

seeds for the parish

Winter 2016

Resource Paper for Leaders of ELCA Congregations

www.ELCA.org



One child's inspiring birthday invitation

By Karen Ball

Every parent has faced the “party invitation” dilemma—the classmate who has invited your child to his or her birthday party, and you have no idea what to give this child for a gift. And when it is your own child sending the invitations, you know he or she doesn't need any more toys or other potential presents.

Cecil Carpenter solved this problem for his parents, and for all the parents and their kids that were invited to his 8th birthday party. Instead of presents for himself, he requested his friends bring something for him to put in the food barrel at his church, St. Paul Lutheran Church in Oakland, Calif.

“I'm not sure why I asked for food the first year, but I wanted to help other people and wanted to be kind,” Cecil

explained. He and his friends have contributed more and more food, and cash each year. This year they collected \$63 and 109 food items, including boxes and bags of pasta, canned fruit and vegetables, tomato sauce, peanut butter and other items for the food barrel.

Cecil still has his birthday party, but now his “gifts” go to someone who needs something to eat, especially during the summer when students don't have access to free or low cost breakfasts and lunches. Cecil and his friends get the good feeling from knowing they are helping someone else, and parents don't have to wonder if they got the “right” gift.

This idea has caught on at St. Paul. Other parents have told Cecil's mother, Carolyn, that they are having an

“alternative birthday gift” for their child: One family collected books to donate, another took up an offering for the local animal shelter, and a third family asked for donations to the St. Paul food barrel. By the way, this was Cecil's idea in the first place (not his mom's).

Cecil's whole family—his church family and his birth family—has been inspired by his example and generosity, are more than just a little proud of him.

For ideas on how to involve children, youth and adults in the fight against hunger—locally and globally—check out the resources at www.ELCA.org/hunger/resources.

Karen Ball is a member of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oakland.



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Five ways for a congregation to respond to a bad online review

By Nora Brathol

Google “bad church reviews on Yelp” and you’ll get more than 800,000 results. Yikes! That’s not a good sign for the future of our congregations.

Many people see Yelp, Facebook and other online review platforms as unfiltered resources, an antidote to savvy marketers that pick and choose which interactions and comments to showcase about their business or organization.

Yet the freedom and anonymity social media allow also present challenges. Anonymous reviewers can publicly criticize your organization with little to no consequences.

On the other hand, anonymous online reviews offer pastors, church leaders and members alike an honest view of the thinking of the masses—or at least, some of them. Online reviews are valuable tools that offer insight into how, where and in what ways your congregation can grow and improve.

Take Yelp, for example. If one person has a bad experience at your congregation, they can hurt your online reputation pretty quickly. While it’s unlikely you’ll be able to get the review removed by Yelp, there are many ways you can provide Yelp visitors with an alternate viewpoint.

- 1. Take control of your congregation’s business listing.** Doing this will allow you to respond as your congregation, aka “business owner.”
- 2. Reply—objectively.** The Internet is no place to fire off an angry response that will live in infamy everywhere. An understanding, compassionate and even-tempered response will

speak volumes. Keep in mind James 1:19, “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

- 3. Be honest with visitors and congregants** about the poor review and ask them to review your congregation—without being defensive or argumentative with other reviewers. Additional reviews can help balance out viewpoints and show that this one review is not the majority’s experience.
- 4. Take this opportunity to examine what might have led to this person’s experience.** Ephesians 4:15 calls for us to speak the truth in love, and that may have been the reviewer’s intent. If they were a first-time visitor, maybe the welcome team could benefit from the feedback. If this was a long-time member, you probably know more of the back story, but a public “we’re sorry to see you go” is another way to show your faith community is sad to see them leave. Don’t shy away from self-examination or pondering criticisms.
- 5. Take it offline.** At a certain point, online conversations can devolve into back-and-forth mud-slinging messages that are pointless. The “business owner” for your congregation’s account can message the reviewer privately and encourage an



in-person meeting or phone conversation to resolve the issue. If that person continues to post negative comments, a simple public message of “we’ve reached out to this person and look forward to a dialogue” can work wonders.

Remember that while a bad review

may feel unfair, it still reflects what that person perceived as true, and thus deserves a response.

