to take over the editorship of Preaching Helps, we give thanks once again for the faithfulness of those who, like Craig, shouldered tasks and kept their word about what they said they would do, so that a common venture could move forward without undue stress on the other partners.

Pastor Salinas begins her commentaries with the statement, “August is a season for considering power.” She chooses focus stories in each of the readings and ends the readings for August with a reflection on metaphor in Genesis. Following the same format, she chooses focus texts for each of the Sundays in September and concludes with a pastoral reflection on forgiveness and responsibility.

A bishop I deeply respect commented to me recently that more and more people today are being held responsible for things over which they have very little or no control, and the result is depression and rage. Daily we are reminded of overwhelming situations that confront the largest of nations and the smallest of families. What does it look like *in action* to embody the “serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference”? It helps me to remember that this longing for clarity, so familiar to those in Twelve-Step programs, is expressed in a *prayer* for help—in the fervent hope for a kind of discernment that relies on God’s grace and strength, every day. In this larger “resting” of responsibility for the outcome of things in God’s care, there is—paradoxically—the daily strength to do what I can.

August and September are months that, for many preachers, hold both breathing space and the press of “beginning again” after summer’s alternate rhythms. May both spaces be filled with holy wisdom, holy word.

Kathleen Billman, Interim Editor of Preaching Helps

August 3, 2014

**Proper 13: Eighth Sunday
after Pentecost**

Genesis 32:22–31 (focus story);

Isaiah 55:1–5

Psalms 145:8–9, 14–21

Romans 9:1–5

Matthew 14:31–21

First Reading (Genesis 32)

August is a season for considering power. Particularly in the Genesis readings, we are invited to consider God's power and our own power. The stories in Genesis are full of people who believe their own power to be the greatest, people who abuse power in frightful ways, and people who are blessed enough to be humbled in their quest for power.

We begin the month reading about Jacob/Israel wrestling with God. The story is mysterious and rather vague, but fascinating when one considers Jacob's conclusion. After he has wrestled with God and torn a muscle in his leg, God allows him to "win" the fight. Truly, it is ridiculous that the story suggests that God couldn't beat Jacob, and that Jacob went around boasting afterwards of his survival.

I'm reminded of the parent who purposely loses in a board game to let the young child win. While some parents believe that a child needs to learn how to lose, and how to recognize that others are stronger, there are times when many parents will allow a young child to beat them. These decisions are made with love, and with a desire to build the child's sense of strength and esteem. Perhaps God was showing the same love to Jacob.

Nonetheless, as Jacob leaves the fight certain of his prowess, we are left smiling and knowing that he's not as strong as he

thinks he is. The stage is set for a month of reflections on the power of people and the power of God.

August 10, 2014

**Proper 14: Ninth Sunday
after Pentecost**

Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28 (focus story);

1 Kings 19:9–18

Psalms 85:8–13

Romans 10:5–15

Matthew 14:22–33

First Reading (Genesis 37)

This section of Genesis tells a story of sons and sibling rivalry, of loyalty and of betrayal. It is also the story of God at work—but not necessarily in the ways that are first apparent! While I've read these stories many times, this season I find myself centering on Genesis 45. Before we get to that however, there is more to the story to consider, including this week's story of Joseph being sold by his brothers.

Let's review: Jacob finds himself with many children, several wives, and more drama in his family than in a reality TV show! This season's readings center most on the actions of the boys in the family: A band of brothers, most of who were born to first wife, Leah, and two who were born to the more beloved wife, Rachel.

Leah's sons were jealous of Rachel's sons, Benjamin the baby of the family, and the ultimate favorite son Joseph. While Joseph wasn't faultless dancing about in his amazing multi-colored jacket, it wasn't his fault that he was so much more adored! Leah's sons didn't stop to consider if Joseph had created the inequitable situation. They just wanted to get him out of the way. So,

they kidnapped Joseph and threw him in a ditch. They plotted to kill him, until one brother was moved with brotherly love. Finally, they sold Joseph into slavery and dipped his fancy coat in goat's blood to convince Jacob that the favorite son had been killed.

