

gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

Mini-issue:

Creating community



My spiritual grandmothers

BY REBECCA EVE SCHWEITZER

RUTH, JUSTINE, ELAINE AND WANDA. These are my spiritual grandmothers. These women in their 60s, 70s and 80s rescued me in my mid-20s. At that time, I found myself unemployed, moving back in with my parents and unpacking my apartment into my childhood bedroom in a city where I had not maintained any friendships. I returned to the church where I had grown up, but it had a new, unfamiliar pastor. I felt lost and hopeless.

Moving home meant being home for my mother's Bible study. Every other Friday morning, several women, mostly older adults, gathered around our kitchen table with Bibles, coffee and baked goods to talk about the next session in their study.

That first Friday, I wondered when the study would be over. Sure, I'd known and loved most of these women my whole life, but I had sleeping in to do, story pitches to write (for possible writing assignments), jobs to apply for and a God to be frustrated with. Women's Bible study wasn't at the top of my priority list. Besides, most of these women had been studying the faith longer than I had been alive. What could I bring to this table? I knew I could learn from them, but I wasn't in the mood.

I never bothered to review the material, so I had no idea at first what we were studying, but I sat quietly, nibbling coffee cake, half-listening to the chatter. Perhaps noticing my lack of engagement, one woman asked what I thought. "You're young," she said. "You probably have a different outlook than us old ladies." When I answered, they all paid attention. They asked follow-up questions. They wanted me to be part of their group.

Up until this point, I'd mostly interacted with these women as a child. I'd overheard their stories, but I had never talked deeply with them. I realized that this Bible study was the first time I'd sat at the table as an adult. It was the first time I felt part of the conversation. I started looking forward to those Fridays.

I'd known that you learned from and respected your elders. I knew you showed your elders how to use new technology. But never before had I felt so included in the dialogue. I found encouragement in learning how each of their lives took unexpected turns and how God used those struggles. They asked me questions about my generation. I interpreted the slang their grandchildren used. We laughed a lot. They surrounded me with love and attention when I felt adrift.

When I turned to the group for advice, they never scolded or preached. Instead, they validated and shared. I learned more about God's love from the love they showed me than I could have learned from any devotional book.

The Bible study dissolved years ago, and Justine went home to be with the Lord, but these women remain dear to me. I am now the youth leader at our congregation, teaching a group of 12- to 20-year-olds. I try to remember the power of the attention and curiosity my spiritual grandmothers showed me. I want my students to feel as heard and loved as I felt. My spiritual grandmas are still there, cheering me on, praying for me and being amazing, hilarious and loving examples to my youth group, reaching yet another generation with their kindness, attention and love. 🌸





CELEBRATE ABUNDANCE

by Elizabeth McBride

Creating intergenerational community

Imagine throwing a party and inviting only people who wear green hats. You spend weeks focused on attracting green-hat-wearing people to the party. When the day of the party comes, a couple of green-hat-wearers come through the door, and you're thrilled! Except that after a while you notice that these green hat-wearers aren't what you expected. You don't have as much in common as you hoped you would. The shade of their hats is not exactly what you had pictured. And where are all of the other green-hat-wearers? Why did only these few show up? Furthermore, to the other people that

show up to your party, you express your discouragement and proclaim that green-hat-wearing women never come to your parties. Everyone is disappointed—you, the people in green hats and the people without hats who feel unappreciated and unwelcome.

Does this example sound ridiculous? It is. But often when congregations or women's groups want to add new members, they fall into a similar trap. A lot of focus is placed on attracting a certain kind of person into our groups—young people, new families, a hip new pastor, etc. But this can come off as tokenism and inauthentic. It is ideal to include

people who may see things differently than you or your current group, but there has to be a genuine connection and willingness to be receptive to changes that may come as a result. A quest to fill your pews with younger bodies does not make an intergenerational community, and it doesn't serve younger women of faith either.

Sometimes before we set out to attract new, younger or different people, we need to ask ourselves why. Is our group really hoping to create an inclusive community, or are we thinking that we are not as valuable because we lack young bodies in our photos? Are we hoping to build and sustain

authentic relationships, or do we think a younger person will somehow magically save our congregation or revive our burned-out group?

I see this often in my work as director for intergenerational programs at Women of the ELCA. Women's groups want younger women to participate but don't know exactly know why. Or perhaps they do know why, but the reason is out of a sense of fear or scarcity. Communities that focus on scarcity aren't sustainable; however communities that foster a sense of abundance may succeed.

Authentic abundance

Parker Palmer writes in *Let your life speak*, "Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection, but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them—and receive them from others when we are in need."

There is something special that happens when women of different backgrounds, ages and experiences get together bound by a common faith in Jesus Christ. They celebrate the abundance they have been gifted by God with others so that they may too experience it. They give what they have to empower women and girls and make the world a more compassionate and positive place.

I've seen it. Women meet monthly over *Café*, Women of the ELCA's online magazine written mostly by young women. Women in their 20s to 80s have met to discuss the articles, prayed together and shared their ups

and downs—they've built authentic community.

At a Women of the ELCA display focused on raising awareness about human trafficking at the ELCA Youth Gathering, I've seen teens ask, "How do we get involved?" and empty their pockets.

I met a woman who told me how an article about miscarriage in *Café* inspired her to invite women of different ages—even women of different faiths—to come together and talk about a topic that brought grief but also healing. This is authentic community—different women, different faiths even, looking to a community to "give those goods to others who need them and receive them from others when they are in need."

Intergenerational community works when there is an authentic relationship. Relationships that are built on mutual respect are sustainable—but if we focus solely on including a certain demographic, like young adults, we will fail both current and potential participants.

Leaders can make a difference

Leaders must also be aware of how their messages to attract new or younger people may sound. Women's groups may use negative-sounding language at their meetings or in their newsletters to describe their struggle to engage young women in their groups. Leaders who preach scarcity and stoke fear about their groups dying will not bring new and younger people to participate. They will only alienate current participants at best

and scare off younger people at worst.