When your congregation receives a good review, it is important to thank that reviewer—Yelp recommends doing this privately, but many businesses choose to do so publicly for outside visitors.

In addition to Yelp, there are many other tools members and visitors can use to review your congregation online, including Faith Street, Church Rater, Facebook and Google. It is always a good practice to routinely—and frequently—check your listings to address any issues and ensure people aren’t turned off before they ever walk through your doors.

If you have any technology or social media questions you’d like addressed on the ELCA’s online Living Lutheran, please submit them to livinglutheran@elca.org.

Nora Brathol is the founder of Arka Pana Consulting and is passionate about using social media for social good. She is a member of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Chicago.

seeds for the parish

ELCA.org/seeds
LivingLutheran.com/seeds

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Current and past issues of Seeds for the Parish are available for download at www.ELCA.org/Resources/Seeds-for-the-Parish.

Contact Us

Subscriptions – 773-380-2950
Content – rod.boriack@elca.org

Mission Advancement

Christina Jackson-Skelton – Executive Director
Melissa Ramirez Cooper – Associate Director, Publications
Julie B. Sevig – Managing Editor, Publications

Editorial Staff

Rod Boriack – Editor
Karen Dersnah – Designer

Note: Not all resources and program ideas listed in **Seeds for the Parish** have received official ELCA review or endorsement.

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POSTMASTER, send address changes to:
Richard Millett
8765 West Higgins Road
Chicago, IL 60631
Email: richard.millett@elca.org

Reminder: New P.O. Box for ELCA churchwide ministries

Please remember to update your contact information for the ELCA’s gift processing center. The new address for our gift processing center (replacing P.O. Box 71764, P.O. Box 71511 and 39330 Treasury Center in Chicago) is:

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
ELCA Gift Processing Center
P.O. Box 1809
Merrifield, VA 22116-8009



This change only applies to P.O. Boxes used for processing direct gifts for churchwide ministries from individuals and congregations. You may continue to give through your synod following the same process you always have.

IGNITE your congregation with intentional fundraising, communications

ALDE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IGNITE CHICAGO 2016

With the Association of Lutheran Development Executives (ALDE) IGNITE International Conference: Chicago 2016, congregations can learn how to ensure hard work and precious resources are focused in the right direction for efficient fundraising and effective communications.

ALDE educates and mentors the Christian fundraising community to spark generosity for mission. Held at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago, Feb. 21-24, the event supports Christian development (fundraising, communications and marketing).

Sessions are tailored to needs in a congregational setting, such as making positive changes for foundation, endowment, operational, capital and overall stewardship funding. Session highlights include:

- Building an Effective Budget
- Forget Bake Sales: IGNITE Your Organization's Fundraising Efforts
- An Introduction to Planned Giving for Fundraisers

- IGNITE a Campaign: Starting With Insiders
- Charting Your Course for Growth
- Leading People Through Change
- Using Visual Social Media to IGNITE Imagination and Build Community
- Beyond the Logo: Reigniting Your Brand
- Igniting a Culture of Philanthropy in Your Organization

Keynote speaker is John Roberto, who studies, writes and speaks about faith formation, intergenerational ministry and other church topics.

Find out more at aldeignite.com. Register now at alde.org/register. Note: It is less expensive to become an ALDE member, and register as a member. ALDE also has a low membership rate for those who serve in a volunteer capacity. Incentives are also available for organizations with multiple members.

Living Lutheran: A place to witness and share everyday living faith

At Living Lutheran, there's something new for you every day. Well, almost every day. How about something new posted five days a week, all year long? Martin Luther said, "Our faith is a living, busy, mighty, active thing." Living Lutheran invites you to share in the sense of purpose and call to action that our faith brings to our lives each day.

As an online publication of the ELCA, Living Lutheran's goal is to provide a place for members and friends alike to find lively engagement in faith and life. At Living Lutheran you'll find the voices of ELCA members, as well as what's happening in communities, congregations, synods and ELCA-related organizations across the country and around the world.

Every week you'll find new posts—feature blogs, stories, photo blogs, prayer suggestions, videos or new Seeds resources and programs for congregations.

Visit Living Lutheran at www.ELCA.org/Living-Lutheran.