Now, Joseph is far from pure and blameless in this drama. Still, one ends up feeling for him. It does seem like everything and everyone is against him. All his big brothers gang up on him, and there are suggestions that even his father was in on the plot to kill him. "...After all, it was Jacob who sent Joseph out on his own to join his brothers. Interestingly, in the Qur'an's account, Jacob's complicity is strongly suggested."¹ So, off went Joseph to Egypt, and the drama continues.

August 17, 2014

Proper 15: Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 45:1–15 (focus story);

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

Psalms 67

Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32

Matthew 15:(10–20), 21–28

First Reading (Genesis 45)

Joseph, after being sold by his brothers, finds himself in the midst of even more drama in Egypt. The lectionary readings focus on his relationship with his brothers. Nonetheless, we need to recognize that life was full of ups and downs for Joseph once he arrived in Egypt. Thankfully, his talent for interpreting dreams helped him

to survive and even to thrive.

God worked not only in helping Joseph tell a good dream story, but then it appeared that God worked by making those dreams come true. So, we aren't especially surprised when the famine hit, since Joseph had been predicting it for some time. The famine to beat all famines raged on and on. While Egypt was fine and Joseph was doing terrific (because Joseph had warned of the upcoming famine), Joseph's brothers were starving. So, the brothers traveled to Egypt—for a bit of food, a little job, anything. Anything to get by.

They didn't expect to see Joseph. They didn't even know he had ended up in Egypt, and they figured that if he were still alive, he was serving as the lowest of slaves. So walking into the government offices they didn't recognize Joseph at first, but he knew them!

He made them bring his brother Benjamin, and tricked his brothers with the oldest trick in the book. While the reader can see what Joseph is doing, the brothers cannot, and it is thus impressive when one of the brothers finally acts in courage, and offers himself as a replacement for his little brother Ben.

These stories in Genesis focus on sin and rivalry, but also on love and courage. It is tempting to paint all the brothers with a wide brush as evil or greedy or petty, but the story continually reminds us of brothers who reconsider, and who are even willing to sacrifice for others. This is a complex series of stories, framed in Genesis by some of the more horrifying stories in the Bible.

Still, in this series of stories, there are moments of beautiful grace. At least some of those who have done wrong actually see and acknowledge their wrongs and repent of them. There is grieving but there is also

1. Michael Carden. "Genesis/ Bereshit." *The Queer Bible Commentary*. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 53.

healing. The smallest and the weakest is the one who saves. Lives, like the clothes worn by the players, are torn in grief and replaced by new reconciliation.

August 24, 2014

Proper 16: Eleventh Sunday

after Pentecost

Exodus 1:8–2:10 (focus story);

Isaiah 51:1–6

Psalms 138

Romans 12:1–8

Matthew 16:13–20

First Reading (Exodus 1)

When we read that a new king arose who didn't know Joseph, there is an almost audible ominous sound in the background. The scary music begins, and we know it will only be a scene or two until something terrible happens. That something terrible, for the descendants of Joseph, is slavery. They will face slavery and hard labor, oppression and hatred. They will lose hope and experience great pain and sorrow. We want to skip quickly on to Moses and the burning bush, to movies about letting my people go, to mid-wives brave enough to save the babies, to plagues and Passovers and parting of seas. We want to move on quickly into the story, for in the telling of the Exodus story we are reminded of God's saving power. We will be reminded that God rescued God's people in distress, and we will be reminded that God will rescue us, too. We want to hurry into that story!

Before we move on too quickly, we need to take a moment with a single verse: "Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph." (Exodus 1:8, *Common English Bible*) We need to take a moment and consider what it means,

that a new king didn't know Joseph. When Joseph was forgotten, it was the beginning of loss.