Do you remember that saying, "What am I, chopped liver?" Women who do show up at your events do not need to be made to feel unimportant because they don't fit a "desirable" demographic. The problem with focusing on younger women is that it is completely subjective. Age has nothing to do value. It is a biological process that does not make up someone's identity—and that single criteria certainly does not help build or sustain community. Young women have skills and gifts that can benefit a group. Let that be the reason you want to build a more inclusive community.

Doing the hard work

Authentic community takes work. Throwing an annual tea for the women in your church group is not going to transform it. But continued effort in making positive change in your congregation and community will. It takes effort to bring people together. It takes time and understanding to meet others in your congregation and even more time and understanding to get to know how to relate to those in your community.

It can be uncomfortable to talk to new people in your community and congregation. Perhaps you have to convince leaders in your congregation that an intergenerational women's group is needed so that the whole community can grow. And you might be the only person that is invested in making change happen. However, just because you lack power in numbers does not mean that there is nothing to

gain. The idea may be slow in developing, but your effort to try something new—meeting new people where they are and sharing your faith in Jesus—is never a waste.

Most importantly, if you desire authentic connection, you cannot keep meeting with only those who think like you. You have to be ready and open to involving those not like you.

Here are some ways to broaden your community, while sharing the abundance of authentic relationships connected by faith in Jesus Christ.

Be visible, so many may find you

To get the message out about your women's group, you can meet people in person, and you can post messages to your congregation's Facebook page. You can also add invitations to your events on your congregation's website. By using electronic media, like social media and websites, you can reach a broad audience. Younger people are looking for new places to worship, whether you may know it or not.

But don't think you have to be visible online only. Other personal invitations can work too. I recall that the young woman who raised the most money at Women of the ELCA's Run, Walk and Roll event at a triennial gathering was an 8-year-old girl, Zoe. She told us that she stood in front of her congregation every Sunday and invited the congregation to support her participation in the race. She raised \$5,000. That money went toward supporting health initiatives for women and girls. I'm sure it wasn't easy for her to invite her con-

gregation, but she didn't stop after one Sunday announcement.

Celebrate those who show up

How often do you hear people at your church talk about the number of women that didn't show up to your event or convention? In order to celebrate an authentic community, do not rely on counting warm bodies. Do not be concerned about numbers or how many "young" women you have in attendance. Authentic community building means building relationship connections over time, maybe one person at a time.

Experience something new outside

When working to create an authentic space, why not move out of your comfort zone? Move beyond the church building and do service in the community. You can organize a group at your congregation or at your local Starbucks and connect with a nonprofit that could use help. Volunteermatch.org connects volunteers with organizations in your area. Not all women know how to quilt, but any woman can help sort boxes of food at a food bank. Make sure you have easy entry points for all volunteers.

Help provide a solution

Are there groups of women in your community that could use some assistance? Could local women's shelters use your group's amazing skills at providing luncheons? Assess the gifts your group possesses. Then share your gifts widely. Women of all ages can participate.

Stop using excuses

Sometimes we may be tempted to dismiss starting something new because we have been used to traditions and can't imagine another way of doing things. Maybe we convinced ourselves that nobody else wants to do something new either—whether that's true or not.

One of my favorite stories is that of a woman sharing a concern with her new pastor that the congregation she has been part of for 30 years is dying. The pastor corrects her about the number of new families that show up every Sunday. Because this woman attended an earlier service, she never witnessed these new families. Sometimes we tell ourselves things based on our own perceptions, and they may not actually be true.

Learn how to do something new

If posting on social media about your upcoming events scares you, take a class. Or better yet ask a friend or family member to help you. If public speaking is difficult, you can practice or take a class too.

Palmer writes: "Community doesn't just create abundance—community is abundance." Let us remember that we can share the abundance by working toward creating an open and supportive intergenerational community in our congregations and communities—green hats or not.

Elizabeth McBride is director for intergenerational programs for Women of the ELCA and editor of *Café*.

by Abby Accettura

BEYOND



SUNDAY

When church folk talk about young people who are involved in church, the immediate response tends to be one of resignation.

This has been true for quite some time. In 2014, Barna Group researchers found that among millennials, only two in 10 believe church attendance is important, and more than one-third (35 percent) “take an anti-church stance.” Similarly a 2015 Cable News Network (CNN) study revealed that “more than one-third of millennials now say they are unaffiliated with any faith.”

Across the board, it seems that young people are divorcing themselves from the church, and plenty of research has been done about why. Anecdotal responses from young adults range from a belief that church is irrelevant to a feeling that organized religion is mired in hypocrisy to a rejection of the limiting exclusivity of some churches.

As a millennial adult who was baptized and raised as a Lutheran Christian, I attended Sunday school, served as a reader and a greeter at worship services and sang in every Christmas pageant. In grade school I attended weekly religious education classes that my parents co-taught in our congregation’s classrooms. In middle school I took my first communion, attended confirmation classes

and was confirmed. In high school I participated in the youth group, taught confirmation classes for younger students and began occasionally serving as assistant minister. So when we talk about young people in the church, I am not the “lost sheep” we’re usually discussing. But I have not attended church in nearly six months. I want to talk a little about why.

Becoming accessible

Traditional church has a reputation—deserved or not—for being inaccessible to young people. Rigid structures, rituals and a “sit up straight” attitude combine so that often, when young people hear “church,” we think of wooden pews, stained glass and fidgeting with our skirt hems or ties while sitting through a sermon. When church members talk about how to fix this, the immediate response is often to “modernize” by bringing in a praise band and projector screens or contemporary music. Yes, contemporary worship music can be quite effective for many people, and if it’s having a positive effect in your congregation, please

continue. But for many of my peers and me, there is something inherently off-putting about the idea that if a congregation throws in a guitar, young people will immediately come to worship.

Contemporary worship is not a siren call for the youth. The idea that contemporary worship works that way is emo-

tionally manipulative at best and openly condescending at worst. The ways in which many younger people find church to be inaccessible run much deeper than the aesthetics of particular liturgies or worship music. This can’t be solved just by changing a tune.

The true distance between young people and the church is at a much deeper level, and in part, this is because young people come from a very unique experience. The millennial generation suffers more profoundly from mental illness than any previous generation. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (nami.org),

20%
of millennials
believe church
attendance is
important

35%
of millennials
take an
anti-church
stance

more than 5 million college students struggle with mental illness and more than 25 percent of college students have been treated for a diagnosable mental illness in the last year.