LOOK AT HOW YOUR LIFE HAS CHANGED!

Families grow, kids leave for college, "Mom" becomes "Nanna" and retirement becomes reality. All along the way, your protection needs are changing.

Make sure your coverage is keeping pace with your life. Schedule an Insurance Checkup with a Thrivent Financial representative or visit Thrivent.com/checkup.



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Valpo announces 2016 Institute of Liturgical Studies

Each year during the second week of Easter, clergy, musicians and other worship leaders gather on Valparaiso [Ind.] University's campus for three days of continuing education, worship, community and renewal. This year's theme is Bearing God's Creative and Redeeming Word to all the World: Vocation and Worship, April 4-6, 2016.

For 68 years, the Institute of Liturgical Studies has provided a place of engaging and emerging topics in liturgical renewal. This year is the second in a series exploring our relationship to creation as a site of liturgical renewal. In 2015, institute participants considered how stewardship of creation takes on new urgency as we discover the fragile nature of our universe. The 2016 institute will explore how we frame our own vocation and worship in this interconnected cosmos.

Plenary presenters Delores Dufner, Rafael Malpica-Padilla, Donald Saliers and Paul Westermeyer will consider how

this theme takes root in our own lives and will help unpack the implications. Plenary talks, seminars and workshops will engage everyone in important questions about vocation in our own time.

Worship during the event will be in The Chapel of the Resurrection on campus and will use global sources to connect our lives with those our neighbor. Participants will consider what a global economy does to our lives, what justice requires of us and how those realities shape the way we worship. The liturgies used for worship will offer eucharistic and other prayer offices to help participants reflect on God's creation and our place in it, connecting our vocation to the world around us.

Monday afternoon seminars offer participants opportunity to delve more deeply into a single aspect of worship leadership. This year's seminar topics include preaching, enlivening worship, clergy-musician relationships and liturgy and life relationships.



The Harre Student Union will be the home for the institute's registration, plenary presentations, meals and exhibits. Its proximity to the chapel makes walking dis-

stances accessible and convenient.

Registration and information about workshops, seminars, worship and schedule are available at www.valpo.edu/ils.

Start planning now for Earth Day Sunday celebrations

Consider celebrating Earth Day Sunday with your community on or around Friday, April 22. The Lutheran tradition as well as the Bible are full of language and theology for celebrating and caring for God's creation.

Yet sometimes, in the rhythm of the liturgical year, it can be challenging to find a specific time to focus as a church community on the theme of creation. Earth Day Sunday provides just such an opportunity.

Since 1970, communities have taken one day each year to be especially mindful of the Earth and its many gifts. Each year, Creation Justice Ministries focuses on liturgical resources as well as Christian education material around a particular en-



vironmental theme. The Earth Day Sunday resource also highlights a number of ways individuals and congregations can celebrate and protect God's creation. These ideas and resources can inspire further thoughts, conversations and actions in

answering God's call to be faithful stewards of creation.

Congregations are encouraged to celebrate Earth Day either the Sunday before or the Sunday after Earth Day, which in 2016 falls on Friday. The theme for 2016 is Care for God's Creatures. You can also access previous years' materials on the Creation Justice Ministries website: www.creationjustice.org/earth-day-sunday.

Lutheran Social Ministry conference in Minneapolis April 25-28

All are invited to celebrate Lutheran social ministry at the 2016 Lutheran Services in America Annual Conference—Building the Path, Shining the Light.

Called by God to serve and walk alongside our neighbor, Lutheran Services in America (LSA) is the national network that brings together Lutheran social ministry organizations, collectively touching the lives of one in 50 people in the United States each year. LSA members answer the call by providing a broad range of critical services such as care for seniors, disaster relief, refugee resettlement, disability support, children and family services, and caring for unaccompanied minors.

Lutheran Services in America's largest event, the annual conference, convenes social ministry leaders, congregational leaders, clergy, nonprofit board members and those who serve in social ministry organizations to build on and celebrate



LSA's network, united in the mission of transforming lives and communities. The LSA annual conference is open to all with a heart for service and a passion for servant leadership.

