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gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION

APRIL 2020



Bible study:

Calling networks

Be together, not the same.
Women at the tomb

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What do I do now?

BY SARAH CARSON

“IT’S STREP THROAT,” the doctor said.

It was 7:42 p.m. on a Thursday night, and my mother, my 2-year-old daughter and I were sitting in the urgent care examination room.

We were going on vacation in just two days. Before then, I needed to read about 30 pages of articles for the magazine. My email inbox was overflowing. My refrigerator was empty. Nearly every sock I owned was dirty. So, of course, my daughter’s sniffling and aching couldn’t just be a cold. That would have been too easy.

Before the doctor had even called the antibiotic into our pharmacy, I was running through the list of people to call: There was my boss, who’d need to know I probably wasn’t going to read all those pages. There was my daughter’s day care, which would have to tell other parents to watch for signs of fever and sore throat. There was my family, who perhaps would not want to vacation with an ailing toddler.

This is the way my mind operates. When presented with a challenge, I start planning, calculating, trying to move forward. So often I forget one of the most important steps in the process, but not this time.

I turned to my mother. “What do I do now?” I asked.

“Sometimes God’s call is direct and easy to discern,” Kathryn A. Kleinhans writes in this issue (p. 22). “But often it is others—our calling networks—who help us understand God’s call in and for our lives.”

In the first sessions of *Gather’s* four-part Bible study—“We are called!”—about vocation, we’ve seen how God calls us to tasks big and small, in the church and in the world, in our comfort zone and outside of it. This issue’s fourth and final session adds to that

understanding the importance of others in the process of discerning what it is that God is asking of us.

Sometimes the path forward seems obvious, but Kleinhans reminds us, “Our calling as Christians is not to have all the answers.”

From Jesus’ first disciples to today’s pastors and lay leaders, Christians have a long history of finding our way in the world together. Even when we seem separated by distance or time or ideology, our coming together is an essential part of how God works in us.

“Today there is less togetherness, but we are no less connected to one another,” Jordan Miller-Stubbendick writes (p. 30). In the story of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, we share an understanding of God’s plan for our lives. “In the same way that God enlivened and brought resurrected life to a valley of dry bones, God will breathe life into each of us and the church,” Twila Schock writes (p. 10).

That Thursday, my mother offered to wait in the car with my daughter while I picked up the prescription and a package of popsicles to soothe her throat. When I called my boss the next day, she helped me prioritize, to see a path through all the work piling up on my desk. When I called the day care, my daughter’s caregiver urged me not to worry and shared stories of times her children had become ill at inconvenient times. She helped me realize this all would pass.

“During those times when the light seems dim, we can also turn to others who can listen to or sit with us in the darkness,” Violet Cucciniello Little writes (p. 34). “In community, we most clearly come to know ourselves as made in the image of God.” 🌿

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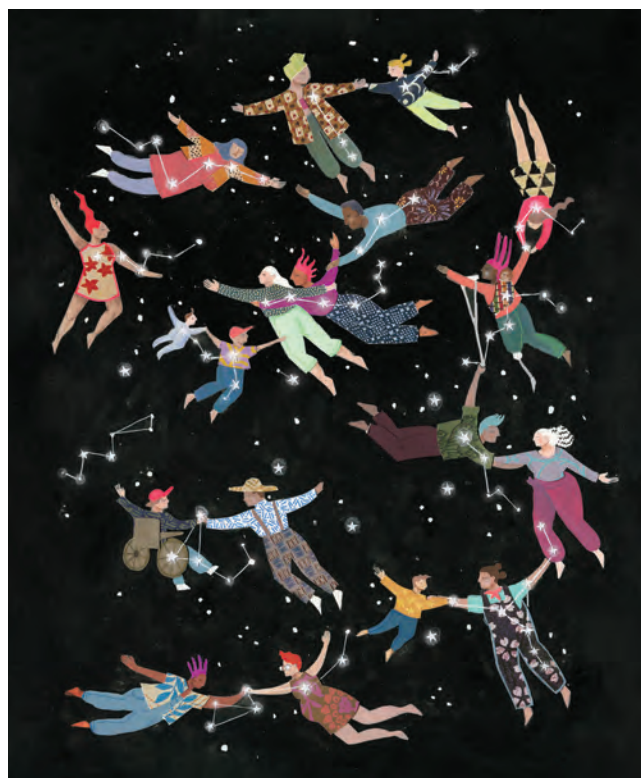
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God's call in our lives is both individual and communal.