Today, most church leaders can tell stories of loss. We remember when churches were full, when collections held all that was needed to pay the bills, when there weren't so many other things scheduled on Sunday mornings, and when there wasn't so much bad publicity about Christianity. Today we're living in a time when people don't know Joseph any more. They not only don't know Joseph, but they don't know Ezekiel, or Peter, or Paul. They certainly don't know Zerubbabel or Ezra or Nehemiah. Sometimes they don't even know Jesus. We lament that a new king and queen are in power, and they don't know. Churches cry out, and want to go back to when Christianity was known!!

Just as the Israelites weren't meant to go back to the days of Joseph, we too aren't meant to go backwards. Don Henley's song, "Boys of Summer," says "Out on the road today, I saw a dead head sticker on a Cadillac. A little voice inside my head said don't look back, you can never look back."² I love that! It reminds me to keep on looking ahead. Yes, remember where I came from, and what I have learned, but don't live there. Look ahead, for God has planned so, so much.

I believe that the church has some amazing days ahead. What will they look like and how will we get there? If I knew that, I'd be more famous than ole Joseph. This I do know, however—God has a plan. For today, that is enough.

2. Don Henley & Michael W. Campbell. "Boys of Summer." (Los Angeles: Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, 1984).

August 31, 2014

Proper 17: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 3:1–15;

Jeremiah 15:15–21

Psalms 26:1–8

Romans 12:9–21 (focus story)

Matthew 16:21–28

First Reading (Romans 12)

Sometimes the Bible makes me laugh, and this reading from Romans is one of those passages.

The Apostle Paul is saying all the right things. Love honestly and without pretending. Don't be evil, but be loving. Bless those who curse you. Cry with the crying, laugh with the laughing. Welcome the stranger, be at peace with everyone. Hold hands and sing songs, pick flowers and wear tie-dyed shirts. It is a beautiful picture.

Unfortunately, Paul can't leave us with that lovely picture, but has to go quoting Proverbs. In verse 20, he tells us to give food and water to our enemy if our enemy is hungry and thirsty. That's lovely. But why are we to do this? Because if we do, we will "heap burning coals upon his head." Bam! All the singing and hand-holding and flower picking stops short.

Perhaps Paul is just being realistic, and knowing that people can't actually live in such peace and harmony. Perhaps he is a pessimist. Perhaps he was in a bad mood when he wrote this section. Or perhaps, just perhaps, he had a sense of humor, and we really are supposed to have a little laugh.

Charles L. Campbell suggests that humor is a sure way to take power away from evil. The powers and the principalities hold sway over us because we grant them honor and dignity. When we take

that away, when we laugh, when we show the powers not honor but what Campbell calls "lampooning"³ and what Walter Wink calls "burlesque,"⁴ then the powers lose their strength. Perhaps this is the powerful humor the Apostle Paul seeks in this week's epistle.

August 2014

Pastoral Reflection on Metaphor in Genesis

Of all these stories in this cycle, I propose that the center of the story may well be found in Gen 45:5-8. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and then says the most fascinating thing! He could have scolded the brothers; or, he could have reflected on the brothers' ability to repent. Joseph says something else entirely: Instead, Joseph says God took him to Egypt.

God took Joseph to Egypt! It isn't because of the brothers' jealousy that Joseph is living in Egypt and not with his family—it is God who put him there. It isn't because Joseph is talented and smart that he rose from the plight of an alien slave to a respected and powerful politician—God put him there. He doesn't blame his brothers. He doesn't boast in himself. He proclaims that this is all part of God's plan.

God caused the brothers to get angry at Joseph, and God put it in their heads to kidnap him, sell him into slavery, and

3. Charles L. Campbell. *The Word Before The Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 116.

4. Walter Wink. *Engaging The Powers: Discernment and Resistance in An Age of Domination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 179.

put him away from their minds as dead. God planned all that, says Joseph. God caused Joseph to be able to interpret dreams, and even to negotiate some sticky palace politics, so that Joseph would be in power when his brothers needed him most. Everything that happened, all the little coincidences, all the big tragedies, all the things one would have preferred to avoid, all that he worked for—God did it all. God did it all, so that when the brothers were hungry, and the family was in danger of dying out, Joseph would be in a position to help. God did it all. That's what Joseph said.