Social ministry is an important part

of our church's rich heritage, and many of today's Lutheran social ministry organizations began as congregational ministries. LSA relates with the ELCA and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Like the Lutherans who answered God's call 150 years ago and founded the ministries upon which the LSA network is based today, we are all a vital part of the Lutheran legacy of service.

Learn more about the conference and supporting Lutheran social ministry and the LSA network at www.lutheranservices.org. Connect with LSA at **Facebook.com/LutheranServices** or **Twitter @LutheranSvc**.

RESOURCES FOR LENT

Join 40 Days of Giving

This Lent, ELCA World Hunger is extending a special invitation to congregations: Lift up the life-changing work of ELCA World Hunger through new levels of giving—spiritually, intellectually and financially—through ELCA World Hunger’s 40 Days of Giving.

Beginning Sunday, Feb. 7, and extending through the season of Lent, congregations will join together to raise \$2 million to benefit the ministries of ELCA World Hunger. This support will enable crucial work to get underway and help kick-start the year-of-emphasis within *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*.

New resources for Lent, including an exclusive 40-day devotional, and special Super Bowl, Valentine’s Day and leap-day ideas, are now available at ELCA.org/40days.

Participating congregations will receive:

ELCA World Hunger's 40 DAYS of Giving

- Exclusive access to ELCA World Hunger’s 40-day Lenten devotional for congregations and members.
- A six-week study guide suitable for Wednesday or Sunday Lenten worship or studies to accompany the 40-day devotional.
- The opportunity to sign up for ELCA World Hunger’s 40 Days of Giving daily e-blasts featuring the devotion-of-the-day throughout Lent.
- A special certificate recognizing your efforts to help end hunger and poverty through ELCA World Hunger.

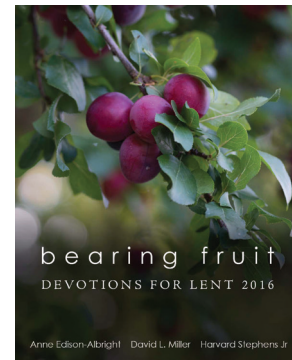
A new Lenten devotional for your congregation

“Bear fruit,” says the letter to the Colossians, not as a burden but as our great joy. As our roots go deeper into the word and we soak up God’s saving grace, we grow and bear the fruit of living new lives in Christ—faith, forgiveness, healing, hope, joy, and love. This fruit invites others to experience God’s love and sends the peace of Christ into the world.

—“Welcome” from “*Bearing Fruit: Devotions for Lent 2016*”

With *Too Deep for Words* in 2014, followed by *Grace and Peace* in 2015, congregations have responded enthusiastically to a new devotional format from Augsburg Fortress, distributing more than 35,000 copies of the 2015 edition—an increase of 27 percent over the previous year.

Augsburg Fortress’ new *Bearing Fruit: Devotions for Lent 2016* takes readers through Lent with daily read-



ings from Colossians and features writers Anne Edison-Albright, David L. Miller and Harvard Stephens Jr.

For each day in Lent, *Bearing Fruit* offers a colorful image, a reading from Colossians, a quotation to ponder, a reflection and a prayer. Colossians is one of the

New Testament letters read in worship during this liturgical year (Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary). The writers bring their voices and pastoral wisdom to these texts, and offer the voices of other witnesses in the quotations they have chosen for the “To ponder” section for each day.

Bearing Fruit is available in pocket-sized, large print and e-book editions, with a quantity discount available with the pocket-sized edition. Lent begins early in 2016, on Feb. 10—so order soon. Visit augsburgfortress.org/bearingfruit or call Sales & Service at 800-328-4648.

Growing church in young community gets new worship space with help from MIF

The rapidly growing suburban areas north of Charlotte, N.C., are drawing in young families. As a result, Community in Christ Lutheran Church in the town of Cornelius is enjoying a growing membership of young families.

Eight years ago, it became clear that the congregation’s 140-seat sanctuary was no longer adequate for an expanding membership—a problem any congregation would be delighted to have. So planning began in 2007 to build a larger facility with a larger sanctuary.

The Great Recession intervened, but the congregation was not deterred. “We had launched a capital campaign, and we continued raising money,” recalls Travis Norton, one of the pastors.