Across the demographic board,

my peers are fighting an uphill battle in our own minds. This trend leaves the millennial generation not only struggling but also increasingly isolated from the world around us. According to Barna, while 20 percent of Americans describe themselves as “lonely,” this increases to 47 percent for millennials. And with social media many young people curate an external self-image via technology, causing many of us to deny the existence of any and all struggle or pain—only increasing the profound sense of isolation.

The experience of today’s young people makes the church more necessary than ever. The church seeks to provide a rooted, core faith; a

sense of life purpose and meaning; a supportive community—things we need now more than ever but find in fewer and fewer places. Many of our towns lack community centers or programming for young people older than 18. Many young people struggle with crippling student debt and work almost non-stop to regain financial stability, leaving little time for communal interaction. We could benefit from congregations that provide a cornerstone, a place of love and healing that reaches us where we are. The need is there. The church has an opportunity to fill it.

So why don’t young people come?

I am only one person. I’m not a researcher, an anthropologist or a theologian. I know very little about the inner workings of the church as an institution. I only know what my experience has been, what I see in my own congregation and what I hear from my peers and contemporaries. Many of us do not attend church because we see so many misunderstandings about what young people need from one.

For instance, we desperately want to feel accepted. We will not choose to spend our time in a place where we don’t feel accepted. Avoiding controversial issues is not sufficient to make us feel accepted.

Safe spaces

We need to talk about the major social issues that play out in our lives. As people in our late teens, 20s and early 30s, there are issues we need to talk about, areas in which

we need guidance. We need to talk about substance use. We need to talk about premarital sex, homosexuality and the role that our romantic relationships play in our lives. We need to talk about marriage in a context we understand, without assumptions that marriage happens early and lasts forever, because statistically it does not. We need to talk about birth control, about family planning, about the role that abortion plays on our national stage. We need to talk about mental illness and about how it could ever be possible for us to live happy, fulfilled lives when we battle our own heads every day. We need to have these conversations in the context of a faithful life, in dialogue with the larger system of beliefs and values that inform the world, and we need to have these conversations in safe, protected, accepting spaces. Can the church offer this?

When a congregation takes an archaic stance on these issues, we feel as if this is an institution that does not include us. When the church takes no stance on those issues, we feel as if the realities of our daily lives are irrelevant to this institution. It is not enough to avoid hard topics. Continuing to maintain exclusive opinions on issues that are permanent fixtures in our daily lives will always, always place us on the outside.

The world has changed profoundly in the last several decades. That is obvious both inside and outside of the church, particularly in how young people today approach worship in churches. But I do not

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believe our declining worship attendance is because young people no longer have faith or are suddenly culturally estranged from the concept of religion. I believe it's because the needs of my generation are no longer

being met within the traditional institution of the church. Yet with time, grace and change, they could be.

Your congregation has an opportunity to serve as more than just another Sunday morning engage-

ment in the lives of young people. We need you. 🌱

Abby Accettura is currently pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in screenwriting at DePaul University in Chicago.

WE LONG FOR WAYS TO TAKE ACTION



- We live in a technological age where we can access vast quantities of information at the touch of a button. Because of this, many of us struggle to appreciate the form of traditional sermon-based worship. I do not believe typical liturgical worship services are effective among young people who are relentlessly inundated with words. Most of us need to actually be involved in action.
- To be a person of faith should be an active state—a verb, not a noun. Young people are very aware of corruption and hypocrisy. Today's technology only heightens this awareness. The most effective way church members can combat that sense of hypocrisy is to truly practice what is preached.
- Many of us learn more from a service project than from a sermon. We feel more connected to a faith community when we are acting in cooperation with others than when we are simply sitting in a pew. We are desperate for a sense of community, a sense of belonging. We

grow that feeling of community through shared experiences, which help create a much more tangible understanding of faith.

- We need more than Sunday. What the church provides outside of Sunday morning worship is just as important to young people, if not more so. Youth groups and Bible studies aren't the limit of what we're craving from a church community.
- We want a place to ask questions, to seek counsel. Desperately.
- We want safe, welcoming, communal spaces where we can meet people of other ages, cultures and experiences.
- We want opportunities for service and action, for a way to feel like what we do has purpose and value in God's world.
- We want to be listened to. We want congregation leaders to ask us what we need and work with us to provide that.

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you continually reach out to us with love and kindness. Guide us as we listen and learn from Scripture and one another. Teach us to share your love by welcoming others with compassion and respect. Break down barriers of misunderstanding and division—barriers that separate us from our neighbors. Transform us by your Spirit and help us to grow in a spirit of mutual love and care. Amen.


SUGGESTED HYMN

“All Are Welcome” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 641)

FOCUS VERSE:

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:1-2).

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
 - Hymnals (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)
- 

All are welcome

Our invitation can reflect the hospitality of Jesus. BY JULIE A. KANARR

INTRODUCTION

More than just “good manners,” hospitality is a spiritual matter. In welcoming and in being welcomed, we experience the love of God who breaks down human barriers and draws us into community with one another. In this study we will explore several Bible passages that invite us to reflect on dimensions of hospitality within our own lives and congregations.

WHO, ME?

1. **Share aloud or reflect:** When introducing yourself to others, how do you describe yourself?

What makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable in a new setting?

What do you consider to be indicators that you are truly welcome?

- **Read:** Jeremiah 1:4-10, Genesis 12:1-5 and Genesis 18:1-15.

When Jeremiah heard the voice of God calling him to be a prophet, Jeremiah objected that he was too young. God reassured Jeremiah and affirmed his calling, telling Jeremiah that his youthfulness was not a barrier. When God first gave Abram (Abraham) the promise that he would become the father of a great nation, Abram was 75 and childless. Yet God blessed Abram, promising that through him all people would be blessed. Years later, when Abram’s wife, Sarai (Sarah), was informed that she would have a son,

she laughed, dismissing the idea as ludicrous because she was too old to bear a child. These texts help us to challenge our age-related assumptions. God refutes Jeremiah's attempt to deny his calling on the basis that he was too young to serve. God overcomes the difficulties presented by Abraham and Sarah's advanced ages and fulfills the promises God makes to them.