Bible study

22 We are called!

SESSION FOUR

CALLING NETWORKS

In community, we discern
God's call in and for our lives.

BY KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

28 LEADER GUIDE

ON THE COVER: Like connected constellations, we are called to share God's light through communal discernment. This cut paper artwork was created by Molly Costello, a queer illustrator and food grower who explores interconnectedness and resilience.



features

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>6 What did the risen Christ look like?
Would we recognize our Lord?
BY M. E. STORTZ</p> | <p>18 God chooses a side
...and calls us to do the same.
BY TUHINA VERMA RASCHE</p> |
| <p>10 Be together, not the same.
A lesson in creating community
BY TWILA SCHOCK</p> | <p>30 Women at the tomb
We stand together in sadness and joy.
BY JORDAN MILLER-STUBBENDICK</p> |
| <p>14 I teach people to ride the bus.
God's grace rides with us.
BY KRISTINE LUBER</p> | <p>34 Darkness is your candle.
Who will bring us the light today?
BY VIOLET CUCCINIELLO LITTLE</p> |

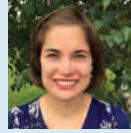
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Welcome
What do I do now?
BY SARAH CARSON</p> | <p>5 Give us this day
Beyond words
BY NICOLETTE PEÑARANDA</p> |
| <p>39 Grace notes
'All Anew' brings us to 'Just Love'
BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFKY</p> | <p>40 Amen
What other surprises await?
BY CATHERINE MALOTKY</p> |



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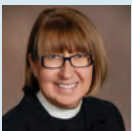
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Beyond words

BY NICOLETTE PEÑARANDA

BEFORE MY FIRST call as a pastor, I served as a pastoral intern at a Lutheran congregation and school in Argentina. My supervisor there spoke as much English as I did Spanish (not much). Transcending the language barrier would be key.

It's hard being called to a vocation that involves authentic relationships when you lack the tools to communicate. Verbal communication is like a screwdriver with removable bits. With words you can convey love, sadness, displeasure and curiosity. Without a shared language, I would just sit and nod during meetings, trying to catch a few words in conversation. Needless to say pastoral care was difficult.

With the school's approval, I found an activity I could lead without being able to speak the language. To connect with the students—most of whom were not part of the congregation—I led a mural-painting project. We spent *recreos*, or recess, with brushes in our hands, creating an original artwork that spoke to the school's Lutheran heritage and their Argentine identity. So we incorporated portraits of Martin Luther and the artist Frida Kahlo, images of baptism with the hand of God, an Argentinian flag and symbols attributed to *los Pueblos Originarios* (the indigenous people of Argentina). These moments were sweet, but I often felt they weren't enough. Did spending a few minutes a day together in silence really foster authentic relationships?

Then tragedy hit. Three of our students lost their lives. The

school closed for several days as the entire community gathered to celebrate the girls who had died. Groups of us walked through the town to lament at their wakes. Grieving, I returned to the mural and painted. For three hours, I sat on the empty patio and incorporated memorial ballet slippers laced into the hand of God. I posted a photo of the mural, now with the slippers, on Instagram. Students shared the image, and eventually it reached the parents who had lost their girls.

The following day one of the grieving parents told a teacher he felt his daughter was present in those ballet slippers—her beautiful life represented in this simple piece of art.

