



Recommendation: Book of Faith Initiative

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Background

The Book of Faith initiative grew from a 2005 memorial from the North Carolina Synod, calling on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to renew its engagement with Scripture and teaching of Lutheran approaches to reading the Bible. The 2007 Churchwide Assembly voted [CA07.02.06]:

1. To 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;
2. To call 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;
3. To call members, congregations, synods, churchwide ministries, and institutions and agencies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to explore ways to reform culture and customs in this church that will open it to a new level of valuing and being shaped by the power of the Word;
4. To urge that this initiative be designed and carried out in ways that affirm the Bible's power through the work of the Holy Spirit to speak in all settings and to all ages, with attention to individual and corporate use of the Bible by members and leaders in worship, devotion, study, proclamation, teaching, moral formation, addressing social issues, and evangelizing;
5. To commit the churchwide organization to substantial engagement in this initiative in extensive collaboration with synods and congregations;
6. To request that the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—who “as its pastor, shall be a teacher of the faith of this church and shall provide leadership for the life and witness of this church” (provision 13.21.)—lead this initiative personally and through collaborative programmatic work with the Vocation and Education unit in partnership with Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, as the publishing ministry of this church, and many others;
7. To anticipate the wide availability and use of a rich constellation of existing and new resources as well as the creative use of new means of communication, mindful of the global and ecumenical context, in exploration of the nature and authority of Scripture in the life of individuals and the whole Church;
8. To affirm funding of the churchwide organization's share of this “Book of Faith” initiative primarily through the regular operating budget in recognition not only that this initiative is of foundational and ongoing importance, but also in confidence that support for mission will grow from congregations through synods for churchwide ministries; and
9. To look beyond the time and scope of the “Book of Faith” initiative to what can be built on that work and to other ways in which God's Word will continually renew this church.

The Book of Faith initiative completed its five-year commitment, encouraging ELCA members, congregations, and synods to become fluent in the language of faith—Scripture. The grassroots initiative was credited with helping this church address realities directly and to experience more fully the power of the Word.

In April 2013, the Church Council asked [CC13.04.03] “the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, in consultation with Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, to review and engage in further discussions on the work of the Book of Faith initiative and consider how this church can build upon that work and engage in other ways in which God's Word

will continually renew this church” and to bring a report with possible recommendations for the 2013 Churchwide Assembly regarding the Book of Faith initiative.

Response of the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit

The Book of Faith initiative began life in response to a memorial from the North Carolina Synod in 2005 and many other voices calling on the ELCA to renew its engagement with Scripture and to renew teaching and use of Lutheran approaches to the Bible. The 2007 Churchwide Assembly action, which formally established the Book of Faith initiative, both called on the ELCA to acknowledge that we are joyfully and intentionally subject to God’s Word and invited the whole of the ELCA into broad and deep engagement with the Bible. From the beginning, the goal of the initiative has been to meet the continuing challenge of widespread biblical illiteracy by inviting people across this church to be more deeply engaged with Scripture for the sake of the world.

The Book of Faith initiative has operated using a decentralized, grassroots approach centered on a common vision in which all are invited to open Scripture and join the conversation. The initiative has emphasized that biblical engagement is greatly enriched by the use of “multiple methods” in conversation with the text and other persons. The suggested “methods” have centered on [four different ways of reading the Bible](#) and asking questions: devotional, historical, literary and Lutheran theological reading. The initiative has also emphasized the many rich Lutheran insights that have been helpful in understanding the myriad ways that God engages us through the Bible.

Over the past five years, Book-of-Faith-sponsored activities have happened in a variety of venues:

Book of Faith in Congregations

The Book of Faith initiative has helped increase and enrich engagement with Scripture in a number of congregations. Although tracking congregational participation has proven difficult owing to changes in the churchwide ministries, more than 1,300 congregations have officially self-identified as Book of Faith congregations through the sign-up page on the Book of Faith website, and 2,962 congregations indicated that they had participated in the initiative (2009 Congregational Report Form C). These congregations and many others have reported such practices as 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. For example, St. Paul Lutheran Church in Wheaton, Ill., hosted in 2013 a [Book of Faith Family Celebration](#) that involved many people from both the congregation and its community.

Many congregations have centered adult Bible study on the excellent [Book of Faith resources](#) from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers. Approximately 3,000 congregations have purchased some Book of Faith resources including Lutheran Study Bibles.

Book of Faith Partnership with Augsburg Fortress

Since 2008, Augsburg Fortress has published more than 160 [Book of Faith resources](#) in seven categories: 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*.

In addition, Augsburg Fortress publishes other Bible-centered resources under the Augsburg Fortress, sparkhouse, and Fortress Press imprints that were designed to align well with the Book of Faith initiative.