"Who, me?" we may think. "I'm too young—or too old—to do that." Whether externally established or self-imposed, our assumptions about age and gender can become barriers to full inclusion and participation. Those barriers, often unspoken, sometimes remain unrecognized until someone has the courage to question them. In some congregations those who wish to serve as ushers, communion assistants, acolytes, readers or altar guild members may be told they are "too old," "too young" or the "wrong" gender—factors that are incidental, not intrinsic to one's talent and ability. Defining ourselves primarily in terms of gender or age can keep us from acknowledging our God-given gifts or pursuing our callings.

- 2. Share aloud or reflect:** Describe a time when someone encouraged you to try something that you thought you couldn't do because of your age or gender.

As you think about your congregational or group setting, what kinds of activities have age- or gender-related parameters for participation? What are the benefits of having such boundaries? What obstacles do those limits create? What changes would you make for the sake of being more inclusive?

📖 **Read:** Luke 10:38-41

Martha and Mary welcomed Jesus into their home. Mary chose to "sit at Jesus' feet," in the posture of a student (typically reserved for males). She

did not conform to the cultural norm that women should occupy a domestic role, preparing and serving food. Because they were sisters, Martha assumed that Mary would have assisted her in her duties. Frustrated, Martha tried to persuade Jesus to pressure Mary into helping her. But instead of forcing Mary to meet Martha's expectations, Jesus defended Mary's decision. Jesus affirmed Mary's choice to define herself as a disciple, even though that conflicted with their society's presumptions about women's roles.

Jesus also challenged Martha to recognize that Mary's choice did not invalidate Martha's own way of following Jesus. Both "Martha's work" and "Mary's listening" were important. Although we often look at this text from the stance of comparing ourselves to either Martha or Mary, this text also prompts us to recognize situations where we can follow Jesus' example of supporting the choices made by others, especially when those choices do not fall into predefined roles based on age or gender.

- 3. Share aloud or reflect:** Describe a time when you chose not to conform to the norms and expectations others had for you based on your age or gender. How did others react? How did you respond?

How can you follow Jesus' example in the Mary and Martha story? Could you stand up for someone who breaks with expectations related to gender, age, race, ability, physical appearance or economic status? What might helping others to sit at Jesus' feet look like in your community?

📖 **Read:** 1 Samuel 1:9-17

Hannah was childless. In a culture where women's status frequently depended on giving birth to sons, she felt shame and had been subject to taunting by a rival wife. Distraught, she went to the tem-



ple. She prayed fervently, pouring out her heart to God. Eli, the priest, observed her body language and presumed that she was drunk. Eli rebuked her for what he thought was disrespectful and inappropriate behavior. But instead of apologizing and leaving the temple, Hannah spoke up and challenged Eli's assumptions about her. Even though the details may have been difficult to share, telling her story and inviting Eli to listen and understand her pain was liberating. Even though he couldn't fully know what it was like to be a childless woman in their society, Eli's stance toward Hannah changed. Hearing her story moved him from criticism to kindness. Eli spoke words of blessing to her. He assured her that God would answer her prayer.

Our assumptions shape our assessments of other people's characters and trustworthiness. Whether or not our assessments are rooted in expectations about age, appearance, gender, ability or ethnicity, such assumptions can be damaging. Unchecked and unchallenged, they can lead to negative judgments that cause their targets to feel unwelcome. For example, adults with a youthful appearance can struggle to be viewed as mature and grownup. Children who look older than their ages can be judged as "immature" even when acting in age-appropriate ways. Older adults may find their contributions minimized. Younger adults may be presumed to be too inexperienced to serve as effective leaders. Those whose size or appearance does not fit cultural standards of beauty may be bullied or ostracized. Those with disabilities can struggle to be treated with respect.

Practicing good hospitality involves becoming aware of our own biases and examining our assumptions. Like Eli, we are challenged to listen with a spirit of openness to others' perspectives. Like Hannah, we are called to pray and speak the truth with courage on behalf of ourselves and others. Sharing stories can build understanding and dismantle barriers of mistrust. Interrupting patterns of criticism and

judgment can help to cultivate environments where all are genuinely welcomed as children of God.

- 4. Share aloud or reflect:** Describe a time when someone misinterpreted your actions or words. How did you feel? How did you respond?

Describe a time when you felt fully heard by someone else—when someone understood not only your words but the intent and feelings behind those words.

Describe a time when hearing someone's story changed your view of that person.

📖 **Read:** Ruth 1:6-17

Naomi, an Israelite, had moved to Moab with her husband and two sons. Both of her sons married women from Moab. After Naomi's husband and sons died, Naomi decided to move back home to Judah. At first, both of her daughters-in-law wanted to go with her, but Naomi urged both younger women to remain in Moab with their families of origin. Naomi did not want to expose them to the risks they would face in their culture as young immigrant women with no male relatives to protect them. Naomi told them that she had nothing to offer them if they came with her. Despite Naomi's objection, Ruth was determined to immigrate to Judah with her widowed mother-in-law. Ruth demonstrated faithfulness and care in providing for Naomi. She went with Naomi not because Naomi needed her to, but because Ruth loved Naomi and wanted to be with her.

Hospitality involves taking risks for the sake of love and service. Members of a small, rural congregation debated renovating their building to install an elevator between the sanctuary and the basement fellowship hall where the only restrooms were located. Deeply concerned about the cost, they worried

whether they could afford the financial risk. Some people noted that the sanctuary itself was accessible and said: “We don’t need an elevator, because we don’t have anybody here who can’t use the stairs.” Others observed that because the only restrooms were in the basement, certain individuals were no longer attending worship. Motivated by love and concern for those excluded and realizing that the community was diminished by their absence, the congregation determined it would make changes. “After all,” one member said, “What does having an inaccessible building say about who we are as a church?”

- 5. Share aloud or reflect:** In your community, who goes “the extra mile” to offer care and hospitality to others?

Name one bold project or venture in your congregation that has the potential to reach out and make others feel more included. What are the risks associated with this? What are the possible benefits?