Later that afternoon school staff summoned me to the patio to meet the parents of another one of the girls—the mother's only child. The father was snapping photos, while the mother stared at the image on the wall. The mother gave me a warm embrace. Her husband did the same, saying, "Thank you. Thank you." Two days earlier I'd struggled for the words to convey my sympathies; now we were able to connect over this piece of art. This experience exposed me to a new way to live in relationship. As cliché as it may sound, actions do speak louder than words.

Daily engaging with students through art carried more weight than small talk ever could.

Lamenting with the community and painting ballet shoes spoke more to the families than anything I could have possibly said. Relationships can—and do—transcend words. 🌿





WHAT DID THE RISEN CHRIST LOOK LIKE?

Would we recognize our Lord? BY M. E. STORTZ

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, a friend and I attended a midday matinee. I can't remember much about the movie, except that it was a delicious pleasure. I remember moving from the inky blackness of the theater, out the front door and into the dazzling light of a late California afternoon. I couldn't see a thing. The transition from darkness to dazzle had been too abrupt. My eyes needed time to adjust. That experience reminds me of Jesus' disciples. Their eyes also seemed to need time to adjust to the risen Christ in their midst.

Do you ever wonder what the risen Christ looked like? No one knows. There are no selfies, no video or audio recordings. The Gospels attest to a series of post-resurrection appearances because someone returning from the dead was remarkable. But even more remarkably, no one seemed to recognize the earthly Jesus in the risen Christ—most notably the people who'd known him best.

EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE

John's Gospel tells of a sighting by Mary Magdalene, who found the stone rolled away (John 20:1-18). She left to tell Peter and John, who returned with her to find linen wrappings where Jesus' body had been. Deeply troubled, Mary entered the tomb and found it occupied by angels. After talking with these divine beings, she turned around and saw the risen Christ, but she "did not know that it was Jesus" (20:14). Mary presumed him to be a gardener and demanded he hand over Jesus' body. Only when he spoke her name did Mary identify the gardener as her Lord.

Later that same day, Jesus appeared to all the disciples except Thomas, making it through locked doors to bless them with his peace (John 20:19-23), even though all, except John, "the beloved disciple," had deserted him at the crucifixion. Christ displayed his wounded hands and side to the feckless and frightened disciples. Maybe he had to give them some evidence because they

would not have recognized him otherwise. When Thomas joined the group for a second post-resurrection appearance a week later, he not only wanted to see Jesus' hands and side, he demanded hands-on proof (20:25).

John's Gospel concludes with an even more puzzling sighting of the risen Christ—this time with Jesus appearing at the Sea of Tiberias. The disciples had gone back to their old lives of fishing. At first light, they set out. As the

a town safely outside Jerusalem's systems of surveillance. Along the way, they were joined by a stranger, who asked them for the latest news. The stranger interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures to them, demonstrating how the events they were discussing had been foreshadowed. When the two followers reached their destination at dusk, they urged the rabbi to join them for dinner. It was only when he blessed the meal that they recognized this itinerant

In the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death, no one recognized him.

sun rose, they noticed someone on the beach, watching them, "but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus" (John 21:4). As with Mary Magdalene at the tomb, the risen Christ again talks to them. Here, too, conversation fails to provoke recognition. Only when the catch yielded more than they could handle did the disciples recognize Jesus. John shouted out: "It is the Lord!" His cry prompted Peter to swim to shore (21:7).

A NEW, RESURRECTED STATE

Luke's Gospel carries its own stories of the disciples' failure to recognize the risen Christ. After the confounding discovery of the empty tomb, two of Jesus' followers made their way to Emmaus,

rabbi as Jesus (Luke 24:31). As if he felt obliged to explain the followers' cluelessness, Luke proposed that they didn't see Jesus "because their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16). Yet how could the two followers walk all afternoon with their master and fail to recognize him? The encounter disturbed the two enough that they returned to Jerusalem that very night to find the other disciples. Suddenly Jesus was in their midst. Instead of greeting him with joy, the people were "startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost" (24:37).