Book of Faith on the Web

The Book of Faith initiative has developed an ongoing Web presence. The [bookoffaith.org](#) site is regularly visited (12,993 unique visitors in the recent 12-month period) and updated. The Book of Faith initiative is active on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) as people continue to share ideas, resources, and successes.

In 2010, the Book of Faith initiative launched a publicity campaign with a goal of giving people a non-threatening way to engage the Bible. The campaign featured a thoughtful [Bible quiz](#) that is still available on the Book of Faith website and on mobile devices. The latest report is that more than 70,000 visitors have engaged this site.

Book of Faith at Churchwide Events

The Book of Faith initiative has had a significant presence at various churchwide events. At the 2012 New Orleans ELCA Youth Gathering, 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. One young woman was so moved by the encounter that she started her own work in bringing peace to others. This script and supply list for [Road to Shalom](#) has now been made available for synods, congregations, and other gatherings.

“Dwelling in the Word” sessions have regularly been included in ELCA Conference of Bishops and Church Council meetings.

Under the leadership of the Book of Faith initiative, the 2011 Churchwide Assembly began the practice of inviting the whole assembly to engage in Bible studies through small group discussions, utilizing the fourfold method of asking questions. This pattern of studying the Bible has been picked up in other event venues and is being used again at the 2013 Churchwide Assembly. This year the wider church has been invited into these biblical conversations.

Book of Faith in Synods

Synods are vital partners in the Book of Faith initiative and provide significant leadership. Designated Book of Faith synod advocates have continued working within their synod ministries on behalf of the initiative. Some have hosted Book of Faith events, bringing in speakers and creating their own events. Many synods have a Book of Faith presence on their synodical website. See, for example, the [Oregon Synod](#) which features an invitation from advocate Ms. Tonia J. Linquist and some audio/visual Bible studies by Bishop David H. Brauer-Rieke. Synods have adopted regular “Dwelling in the Word” moments at council meetings, synodical assemblies, and elsewhere.

Book of Faith in Higher Education

ELCA colleges and universities and campus ministries have sponsored Book of Faith groups and events. At present there is a move to propose partnerships among colleges, lifelong learning programs, campus ministries, and synods to offer Congregational Leadership Training for Book of Faith and mission conversations.

Book of Faith 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](#).

Lifelong learning at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., partnered with area synods to sponsor two [Book of Faith Jubilees](#).

Book of Faith with Other Churchwide Ministries

The Book of Faith initiative has collaborated with a variety of other partners to support programs and to help develop materials for use in various ELCA ministry settings.

In partnership with Faith Practices and Mission Development Leaders, a resource called *Story Matters: Claiming our Biblical Identity for the Sake of the World* was developed and is currently being piloted by a number of congregations. [Story Matters](#) is designed to help each congregation discover and articulate, in a deep and biblically based conversation, its unique identity and mission so that it might discern its congregational story, explore and live into its story, engage in missional planning, and be challenged by this engagement to live out its mission.

With Select Learning, several Book of Faith resources have been developed 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*.

With stewardship leaders, a [Rediscovering Macedonia](#) resource was developed for congregational use using the fourfold method to study 2 Corinthians 7:16–8:7.

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 culture and customs in this church that will open it 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 cultures and customs takes time. Old challenges have deepened, and new challenges have arisen.

Following [are] recommendations for Churchwide Assembly action that will meet these continuing challenges and opportunities.

Recommended for Assembly Action

To affirm the Book of Faith initiative as a continuing emphasis and priority in this church, and to request that the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—who “as its pastor, shall be a teacher of the faith of this church and shall provide leadership for the life and witness of this church” (ELCA constitutional provision 13.21.)—continue to lead this initiative personally and in collaboration with the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, other appropriate churchwide units, and the Conference of Bishops;

To reaffirm the overall goal of the Book of Faith initiative to help individuals and congregations throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to open Scripture and join the conversation;

To call on congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and other ministries of this church to continue to promote deep biblical engagement that approaches the Bible as the written Word of God, using “multiple methods” to engage persons individually and in community with others;;

To call upon Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, as the publishing ministry of this church, to consult with all expressions of this church and its related institutions and agencies as appropriate to undergird and support the Book of Faith initiative in order to enhance the biblical literacy of all members of this church as well as those seeking a better understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ;

To encourage engagement of the Book of Faith initiative by colleges, universities, and seminaries of this church, recognizing the continuing challenge of assisting pastoral and lay leaders in taking up their roles as teachers of the Bible in ways that engage and inspire the current and future members and seekers in this church;

To encourage the Book of Faith initiative leadership in conversation with its many partners to continue implementation of the initiative so as to respond to such challenges as: biblical illiteracy, Bible and mission outreach, addressing the great variety of cultures that make up this church and world, appealing to the growing number of persons in society claiming to be “spiritual but not religious,” creative use of social media, and the importance of family and home as centers of faith development; and

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