📖 **Read:** Genesis 31:43-55

Although they had lived and worked together as a multi-generational family, Jacob and his uncle, Laban, had a conflicted relationship. For years, they had tricked and cheated each other. When Jacob finally moved away, he and Laban set up a boundary, calling upon God to guard their safety by keeping them apart from each other. To be at peace with each other, they needed both physical distance and emotional space.

Creating good boundaries is a sign of hospitality. For congregations, this can include requiring background checks for those who work with children or vulnerable adults. Recognizing the limits of hospitality can also protect us from taking on impossible or inappropriate tasks. For instance, a congregation committed to accommodating community organizations may choose not to provide space to organiza-

tions whose values conflict with their own. A church offering rides to worship may set guidelines, such as not transporting unaccompanied children.

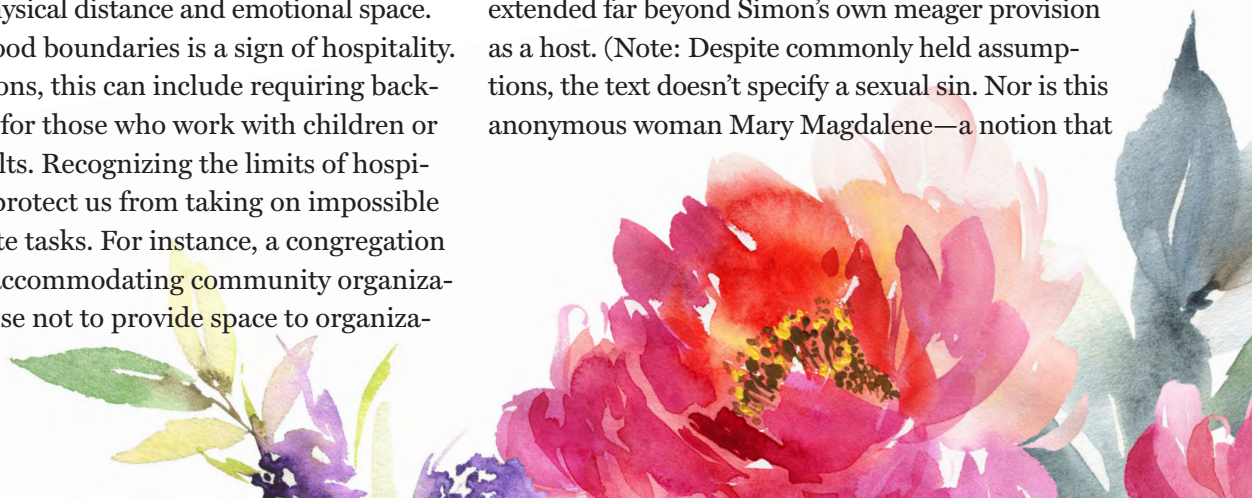
- 6. Share aloud or reflect:** In what situations might two individuals need physical distance or emotional space in order to respect each other and thrive?

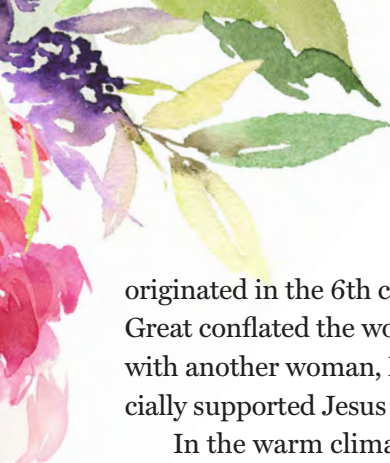
Sometimes people with difficult family situations need this kind of “space” for a while. What are ways to respect this at holidays and family gatherings?

As you think about your congregation, where are its boundaries and limits? Do these boundaries serve a good purpose for your congregation’s hospitality? Why or why not?

📖 **Read:** Luke 7:36-50

Luke 7:36-50 sets up a sharp contrast between Simon and an unnamed woman who crashed his dinner party to wash Jesus’ feet. Simon was a Pharisee, a religious leader with education, standing and power. The woman is identified only as a “sinner.” As a host, Simon would have been expected to provide for his guests’ feet to be washed upon arrival, either by a servant or by providing water for guests to do it themselves. While Simon neglected this basic duty, the unnamed woman modeled radical hospitality that extended far beyond Simon’s own meager provision as a host. (Note: Despite commonly held assumptions, the text doesn’t specify a sexual sin. Nor is this anonymous woman Mary Magdalene—a notion that





originated in the 6th century when Pope Gregory the Great conflated the woman who washed Jesus' feet with another woman, Mary Magdalene, who financially supported Jesus and his ministry.)

In the warm climate of the Mediterranean, typical houses were not fully enclosed with walls. The dining area would have been open, perhaps under a roofed patio. Leftovers and table scraps would be passed from the table out to beggars who lingered nearby, in the margin between “private” and “public” space. The woman who lavished hospitality on Jesus occupied that liminal, in-between space where one's expected role was to be the grateful recipient of charity. Yet she had much to offer. Using her hair, her tears and an expensive ointment to wash Jesus' feet went far beyond what was customary.

Drawing Simon's attention, Jesus asked, “Do you see this woman?” In doing so, Jesus challenged Simon to recognize the woman's dignity and intrinsic worth as a human being. Jesus asked him to see her not as a problem, but as a person. By forgiving her sins, Jesus interrupted Simon's narrative—a narrative that framed her as unworthy and justified her marginalization. Jesus identified her, not as an object of disdain or pity, but as a model of hospitality and service. For us, the phrase, “I see you,” has come to mean, “I understand where you are coming from.” When addressed to someone who has been rendered invisible, “I see you,” is a powerful statement that recognizes both the person's presence and the person's struggle to be acknowledged.

Jesus' affirmation of the unnamed woman “at the margins” teaches us to recognize those whose contributions we may otherwise discount. We can think about the spiritual architecture of the church as akin to that of a Mediterranean house, containing both a clear core of members and a metaphorical “transition zone,” a flexible boundary between outside and inside. This view creates room at the margins, occupied by those with loose ties to the congregation—those desiring to be spiritually fed and

seeking ways to serve and belong. Jesus' affirmation of the unnamed woman at the margins teaches us to recognize all whose contributions we may not have noticed or valued.