No one immediately recognized the earthly Jesus in the risen Christ. Indeed, the people who should have known him best

consistently mistook him for a ghost, a gardener, a harbormaster and an itinerant rabbi. Whether from faithlessness or temporary myopia or some divinely-induced blindness, the disciples could not see the risen Christ in their midst. Their eyes needed time to adjust.

Happily, they were given that time. The risen Christ returned: to forgive the disciples their betrayals, great and small (John 20, 21); to show them that there is life beyond fishing and tax collecting, charging them to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19); to repeat the call that orients their ministries—“follow me” (John 21:19, 22); and touchingly, to cook them breakfast, because they will need food for the journey (John 21:12). Disciples today should celebrate the First Breakfast alongside the Last Supper!

Instead of ascending directly to his Father, the risen Christ stuck around and let people get used to seeing him in his new, resurrected state. The time between the resurrection and the ascension also gave their hearts time to adjust to the journeys that now lay before them.

TIPS FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

In similar fashion, the Easter season gives disciples today a chance to re-orient their own ministries for the road ahead. From this earliest community of followers, latter-day disciples receive two important travel tips: the promise of a resurrection that exceeds our

wildest imaginings and some concrete counsel on where we might find the risen Christ today.

TRAVEL TIP #1: The followers of Jesus wanted nothing more than to have the old Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, back again. Instead they got the resurrected Christ. Resurrection is not resuscitation.

Let me give a pedestrian example of the difference. My aging mother had such bad feet that it was hard to buy her new shoes. By the time she’d finally gotten the uppers worn in around her bunions, the soles were wrecked. While we were shoe-shopping, she’d wail: “I don’t want new shoes; I want my old shoes back again.” But resurrection is not about finding the perfect fit for gnarled feet; resurrection means getting new feet. Resurrection signals life on new terms entirely. No wonder the disciples couldn’t recognize the risen Christ. They were too busy looking for the old Jesus. Resurrection doesn’t give us the old Jesus back again; resurrection gives us grace beyond imagining, the risen Christ.

TRAVEL TIP #2: That community of followers left some concrete counsel for where we might find the risen Christ today. First, Jesus promised to be amid people gathering in his name, breaking through locked doors, barred hearts, despair and persecution: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). The promise does not mention

prayer; it’s enough to gather in Jesus’ name, nothing more—and nothing less. There’s power in that name; there’s power in “two or three” invoking it. Sometimes that’s all a group of beleaguered disciples can muster.

Second, the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist brings the risen Christ into the midst of his disciples. As they eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine, they literally become what they eat: the body of Christ in the world. Once fed, they and we go out as God’s hands to serve a struggling world.

Finally, in sharing the Lord’s Supper, disciples join that wild and crazy table fellowship that Jesus created—and he had eclectic taste in dining partners!

Jesus ate with the religious elite, and with his wealthy friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. But he also ate with the marginalized of his time. For this reason, Jesus was accused of being “a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34, Matthew 11:19). In the table etiquette of the ancient world, the people you sat with at a table were your friends, and your friends were the people you sat at the table with. Disciples today are called to sit at the table with the full range of Jesus’ dining partners—people who aren’t used to dining with one another. What does that table fellowship look like in your life?

Prepare the table and see who shows up. 🌿



BY TWILA SCHOCK

Be together, not the same.

A lesson in creating community

IT WAS 1997. I had just begun serving as a pastor to an international congregation in Moscow. Prior to that time, I felt that my theological training had equipped me adequately for what would become 13 years in global service.

But somewhere along the line, I must have missed the class on how to serve a congregation made up of members from 31 countries and 26 denominations, 80 percent of whom spoke a language other than English.

Coupled with that challenge was the fact that pastors were not exactly flocking to serve in Russia (in what locals affectionately called the post-Communist “wild East”). The congregation had been served by interim pastors for nearly three years. “Just getting by” had become the order of the day.