I don't know about you, but I find this very confusing! I am confused by Joseph's statement that God planned his kidnapping and trip to Egypt—to me, that seems like sin. If a member of my congregation decided to kidnap someone and sell them into slavery, I would never preach a sermon praising that as the will of God. I have trouble with the thought that God uses hurtful actions to do God's will. Joseph hasn't said that God worked in spite of his brothers' kidnapping and selling him, but that God caused it. Joseph's pain was all part of God's plan, and Jacob's grief at losing his favorite son was all part of God's master plan. God caused the brothers to do something that everyone agreed was hurtful and wrong—so that in the end, they could be saved.

What do we do with a God who works like this? If God wanted to teach the brothers of Joseph a lesson, why not tell them right up front that selling Joseph was a bad idea? Why not just open the brothers' minds to listen to Joseph in the first place—and they could have all lived happily ever after? It seems to me that God could have worked everything out with far less drama!!

Still, perhaps I am reading the story incompletely.

Maybe Joseph and his brothers are more than a literal story, but are a metaphorical story as well. Yes, maybe Joseph is right. Maybe his life and his brothers' lives point to something so, so much larger—something that has less to do with them personally, and everything to do with God—and with us.

For, if God was at work in Joseph's story, then Joseph is pointing to a God who works in the world as a God of sacrificial forgiveness. After all, everyone in this story knows that what the brothers most deserve isn't food, but punishment. They themselves know that what they did to Joseph was very wrong, and any bad stuff that came their way was just—well, karma. What goes around comes around. Garbage in, garbage out. They got what they had coming to them. They had deserted and hurt Joseph, and now they deserved to be deserted and hurt. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. They deserved to not be helped during the famine, and they knew it.

Instead of giving them what they “deserved,” Joseph showed them forgiveness. Instead of turning them away, he gave them food and more. Instead of laughing in their faces, he giggled with delight at being with them again. Instead of guilt-tripping them, he told them God was at work in them. Instead of hate, he showed them love.

Joseph was an agent of forgiveness. Through his actions, the brothers were saved, and so were their families and their animals and their employees and more! God worked. Through pain. Through the sacrifice of Joseph. Through forgiveness to those who caused that pain. Then and only then, were the brothers set free to openly talk and be themselves with Joseph.

Sound familiar??

There's another guy in the Bible, who did the same thing, and said it was all God's plan—only we were the brothers who threw him into the ditch and sold him into slavery, and we were the ones who were forgiven. God sent God's only son, Jesus, not only to teach us about sacrificial love, but to save us through his sacrifice and love. It was God's plan all along.

Jesus taught us, but we couldn't understand God's plan of love and sharing. When God's teachings sent him to be executed, Jesus' followers couldn't stay with him. When Jesus went to die on the cross, he looked at those who were hurting him and said, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Joseph's brothers came to understand their errors, to repent, and to know true sacrificial forgiveness. Today, Jesus offers the same to us: to see when we have done wrong, to repent, to allow God to forgive us, and to see that forgiveness acted out on the cross, in true unconditional, sacrificial grace and love! That, more than anything else, are what the Bible's stories try to teach us.

September 7, 2014

Proper 18: Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 12:1–14;

Ezekiel 33:7–11

Psalms 119:33–40

Romans 13:8–14

Matthew 18:15–20 (focus story)

First Reading (Matthew 18)

Matthew's stories begin this month with instructions on how to discipline someone in the church who has done you wrong. The process of increasing witnesses and

judges reflects Jewish law and it all sounds remarkably efficient. Still, I have to wonder if it worked. Today, I must admit that such a strategy wouldn't work so easily in many congregations.