The congregation turned to the Mission Investment Fund (MIF) for consultation. As the ELCA’s lending ministry, MIF makes

low-interest loans to congregations and ELCA-related ministries for building projects, including the construction of church buildings as well as renovations, additions and upgrades with environmentally sound, sustainable features. For Community in Christ, MIF’s experienced church-building consultant recommended a manageable—and affordable—expansion: a 7,000-square-foot building with a 300-seat sanctuary.

MIF became the congregation’s lender of choice. “MIF offered a very competitive interest rate,” said Norton. “And the fact that MIF uses funds of its investors to help start new churches—that was great motivation for us. We wanted to support that vision.”

Community in Christ’s new building was dedicated on Palm Sunday 2014. Now, with the addition of a second Sunday wor-

ship service, more than 360 weekly worshipers fit comfortably in the 300-seat sacred space. The sanctuary is wider than the original, and all worshipers are closer to the altar. The chancel area is elevated, and a more sophisticated system projects sound and images.

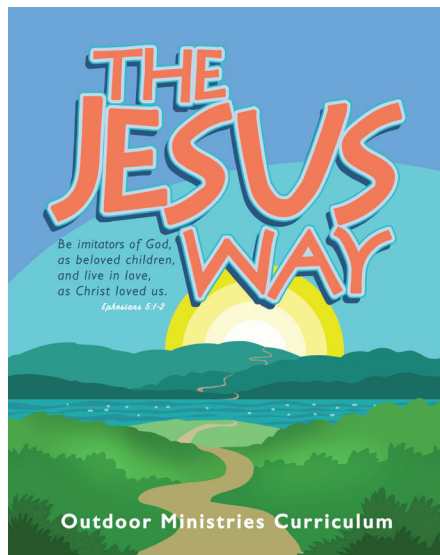
Now that the new, larger worship space is in use, Norton is delighted that the former sanctuary can now serve as the official home to Sunday school classes: “For the first time, Sunday school doesn’t have to



share quarters with our preschool.”

For more information about MIF loans and investments, call MIF customer service toll-free at 877-886-3522 or visit mif.ELCA.org.

Outdoor ministries curriculum focuses on ‘The Jesus Way’



Lutheran Outdoor Ministries (LOM) has released its 2016 curriculum titled “The Jesus Way.” LOM produces the curriculum each year to be used not only by Lutheran camps, but also by camps affiliated with other denominations, congregations and other organizations.

The theme challenges participants of all ages to live not in the way that the world expects, but to live for others. In “The Jesus Way,” participants will learn to trust in God’s promise as we feed, forgive, love, serve and pray ... The Jesus Way.

In addition to the entire curriculum package, “The Jesus Way” is available in different bundles at a discounted price to

meet different needs. The “Youth Ministry” bundle includes Bible studies for adults and junior and senior high youth. The “VBS” bundle provides a quality theme at an affordable price for congregations. This bundle includes Bible study activities, crafts and games for preschool children and upper and lower elementary-aged youth. All of these bundles contain sections to help you as you plan, including an introduction to the theme and biblical background material.

Those who purchase “The Jesus Way” will have access to the LOM curriculum website designed as a resource for curriculum development. The website contains a discussion forum where users can ask questions, share ideas and post other related resources they have found. The website will also host webinars that will help those developing and using the curriculum to dive more deeply into the material.

“The Jesus Way” curriculum can be purchased on the Lutheran Outdoor Ministries website at www.lomnetwork.org. More information can also be found on Facebook by searching “The Jesus Way Outdoor Ministry Curriculum.”

Lutheran Outdoor Ministries is an association of outdoor ministry organizations dedicated to encouraging, equipping, educating and empowering bold and faithful outdoor ministry leaders for service in the church and in the world.

Summer Bible study focuses on conflict, reconciliations

Angela Shannon, a pastor of King of Glory Lutheran Church in Dallas, Texas, will share “The Heart of the Matter,” a three-session Bible study on learning to deal with conflict through the ministry of reconciliation beginning in the June issue of *Gather*, the magazine of Women of the ELCA.

“Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation are healing words,” Shannon writes. “We hear these words spoken from our pulpits, in our hymns and various places throughout our churches. Yet we see conflict in our society and the ways in which we harm each other. We are about to enter an election year where the politics are as shrill and mean as ever.”