This disparate, exhausted group of expatriates had entered what, at best, could be called a phase of decelerated maintenance, a “just enough” mentality. There were just enough tithes and offerings to pay the rent and the bills. There was just enough revenue from abroad to keep our food sharing ministries alive. There was just enough toner to crank out another week’s worship bulletins. And there was just barely enough grit and stamina in the hearts of our members who, on those dark, Moscow winter mornings, arrived early to set up chairs in our makeshift chapel, hand out bulletins, and heat tea for those who had to walk or wait for buses in the bitter cold.

Yet it was so clear to me that the potential in this place was great. Among us were diplomats and refugees, nurses and doctors, students and educators, rich and poor. Congregation members shared various worship practices, and would—according to their culture and denomination—curtsy, bow, genuflect, kneel or shed tears as they received the gift of communion. How could we revitalize such a diverse and talented group of people for mission, while using an English as a Foreign Language vocabulary? And then there was this: They were so tired. Life was harsh in Moscow, especially for refugees. Sometimes the smallest tasks could feel overwhelming. I recall a U.S. expatriate student saying: “I wish folks back home knew how much energy it takes even to even find and buy a simple jar of juice here!”

How could I possibly ask this dispirited group to generate enthusiasm and energy they didn’t feel? Like the prophet Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, I began to ask myself, “Can these bones live?” Unwilling to admit defeat or a lack of faith, I tried what might be considered an American corporate approach. We held a community-building retreat where we recommitted to focusing on what bound us together: the centrality of the cross. Our skin colors and accents differed, yet at the foot of the Christ’s cross, were we not all the same?

And it worked. Sort of. But there was still something lacking in the whole experience. It somehow felt as if we’d legislated community according to our strategic plan, rather than living into community according to God’s plan.

WORDS AND BREAD

“Daniel,” I confided one day to a council member, “while everything is pleasant enough in these days since the retreat, I still feel as if something is missing. It’s as if we’re being really friendly, without really being friends.”

Daniel, a sage, aging diplomat from Kenya, nodded his head. He saw it.

“Pastor,” he counseled me in his gentle way. “Back home in Kenya, we put our words together with bread. Our community needs to eat together. It is, after all, what Jesus did.”

Can he really mean this!? I thought. *Doesn’t he know how hard food can be to come by in Russia? Especially after the crash of the economy? Especially in large quantities?* Then I remembered something a seasoned missionary had told me during my first year of global service: “Twila, sometimes we can help bring about the unthinkable just because we’re crazy enough to believe that it’s possible.”

So I tried it. I approached our church council and suggested that we host an international potluck. An enormous one!

One in which every member would be invited to bring a national specialty to the table and some international moves to the dance floor. Our role was to provide financial support to the refugees so that everyone had something to contribute at the table.

“This is another one of Pastor’s crazy ideas,” grumbled Hans, a Dutch diplomat. “But on second thought, I’ll admit it,” he said. “I could stand to have some merriment in this crazy place.”

Three months later, what merriment we had! We savored Nigerian *fufu*, Liberian okra, North American cheeseburgers, Austrian *rouladen* and Japanese *basashi*. We danced the waltz, sang South African freedom music, did Nigerian line dancing and square danced, Malagasy-style.

The best part, though, was to come at the end of the evening. Paul—a refugee parishioner—came running up to me and said, “Pastor, thank you so much! Tonight, I felt as if I was truly part of God’s family. And, best of all, I wasn’t just like everyone else. I was Sierra Leonian, and I was proud of it!”

“I wasn’t just like everyone else. I was Sierra Leonian.” His words foreshadowed the Android billboard I was to see on a Chicago expressway decades later: “Be together. Not the same.”

As I walked out of the gathering space that evening, Daniel caught my eye. We did not need to say a word. He merely nodded, with a gentle grin. That evening we had put our words together with bread. And we learned that “together, but not the same” was what we needed to flex our weary muscles for ministry.

... “*being together, but not the same*” makes us the *body of Christ*.

In the weeks to come, as we slowly rebuilt our ministry, I was again reminded of Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones: “...I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord” (Ezekiel 37:14).

“CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”

Twenty years later, I once again find myself contemplating what brings us and binds us together for ministry. Professional surveys tell us that U.S. worship attendance in mainline denominations is declining at an extraordinary rate. Financial stewardship is not far behind. An unprecedented number of people in our culture

do not identify with any expression of organized religion.

And while I am blessed to serve a very vital congregation, I look at the horizon and, once again, ask Ezekiel’s question: “Can these bones live?” Yet I do not lose heart. God does not forsake God’s people. Paul reminds us in his letter to the community at Corinth that resurrected life—whether the church’s or our own—will look different from life as we have always known it: “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52b).

In the meantime, we are called to boldly live into Paul’s vision as we gather in our communities of faith.

For it is, indeed, in gathering at the foot of the cross with our many and diverse gifts that we find our common bond. It is at Christ’s table, where words and bread are brought together, that we are enlivened and our muscles are flexed for ministry. This wonderful “being together, but not the same” makes us the body of Christ. I am grateful.

In the same way that God enlivened and brought resurrected life to a valley of dry bones, God will breathe life into each of us and the church. God’s promise to Ezekiel is also a promise to us: “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves” (Ezekiel 37:13). 🌿



I teach people to
ride the bus.

God's grace rides with us. BY KRISTINE LUBER





any years ago at my confirmation, the pastor gave me this Scripture verse:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20 KJV).

The Great Commission was an interesting choice to give a 13-year-old girl in my former denomination, that still does not ordain women. But my pastor recognized my interest in theology and talent for teaching.

I went on to major in theology, minor in English and earn a degree in elementary education. And while I did not end up in a classroom, for five years I was an English editor on a Bible translation team where scholars taught me about the nuances of biblical Hebrew and Greek. I taught them how to convey those nuances in a layperson's English. Later I served as a lay youth and education minister, providing religious education for people of all ages and abilities.

Now I teach people how to ride the bus. My official title is "Mobility and Outreach Specialist." I work for a bus company in a medium-sized, Midwestern city. Most adults who live here drive

their own cars. So who rides the bus in a city like ours? People who cannot afford a car, those with a physical or mental condition preventing them from driving, and others whose licenses have been suspended. Many are the very people Jesus talked about in Matthew 25:34-40: the hungry (who need transportation to food pantries and community meals), the stranger (who doesn't know how to get around town), the impoverished (who need rides to support services), the sick (who can't miss medical appointments) and the incarcerated (who are in work-release programs).

I have learned from these non-drivers that they can only ask friends and family members for rides so many times, and if they use a large mobility device, their friends may not be able to transport them at all. Public transit offers people a way to get to their jobs, the store, the library, volunteer work, food and clothing banks, and medical appointments. Riding the bus also combats isolation and loneliness. Teaching these new riders has become yet another way I live out God's calling in my life.

WHY RIDE A BUS?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires bus companies to provide door-to-door paratransit service (typically a special van) for "persons with disabilities who are functionally unable to use the wheelchair accessible fixed route bus system." My primary job is to

encourage some paratransit users to try the regular bus instead of calling for a paratransit ride.

For several reasons, learning to ride the bus is beneficial. The \$8 paratransit ride can take a big bite out of one's disability income. Using the regular bus gives people freedom to take a spur-of-the-moment trip while the paratransit service must be scheduled the day before. It's also good for the bus company, since \$8 only covers a fraction of the cost for door-to-door service, and the fixed-route bus is already running.

I usually work with people one-on-one. I tell them about the routes, how to read a bus schedule, how to find a bus stop and how to transfer. I review the rules for safety, convenience and courtesy. I show them around a bus and point out the accessibility features, the ease of stepping onto a low-floor bus and how to use the ramp. I give people who use powerchairs the opportunity to practice the tight turns necessary to position themselves in the wheelchair spot. I give everyone the opportunity to talk to a bus driver in a calm setting. All this goes a long way toward eliminating the anxiety of catching a bus for the first time.

Maurice was the first person I taught to ride. His right leg had been amputated after a gunshot injury. He used crutches, but moved so fast that I couldn't keep up with him—so I was the one who tripped and fell flat on my face in the bus yard. Maurice rushed over. He and the bus

driver managed to pick me up off the asphalt. The driver never let me forget my inauspicious first attempt at helping others.