I serve a congregation in northern New England, where people are independent and proud of it! Here, if I were to bring someone before another church member and say that they had wronged me, while I might get some personal sympathy, there would undoubtedly be questions asked of me as well. Surely the wrong could not be completely the fault of the other person! Surely I, too, would be at fault. In fact, having grown up in a society that taught me to judge myself harshly, I probably would have great difficulty bringing charges against someone else in the church. I would immediately assume that whatever happened was at least in part my own fault, whether it was or not.

This being the attitude that is prevalent in both me and the people that I serve, bringing judgment against someone else is difficult. We don't want to openly judge because we're so afraid of being judged. At the same time, we are glad to secretly point fingers. All this means that taking the writing in Matthew further and bringing the person before the entire congregation would seem impossible. If I did it as a clergyperson, it would feel like an abuse of my power as a pastor. What's more, should I treat the wrong-doer like a Gentile and a tax collector? Don't I preach that people shouldn't do that? It is a dilemma.

September 14, 2014

**Proper 19: Fourteenth Sunday
after Pentecost**

Exodus 14:19–31;

Genesis 50:15–21

Psalms 103:(1–7), 8–13

Romans 14:1–12 (focus story)

Matthew 18:21–35 (focus story)

**First Reading (Matthew 18 &
Romans 14)**

We find ourselves reflecting on the Unforgiving Servant who is glad to accept forgiveness but who then cannot give it in return. We will move on to the weirdly unfair story of the Workers in The Vineyard, and we finish the month with Jesus' authority questioned. In all three stories we discuss issues of fairness and judgment.

The Unforgiving Servant is glad to accept the judgment of the master who forgives him/her. The ten thousand talents the servant owes is an unimaginable amount. Everyone listening would know that this servant couldn't possibly have accumulated that much financial debt. Clearly this servant owes not only cash, but much more to the master. This servant has made some huge errors of the kind that cannot be easily undone. No amount of money will repay this debt. It is beyond forgivable—and yet it is forgiven.

One would think, forgiven of such a huge unforgiveable wrong, that the servant would be forever grateful. Perhaps he/she is forever grateful to the master, but that gratitude means nothing if it stops at that relationship. To say we're grateful to God for grace but to still show harsh judgment to others means we don't really get what God is trying to do. What the Unforgiving Servant fails to recognize is that accepting forgiveness also means accepting the responsibility to grant for-

giveness. In fact, the Unforgiving Servant fails at granting even a small amount of forgiveness. The hundred denarii were about a day's wages, and far, far less than the amount the servant had been forgiven!

When we are granted grace we are also told to grant grace. When we live in thanksgiving for having been forgiven, we are able to forgive. If we are not able to forgive, our story suggests that perhaps we haven't truly experienced forgiveness. Being forgiven gives us the openness and the confidence to forgive others. As a professor of mine in seminary liked to say, "An attitude of gratitude provides great latitude."⁵ Often that grace is difficult to understand for those who would rather judge than give grace.

The readings from Romans complement this theme of judgment and forgiveness and the authority required for each. We are taught that the only way to be right with the law is to love. We are also taught not to judge how someone else eats or celebrates, but to just do what we do in the honor of God. In that honor, perhaps we find the key to all our reflections on judgment, forgiveness, and authority.

September 21, 2014

**Proper 20: Fifteenth Sunday
after Pentecost**

Exodus 16:2–15;

Jonah 3:10–4:11

Psalms 145:1–8

Philippians 1:21–30

Matthew 20:1–16 (focus story)

First Reading (Matthew 20)

The last will be first and the first will be

5. The Rev. Dr. Sherrill Holland. Personal discussions of theology, noted by author. (New Brunswick, N.J.: New Brunswick Theological Seminary, 2000).

last. That can be frustrating, particularly if you're first! If you work hard to be first, you will end up last? The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is confusing and frustrating, and seems to go against everything that we have been taught.

Recently, I have been appalled at a car commercial in which an American man boasts about how "we" as Americans don't take the entire month of August off, work hard, and thus get what we deserve. The suggestions are upsetting, for they suggest that if one works hard, one is guaranteed success, and that if one is not working overtime, one is somehow insufficient. The suggestions also present the idea that we, the hard workers, are significantly better than those who cannot work.