In his practice of hospitality, Jesus did not conform to his society's cultural norms. In addition to dining with Pharisees, Jesus often ate with “sinners and tax collectors” (see Luke 5:30). Breaking through the social barriers that divided insiders from outsiders, Jesus shared table fellowship with those who were marginalized and considered outcasts. Can we, too, “see” those who are clutching their alabaster jars of ointment and tearfully wondering, “Would I really be welcome here?” Can we affirm them and join with them in their ministries of hospitality and service?

- 7. Share aloud or reflect:** Describe a time when you received hospitality from an unexpected source.

Jesus asked Simon, “Do you see this woman?” As you think about your own life and setting, who is Jesus asking you to “see”?

What challenges does your congregation face in becoming more inclusive?

CLOSING PRAYER

Christ Jesus, you welcomed the outsiders and ate with those who were outcasts. Draw us into your circle of love and forgiveness. Teach us to welcome everyone into the community you have created.

Amen. 🌸



I keep finding myself with the women.

And in them I find myself. BY KIMBERLY KNOWLE-ZELLER

IT STARTED WITH a small amount of flour. Gathered in a circle, women passed the bowl from one hand to the next. One woman added yeast and salt, followed by water. The bowl passed to the next woman, who began mixing the ingredients together. The bowl made its way around the circle, with each pair of hands mixing, kneading, working the dough. Around and around the bowl went. As their hands worked the dough, the stories of the women came to life.



This was a weekend women's retreat, where we opened by making bread. First we shared our names. Ruth, the oldest woman in attendance, introduced herself, adding that she felt too old to be in the group. Seated next to her, Leslie, the youngest attendee, echoed this sentiment, stating that she felt too young for the group.

Yet both women showed up. Deep down, both Ruth and Leslie knew the power of gathering with women and women only. They knew if they took that first step—showing up—they would be surprised by what God had in store for them. Their honesty opened the way for others to share their doubts and fears.

As the bread bowl got passed around the circle, more stories emerged. Tears interspersed with hearty laughter, as the full range of emotions and experiences entered into this holy space. Whether one was a mother, a grandmother, a student, a friend, a widow, a stay-at-home mom, a full-time working mom, someone newly divorced, a church newcomer or a life-long member, being women together united us.

I keep finding myself with the women.

It began with a small amount of nuts and couscous. Every morning in Nyanga Bantang, a village in the Republic of the Gambia in West Africa, women gathered to begin preparing the day's food. This included grinding nuts and grains into a fine powder. Their work took strength and

time, as the women moved their arms up and down, rhythmically pounding the meal. Amid the loud thumps the women shared their stories. They laughed, and they cried. They talked about the latest baby born; the elder who died. They pointed out any new pieces of clothing. They shared the village gossip.

Morning after morning, I joined them, seeking their company. Many days I didn't fully understand what they shared, due to my limited understanding of their language. But I got the heart of their stories, their smiles and their tears. I saw the way they helped each another. If a woman didn't feel well or her baby was fussing, the others would take over. If someone had guests visiting and needed more food, the others would offer their share. Whether one had lived in the village her whole life or had come to live here through marriage, whether one was a student or someone about to be married, whether one was single, married or widowed, whether one was Gambian or an American Peace Corps volunteer, the connection of being women united us.

I keep finding myself with the women.

Each time I gather with women, I feel the presence of women who've gathered together for centuries, across the world. Long ago, on a morning not yet known as Easter, as Julie A. Kanarr points out in this month's Bible study, "it is the women, together with the

Beloved Disciple, who remained with Jesus at the cross." Their hopes had been destroyed. Their fears were realized. Their tears were flowing. Yet they showed up. They witnessed the worst kind of death imaginable. Yet they didn't abandon Jesus, and they didn't abandon each other. I like to imagine them together, clapping hands, crying, holding one another up. Each body is strengthened by the others. Each one's grief is offered for the other, for Jesus and for the world.

I keep finding myself with the women.

Women get it. They know the healing power of soup after a loved one dies. They know ice cream, cookies and lots of chocolate can help heal a broken heart. They know the magic of coffee for the bleary-eyed mom of a newborn. They know the perfect book to recommend, which laugh-out-loud meme to share, and the random text to send to remind a friend she or he is not alone.

Women know playdates are best in the company of friends. They know wrangling kids at church takes a village—friends, fellow mamas, aunts and grandmas. They know the goodness of quilts, care packages and homemade cookies. They know the beauty of Bible study groups where you show up tired, frustrated and overwhelmed, but are met with words of welcome and love: "We're glad you're here."

I keep going back to that circle of women kneading bread. I can

smell the bread baking. I can taste that first, warm bite. I remember the stories told and the holiness of those moments. When we gather as women, we gather in strength and vulnerability to share our deepest joys and hurts and listen to those same stories from others. We embrace the vulnerability of naming our fears and deepest desires, and the strength of overcoming them, together.

I know a group of women who gather every Monday to quilt, spending most of the day together. They cut fabric. They sew. They design. They tie. They talk. They laugh. They cry. God's work happens with their hands. They eat lunch together between the work;

God's table set before them. They keep showing up, together, week after week. They've been present throughout so many transitions in their lives, as babies have been born, as relationships have fallen apart, as they've grieved the loss of friends. They themselves have been sick, lonely and uncertain. But every week, they come together to put their hands to work and their hearts together. I know theirs is not the only congregation with such a group of quilters or the only congregation with women who celebrate life together in the big and small ways. They join women across this country and the world who know the power of being with other women.

Women get it. That's why I continually find myself with the women. I need their faith. I need their presence. I need their tears and their laughter. Most importantly, I need them to show me Christ. I need to look them in the eyes and see the body of Christ—the blessed, holy, broken, beautiful body where all are valued and needed. All have something to share. We gather as women who believe in the power of resurrection—the power to transform lives from small bits of bread, wine, coffee, tea, needle and fabric.