Nabombe had come to the U.S. from Zambia on a Fulbright scholarship. She, too, was an amputee, a large woman who used a powerchair. After she learned to ride, she began to use the bus system all over town. She lived in a building specifically designed for renters with disabilities. I met the building manager and did a group presentation. I thought, “What a wonderful place!” But the elevator malfunctioned frequently. More than once, Nabombe had to be carried down from her second-floor apartment by firefighters, so she would not miss her all-important dialysis appointment.

Anxiety disorders can also keep people from riding. Mental health workers often contact me to work with their clients. I once helped a very apprehensive woman who asked me over and over what would happen if someone got on a bus brandishing a gun. This was not a concern I’d dealt with before. I finally teased out of her that her heightened anxiety came from watching the action film, *Speed*, with Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves.

The infirmities of advancing age can keep people from

activities they cherish. One of the first things I ask people is, “Where do you want to go?” Betty, new to using a wheelchair, was happy to learn to use the bus for appointments and grocery runs. She wanted to attend mass, but we have no Sunday bus service. Betty was overjoyed to realize that she could take the bus to a Saturday mass instead.

I also do presentations for international students at our local university. Many are overwhelmed, and may not grasp all the information right away, but I welcome them to our city and show them how riding the bus helps them enjoy what our city offers.

GRACE ABOUNDS

I wish I could succeed with everyone, but the distance to a bus stop, potholes, lack of sidewalks and cumbersome mobility devices make it impossible for some people to use the fixed-route buses. Over the course of a year, Merle made three separate appointments to practice maneuvering his powerchair onto the bus, but he just couldn’t get the hang of it. He went away sad and frustrated. Many months later I got on the bus to go home one day and saw that he was riding! He must have been practicing his own because he got off the bus smoothly and

efficiently. He told me that he had just started a new job after five years of unemployment.

The bus company staff I work with take difficult situations in stride and treat everyone with respect. I tell passengers that their “best friend” on the bus is the driver, and their “best friend” when they call for information or a paratransit ride is the person who answers the phone.


Drivers who have the same route every day get to know their regular passengers. The people on their bus quickly become a community. I’m amazed at how well the customer service reps know their paratransit customers’ routines and check on them if they miss a ride. If an appointment runs long, the rep will find a way to have a bus come back later so the passenger gets home safely.

When I made the transition from a career in ministry into secular employment, I was sad and confused. No longer did every meeting begin and end with prayer. I had to alter my language since God-talk is inappropriate at a government agency.

But God is not absent. God’s grace abounds every day at the bus company, and I continue to live out the words of my confirmation verse. Seeing Jesus in the people I help is God’s grace to me, and I strive to reflect that grace to every passenger I meet. As Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). 🌿

I strive to show God’s grace to every passenger I meet.





God chooses a side

...and calls us
to do the same

BY TUHINA VERMA RASCHE

WHENEVER I ENGAGE with Scripture, I cannot help but notice that God always chooses a side—and that side is always with the marginalized and oppressed. That side is with the poor.

BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POOR?

As an advocate for those living on the margins, I've learned that we need a better understanding of one another and the terminology we use when it comes to people's lives. "Poor" can be expressed in a multitude of ways: needy, lowly, meek, afflicted or humble.

But the word "poor" does not exist in a vacuum. To be poor means that someone must be rich. There must be a power dynamic present to stretch and separate populations from one another, thereby creating those who have power and those who are oppressed by power. God calls for every person to live into the fullness and wholeness of God's good creation. To be poor is to be denied full personhood—the person God created you to be in the fullness of *imago dei* (the image of God).

That's why God chooses a side. God created us, along with a wealth of abundance. Yet the powers of this world would scare us into scarcity, encouraging those in power to hoard wealth and privilege, creating dire need for those on the margins. As followers of God, our call is to side with the poor.