Although we look to the church for a safe haven from conflict, Shannon says, “life follows us through the doors, and there, too, we find conflict.”

“Conflicts are nothing new to the church,” she writes. “What’s miraculous is that God continues to create us anew. God insists on entrusting us with the ministry of reconciliation.”

She continues: “In working with congregations, I have found that although people are familiar with the healing words of Christ’s church, we must continue to learn the practical application of these words.”

The Heart of the Matter sessions

- **Session 1: Treasure in clay jars.** “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).



- **Session 2: Seeking God.** “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:14).
- **Session 3: The ministry of reconciliation.** “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

Subscribe to *Gather* magazine (gathermagazine.org) for this and other Bible studies that run in every issue.

‘Scripture Talk’ prompts conversations

Scripture only sits on a page until we interact with it, and people fall in love with the Bible as they connect it to their own stories. “Scripture Talk” allows our stories to flow out of God’s stories. “Scripture Talk” is an interactive invitation for real life and faith conversations. Scripture comes alive as people ponder, wonder, think about and share analogies, experiences, interpretations, impressions, hopes, doubts, memories, feelings, beliefs, ideas and prayers. Originally designed for youth

ministry, “Scripture Talk” is now widely used for cross-generational, family and adult ministries.

“Scripture Talk” provides 135 Bible passages with short prompts that lead to honest and open faith and life discussions. People who have used it describe it as simple, non-threatening and dynamic—a way for people to start amazing conversations. A digital kit includes three PDF formats with multiple uses: poster format, table top format and booklet or card format.

Find “Scripture Talk” at www.peerministry.org. Enter “SEEDS” to receive 15 percent off through Jan. 31. A one-time \$42.95 cost allows unlimited printing rights for your congregation or organization—buy it once to print and use over and over again for years to come.

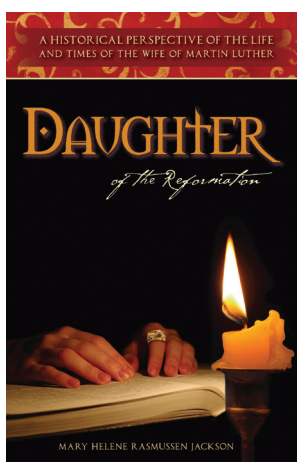
Peer Ministry Leadership offers a variety of resources that help groups build skills to care, welcome and affirm others, plus resources for sharing faith and life stories in the midst of mentoring, small groups and spiritual practices.



“When I usually read a verse in the Bible, I don’t know how to respond to it or how it applies to me, but with these questions I really do apply it to myself, take it in and learn things about myself I didn’t realize.” —Brianna (high school student), Texas

New Katharina von Bora Luther book available

As we near the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, Protestant churches, theologians and historians around the world will remember the man who started it all, but will they remember his wife? Martin Luther's legacy may not have had as profound an effect if not for his wife, Katharina von Bora, as researched by Mary Helene Rasmussen Jackson in her new book, *Daughter of the Reformation: A Historical Perspective of the Life and Times of the Wife of Martin Luther*.



Jackson began studying von Bora 30 years ago when someone asked her to do a presentation about her at church. This led to ongoing research and teaching opportunities. With the support of her education in teaching, public speaking and history, Jackson wrote and performed a monologue about von Bora for dozens of congregations.

"I discovered that people really know very little about the facts of the Reformation. It became my passion to talk to people in the pew, the pastor in the pulpit and to those who search for the inestimable value of ordinary life and events in the pages of history," said Jackson.

This monologue eventually became the foundation for what is now *Daughter of the Reformation*. The book is part history and part historical fiction, with extensive

research on the details of life in the 1500s woven throughout the narrative. Jackson's book reflects what people ate, what they wore, their superstitions and fears, and many other details of how people lived and died in 16th century Germany.

Jackson hopes that as churches around the world celebrate the Protestant Reformation, that they would not just remember the bold actions of men like Martin Luther, but would also honor the contributions of women like Katharina von Bora who sacrificed and contributed so much to the church.