The Gospel teaches us something very different. Hard work isn't for us to "get stuff." It is for God. We work for God. We are rewarded by becoming closer to God. God fills our minds with wisdom and our hearts with peace. God doesn't necessarily fill our garages with cars.

The producers of that car commercial might suggest that is somehow un-American, or at the very least unsuccessful. I'll take the Gospel's version of success any day!

September 28, 2014

Proper 21: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 17:1-7;

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalms 25:1-9

Philippians 2:1-13 (focus story)

Matthew 21:23-32

First Reading (Philippians)

The Christ Hymn of Philippians 2 has long been both a favorite of preachers,

but carries with it many questions. Does God want us to be humble like Jesus? Are we to take these verses that literally? Or is the lifting up of Christ the real goal of this section? Can we even get anywhere close to being like Jesus, and if not, then why tell us to try?

Recently I completed my Doctorate of Ministry in Preaching through the ACTS DMin in preaching program. As part of that program, I wrote a thesis on "Right-Sized Preaching." Perhaps being right-sized is what the Apostle Paul is calling us to consider in this section of Philippians.

Right-sized preaching is essential in a world of bigger-than-life celebrities and ever-dwindling resources. We are constantly being drawn to something we cannot and should not have. Right-sized preaching is preaching that recognizes a preacher's true size before the congregation, before the world, before self, and most importantly before God. This is not simply about physical height but about a preacher's spiritual, emotional, and intellectual size as well. Preaching right-sized calls preachers to see themselves honestly, recognizing that the preacher is a gifted creation of God, and also that those gifts mean nothing if they are not used in humble love of God.⁶

We are called to preach right-sized so that we and our people can learn to live right-sized. This is the call of the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2. It is a call we find in many areas of our lives, and God speaks to us in many exciting ways and voices.

6. Stephanie Salinas. *Right-Sized Preaching: You're Not That Special, and Yet...* (Chicago: McCormick Theological Seminary ACTS DMin in Preaching, 2013).

For example, 12-Step programs have long included this section in their literature:

We used our education to blow ourselves up into prideful balloons, though we were careful to hide this from others. Secretly, we felt we could float above the rest of the folks on our brainpower alone... Since we were brighter than most folks (so we thought), the spoils of victory would be ours for the thinking. The God of intellect displaced the God of our fathers... But... We who had won so handsomely in a walk turned into all-time losers. We saw that we had to reconsider or die. We found many in A.A. who once thought as we did. They helped us to get down to our right size. By their example they showed us that humility and intellect could be compatible, provided we placed humility first. When we began to do that, we received a gift of faith, a faith that works.⁷

The call of the Philippians 2 Christ Hymn, and our call to those who will receive our sermons, is to have the humility to truly listen to “commentary” from all around us. God is speaking to us and to others, and humble listening is the best way to hear God speak!

September 2014

Pastoral Reflection on Forgiveness and Responsibility

This month, as kids return to school, teachers return to the classroom, and churches return to fall programming,

it is interesting to consider how many of the New Testament readings focus on judgment and forgiveness. No matter how much a school tries to get away from teaching to the test, nonetheless school involves a system of judgment, forgiveness, testing, and authority. Students need to learn and teachers need to know if they have learned. When a student has not learned a teacher has the authority and the responsibility to judge that student and to try and help. When a student hasn't even tried to learn, a teacher still has the authority to judge and to try to help where there is need.

A good teacher is one who can judge with both authority and grace. A good teacher forgives again and again, while still calling the students to take responsibility and to maximize their potential. A good teacher also forgives so that the student will have the space to grow and continue to learn. A good teacher can mark both “100's” and “X's” with love.

Our God is a good teacher! We are granted forgiveness when we do wrong—over, and over, and over again. Even better, God doesn't stop there. God draws us to consider our errors and to learn from them, so that we can live better, healthier, holier, and happier lives. Part of living those better lives means that we accept the responsibility that comes with being forgiven. The responsibility means that we, too, can and must forgive.