I keep finding myself with the women. And in them, I find myself in Christ. 🌿



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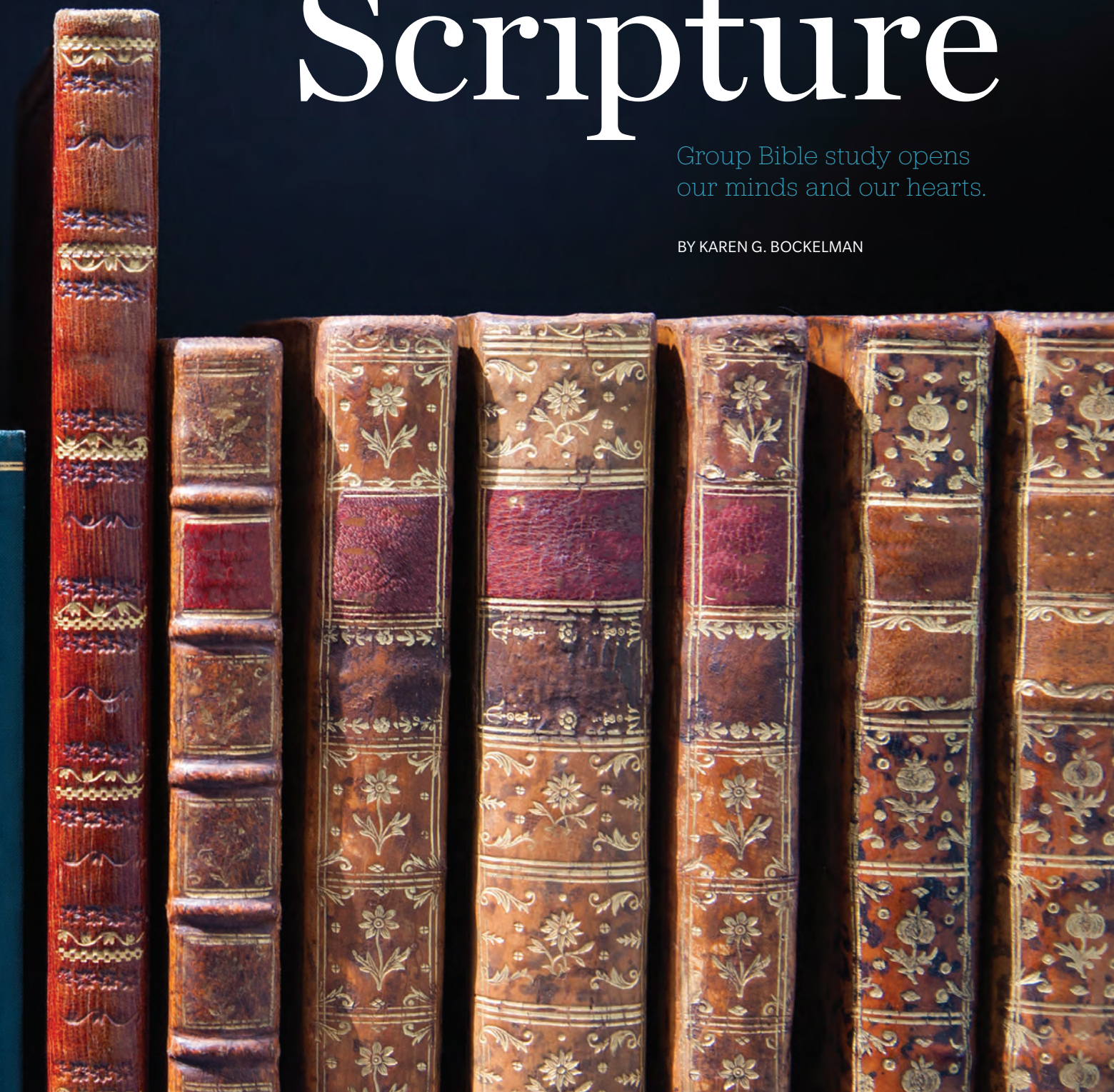


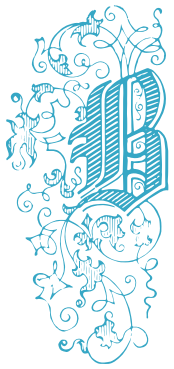


Studying Scripture

Group Bible study opens
our minds and our hearts.

BY KAREN G. BOCKELMAN





BLESSED LORD GOD, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn and inward-

ly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (Source: "A prayer for grace to receive the word," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 72)

I was a seminary student when I overheard a woman in the registrar's office asking for information.

"I think my son should be a pastor," she said, "and I want to know just what a seminary education is all about."

A staffer gave her a quick summary—three years of class work and a year of internship—and a school catalog.

"What kind of classes?" the mother asked.

"Church history, theology, pastoral care, and of course, Bible."

"Oh, he won't need to take the Bible classes," she interrupted. "He has read it from beginning to end multiple times." She took the catalog and left, and I silently chuckled at the idea that classes in Bible could be optional at any seminary, let alone a Lutheran one.

The more I thought about that long-ago conversation, the more I recognized two other responses. I must admit I was impressed with anyone who read the Bible from beginning to end several times.

(Whenever I had tried that kind of structured Bible reading, I'd tended to bog down somewhere in Leviticus.) But I also found myself saddened that anyone might think the best or only way to read the Bible is by yourself.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm all for personal Bible reading; times of private devotion, study and reflection establish a spiritual discipline that bears much fruit. But I knew even then that reading the Bible (no matter how often) on one's own was never going to be enough. My most vivid memories of Bible reading are of family devotions (I can still picture the illustrations in our family picture Bible), Sunday School classes, late night dorm room discussions, circle meetings, text study groups and yes, seminary classes.

I have learned that, no matter how mindfully I approach times of individual Bible study, there are all too many times when my mind wanders and the words lie flat on the page—anything but nourishing. I am most fed when I "hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" Scripture in community.

David J. Lose, in *Making Sense of Scripture* (Augsburg Fortress 2009), reminds us that the Bible "was written by lots of different people, usually with a community in mind. It's been collected, handed down, and interpreted by communities, and it tells a communal story, the story of what it means to be part of the family of God. When you read it with others you come closer ... to realizing its intention—

to build a community of faith around its confession of the God who is out to be in relationship with a community, the community we call 'humanity'" (p. 113).