"Katharina was the first pastor's wife. She survived as a strong woman despite gossip, deadly plagues, deaths of her children, wars, and not least of all, a very human and brilliant husband—Martin Luther," said Jackson.

Daughter of the Reformation was published by Huff Publishing Associates and is available at www.huffpublishing.com/books.

New social message: gender-based violence

This past November, the ELCA Church Council adopted both a social message on gender-based violence and an accompanying foundational document. The message is now available online and in printed form. The social message is easily used in educational settings and discussion groups. The foundational documentation is available online for download and provides significant analysis, statistics and context.

These two documents are among the first on this subject to be adopted by a national denomination and are widely seen as a distinct call to new understanding and action. For instance, the ELCA Conference of Bishops, meeting in October, went on record in support of this work with a unanimous commitment to share and use the materials.

The social message originally was requested by the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ. The ELCA Church Council agreed and directed the theological discernment team of the Office of the Presiding Bishop to develop the message. The development process including consultations with a large group of experts, public comment period and multiple drafts. This social message is the 14th of its kind adopted by the council. Other topics include suicide prevention, immigration, mental illness and end-of-life decisions. Visit www.ELCA.org/socialmessages to review all of them.

The online text of the message and foundational document are available at www.ELCA.org/socialmessages. Call 800-638-3522 for a complimentary paper copy of the social message. Multiple copies are available for the cost of shipping by calling 800-638-3522 or by ordering online at www.ELCA.org/resources.

Women and justice study (June 2016)

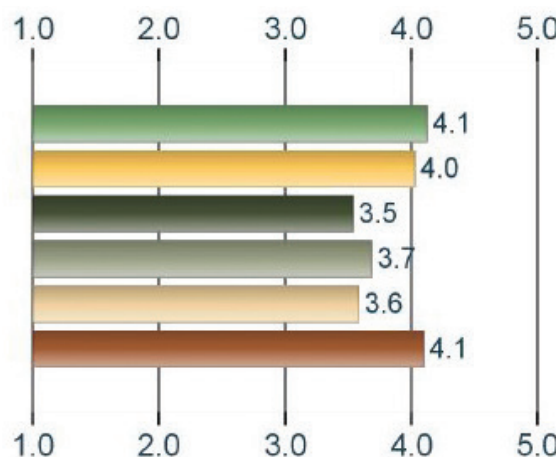
If you are making plans for study groups or programs for 2016 or 2017, watch for the study coming in late June 2016 from the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ. Tentatively titled, "Women and Men: One in Christ," the study's six sessions will be modular and can be adapted to the interests of your group.

The task force hopes for broad-ranging use of the study and extensive input on the issues covered. The response period runs through Sept. 1, 2017.

Reflecting on congregational life, vitality

How well do these phrases describe your congregation?

- Worship nurtures faith
- Helps deepen relationship with God
- Clear sense of mission
- Excitement about the future
- Always ready to try new things
- A positive force in the community



Each year ELCA congregations are asked to complete an annual report online, and last year 76 percent did so.

The data collected informs the whole church and is important as congregations think about mission and ministry. The data is also important to those who work on behalf of your congregation, including your synod bishop, the synod council, the synod staff, the presiding bishop, the ELCA Church Council and the churchwide organization staff.

This year's report for Form A is a bit different. The form still includes questions about membership and giving, but there are also new questions that focus more on

congregational life. These new questions, developed in response to many requests, will provide your congregation with a new opportunity to creatively and intentionally reflect on key areas of your congregation's life. The goal is to look forward: What is going well? What isn't? What do you do well that can be built upon? What can be done better and how?

Congregations are encouraged to convene a discussion group prior to filling out the report. This might include the congregation's council or another group of congregational leaders. Answers to these questions can then be shared as part of the report. The new report will include ques-

tions about worship, your congregation's sense of mission, using the gifts of members and your congregation's interaction with the local community. Each congregation is encouraged to find a process that works for them—the important thing is filling out the form. Your congregation's specific responses will not be shared without your permission.

Congregations are strongly encouraged to file the report online at www.ELCA.org/congregationreport. Paper copies will also be available, and all responses are due by Feb. 15, 2016. If you have questions, contact the ELCA Office of the Secretary at sec@elca.org.



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