The story of the Unforgiving Servant in the middle of this month is a tragedy, because it is lived out so much in American society today. Yes, it is a tragedy for the second servant who is put into financial difficulty because of debts that will never be forgiven. Still, I suggest that is perhaps an even greater tragedy for the first servant, who has known forgiveness but is unwilling or unable to then grant it. To those who

7. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1953), 29–30.

have never known God's mercy and love, life can be difficult indeed. For those of us who have known it, but are unwilling or unable to embody and live it, life can be positively unbearable. Certainly this is not to lessen the needs of those in need of mercy in our society, but it seems that this tale is told to draw attention to our own responsibilities as forgiven people. When we don't act on our responsibility to show mercy, not only our debtors suffer, but also we ourselves suffer.

This is becoming increasingly apparent and important in American society. As our society becomes increasingly more partisan and judgmental, we are losing our ability to forgive. We will accept forgiveness, but not really. What we really do when God offers us grace is to stuff our wrongs away in a corner, pretending they never happened. By not taking responsibility for our wrongs, we cannot know the joy of God's forgiveness, and we will never know the empowerment and peace

that comes with forgiving someone else.

God calls us out of this tragedy. God is calling us back to grace, received and given. This September, as the school bells ring, let's go back to school and hear the Good Teacher teach us to live as Christ lived, as sung by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:

⁵ Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: ⁶ Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. ⁷ But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8, *Common English Bible*)

In that humility returning to school works for all of us, whether we will sit in a classroom, or learn in other places. God is good indeed! Thanks be to The Teacher!



CURRENTS

in Theology and Mission

Could you use some help with sermon preparation? Do you find essays from leading pastors and theologians stimulating and rewarding? Then subscribe or give a gift of *CURRENTS in Theology and Mission*.

Get or renew a subscription...

	U.S.	Outside U.S.
One year (6 issues)	\$24	\$28
Two years (12 issues)	\$44	\$52
Three years (18 issues)	\$60	\$72

...give a gift *at a discount!*

	U.S.	Outside U.S.
One year gift (6 issues)	\$18	\$21

CURRENTS provides resources for mission, ministry, and theological growth for pastors, diaconal ministers, associates in ministry, and other church leaders. It is published bimonthly, February, April, June, August, October, December.

go to currentsjournal.org



The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation offers a number of stewardship workshops each year, each covering broad-based stewardship material. These events are open to the public. Please consider joining us and inviting members of your congregation to participate!

Programs offered through the Tithing and Stewardship Foundation at LSTC promote the practice of proportionate giving, encouraging greater spiritual growth in the sharing of all our talents and gifts.

The Tithing and Stewardship Foundation generously underwrites the workshops. For information about the foundation and upcoming events, go to tithing.lstc.edu, email tithing@lstc.edu or call 773-256-0679.

tithing.lstc.edu



1100 East 55th Street
Chicago, IL 60615

Currents in Theology and Mission
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
1100 East 55th St.
Chicago, IL 60615

Non Profit Org.
U. S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 38
Wheeling, IL 60090

***Websites
produced by
professors at
the seminaries
publishing
Currents***

Ann Fritschel (Wartburg Theological Seminary): Rural Ministry
<http://www.ruralministry.com>
S.D. Giere (Wartburg Theological Seminary):
Orienting the Ear to the Gospel
www.withearstohear.org
Ralph W. Klein (LSTC): Old Testament Studies
<http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/>
Gary Pence (PLTS): Healing Religion's Harm
<http://healingreligion.com>
The LSTC Rare Books Collection
<http://collections.lstc.edu/gruber/>

***Change of
address?***

Please contact us by phone or email (currents@lstc.edu), or send your corrected mailing label or a photocopy, or any change-of-address form, to Currents in Theology and Mission, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615, phone 773-256-0751, or fax 773-256-0782 (specify *Currents*). Whether you write or call, **please include the five-digit code at the top left of your address label** for our reference. Thank you.