Of course, group Bible study can have its own challenges. Just as the Bible was written by different people, a study group is made up of different people with different backgrounds, interests, challenges, opinions, experiences. Even if the group seems pretty homogenous on the surface, greater or lesser differences are bound to surface. As we discuss in this issue's Bible study (see p. 20), how do we respect other interpretations and learn from the perspectives of others, even if these conflict with our own? Do we have to come to agreement, or can we live with a multiplicity of views? What do we do with the person who seems to want to dominate the discussion? Or the person who never says a word? How do we honor confidences while being supportive?

Some of you reading this article may have long experience in group Bible study—it's one of the great gifts of Lutheran women's organizations. Others may be coming to group study for the first time. I hope the following suggestions can be helpful, no matter what your experience.

BEGIN AND END PRAYER

Group Bible study is not just another book club (although there may be some similarities), so ground your time together in

prayer. You may want to use the prayer at the beginning of this article or the prayers of Thanksgiving for the Word (*ELW*, p.220). Prayers can be simple, calling on the Spirit's presence or speaking to the group's need. For example: "May the word of God dwell in us richly in this time together." "May we hear your voice today, Lord, as we read the Scriptures and listen to one another."

READ THE BIBLE

The ELCA Book of Faith initiative used a tag line (or motto) that began, "Open the book." That may seem pretty obvious, but sometimes people can be so nervous about reading the Bible "correctly" that they zero in on ideas from someone perceived as an expert—the pastor or someone who has had some theological training. Study notes, commentaries, academic articles and theological books can be helpful, but start with reading the Bible itself.

Listen attentively to the words. What word or words stick in your mind? Read out loud. Perhaps have different members of your group read the same passage and listen for different emphases. Read different translations and listen for the differences. Share your insights—making sure everyone has the chance both to share or to pass.

Reading the Bible is never a one-and-done thing; there is no one, fixed reading for all time. There is always something more to learn. The same Scripture passage can be read or heard in

a new or different way as time and place and life circumstance changes. If you are part of a group that includes people of different ages, life situations, personal and family history and faith journeys, your understanding of a particular passage can be deeply enriched by what you share with one another.

A LITTLE HUMILITY NEVER HURTS

One of my father's favorite quotations is attributed to Oliver Cromwell, the 17th century English political and military leader, "I beseech you, think it possible you may be mistaken." My father was never shy about sharing his opinion, but he was always open to hearing differing points of view and willing to change or at least expand his mind on a subject. Not a bad attitude to bring to Bible study.

I KNOW, LET'S SHARE

When my nephews were very young, they struggled, as young children do, with the concept of sharing. It always seemed to mean giving up something. When they discovered that sharing meant getting something—a chance to play with a new toy or to have a turn riding on the tractor—suddenly "sharing" seemed like a really good idea.

Sharing thoughts, insights and even leadership in a Bible study group is a really good idea too. It's not just about giving up the familiar but gaining the joy of new direction and new insight.

ASK DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

As important as it is to ask who, what, where, when and why questions, try asking different questions like:

Do you have a personal or family history with this Bible passage or story?

What don't you like about it? What puzzles you, angers you or frustrates you about it?

Do you find this biblical passage challenging or comforting? Confusing or obvious?

Sharing responses to these questions is a good reminder that not everyone thinks alike. And wouldn't it be boring if they did?

NOT A TEST

A group Bible study is not a test in which there are clearly right and wrong answers, where the "teacher" knows best or at least has the answer book. As we emerge from a year-long commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it's good to be reminded of how important God's Word was to Martin Luther—so important that everyone should be able not only to read it, but to engage with its life-giving, life-changing power.

I never heard the end of the story that started with a mother's questions about a son who read the Bible. I don't know if he ever enrolled in a seminary or became a pastor. I hope he continued to read the Bible, but I hope even more that he found others with whom to share a love of Scripture and build a community of faith. May it be so with you. 🌿

Hospitality as grace

BY CATHERINE MALOTKY

OUR ANCESTORS IN THE FAITH, Sarah and Abraham, lived in a culture where families were intergenerational, rooted to the land that fed them. A woman married into her husband's family—a transfer of property from her father to her husband. After marriage, she lived with her husband's parents, his brothers and their wives and their families. Mostly, she was welcomed. The women became family and cooked, cleaned and raised the next generation together.

So it is stunning that to follow God's call, Sarah and Abraham left home and family behind. They became sojourners. In a rarely transient world, they were foreigners and strangers moving among people they did not know, hearing languages they could not understand, among people who did not know their family tree.

Generations later, their progeny would know slavery in Egypt and, eventually, exile in Assyria and Babylon. Family ties were stressed and torn. The powerful grace of intergenerational blessing was interrupted.

From these experiences, we read again and again in the Old Testament that one of the practices that marked the culture of Israel was hospitality for the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). Hospitality and compassion could create new, equivalently life-giving intergenerational family ties.

God, our world is no longer stable, slow-changing and primarily land-rooted. Those of us who live on the land and steward it to produce crops and livestock know this way of being rooted to the land, as do the people who are native to this land (though like the people of Israel, native people know too

well the imposition of exile). But culturally, most of us are transient, moving from place to place, often geographically separated from family for years.

Your command to show hospitality is not just fit for your ancient people, but also for us, in our time. How do we build family ties, even if family is not biological or legal? How do we create a vibrant, intergenerational web of love and learning that can sustain our hearts and souls as well as our minds?

There are so many in our world who have been compelled to abandon home or were forced away against their will. There are so many in our world who are economic exiles, excluded by the demands of poverty, personal tragedy, geography or insufficient familial support from pursuing education and productive work. Does your invitation to hospitality include our neighbors (even those we do not know) who are poor or struggling or lonely? Might we also think of our congregations this way, as places where hospitality and the gift of family ties can create that web for people who don't otherwise have it?

If this is true, how do we become this for each other? If we have a well to draw from, how do we manage both? If we don't, how do we come to this without overwhelming the relationships that might become life-giving? How do we stay rooted in your good creation of us, trust in your abundance and open ourselves to each other, even others who are unlike us?

Make us brave, God. Open our eyes and hearts to the power of hospitality to make the world a healthier, more loving place where everyone knows home. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿



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