Beginning in the Hebrew Scriptures, God creates prosperity out of the void. God makes assurances to a mere shepherd and his wife, promising them an unfathomable lineage. God creates something out of nothing for banished single mothers, weary prophets, poor widows and starving children. God's prophets also side with the poor:

What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor; says the Lord God of hosts (Isaiah 3:15).

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy... (Amos 4:1a).

Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths (Micah 6:12).

I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor (Psalm 140:12).

In the person of Jesus Christ, God most certainly chooses to side with the poor—not just in the extreme vulnerability of a newborn child, but also in the vulnerability of Mary and Joseph's situation, bringing Jesus into the world in a manger, surrounded by the grit of earth, animals and their byproducts.

Jesus, a brown-skinned Palestinian Jewish man, grew up living under the power of the Roman Empire—an empire of scarcity. The Roman Empire robbed and hoarded wealth from its conquered lands through multiple forms of oppression. That God shows up in such a human form—born under the occupation of empire, in the starkness of a manger, outside the comforts of monetary wealth and worldly royalty—shows that God does indeed choose a side.

Much of Jesus' ministry, as recorded in the Gospels, deals with the disparity between the rich and the poor. Jesus spoke frequently about wealth, challenging all of us with access to it. When Jesus sums up his call by reading from Isaiah, he focuses on the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

Over and over I have read this passage. I have preached sermons on it. Yet this text took on an entirely new life when I heard it spoken aloud by Pastor Imad Haddad at the School of Hope in Ramallah, Palestine. I was sitting in the land that Jesus

called home, a land still under occupation nearly 2,000 years later. Suddenly how I interpreted wealth and poverty as a follower of Jesus changed. Pastor Haddad said that although most members of his congregation were living as refugees, they had the privilege of carrying hope in the city.

As followers of a crucified and resurrected Christ, we are actually wealthy in ways we could never imagine. We are called to respond to a radical God who came in

When Jesus encounters the rich, he is direct. He flips tables over in the temple because changing money creates classes of “haves” and “have-nots” where wealth should be abundant for everyone, as it is a place to revere God. For someone who speaks in parables, Jesus is also direct. In Mark’s Gospel, a rich man asks Jesus what needs to be done to inherit eternal life. Jesus not only looks at him, but also loves him as he concludes his statement,

God desires all to have abundance, not just in heaven, but in the here and now.

flesh and bone to love us. We are called into a wealth of which we could never dream, and we are called to give such wealth to those around us, as it knows no scarcity.

To powers and principalities, this vision of never-ending wealth is terrifying: If such a resource is infinite, from where will they seize their power? Jesus had to confront these powers directly. He could not mince words. He could not give into a culture of “niceness.” The culture of niceness doesn’t address societal issues. I firmly believe those in power have a field day when we attempt to be “nice” to one another, but we’re too scared to address the systems and structures that keep us from truly living in community.

saying: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21b). The rich man hears these words but can’t *incarnate* them.

Two thousand years removed from the incarnational evidence that God chooses a side, I believe we are called to do the same. We are called to side with the poor. We are called to defy the powers of death, fear and scarcity not just for ourselves, but also for one another. I recognize that this is difficult. To be entirely honest, I am terrified of choosing a side. I thought being a follower of Christ was to be on everyone’s side and to be nice to others. I am now realizing that by

choosing a side, God desires all to have abundance, not just in heaven, but in the here and now.

We must also be honest about when and where our church takes a side. While many in the ELCA live in fear of scarcity—of closing churches, of declining attendance—we are also incredibly rich.

At the 2019 Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee, the ELCA celebrated raising more than \$250 million for the “Always Being Made New” Campaign—\$130 million of which is being directed toward initiatives to end hunger and poverty. Yet that same assembly also voted against becoming an endorsing partner of the Poor People’s Campaign, the ministry on which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was focused before his assassination. Our voting members instead chose to affirm the Poor People’s Campaign without officially endorsing it. Our social statements and teachings offer us a way to be in the world, but with this decision, we have opted to not link arms with our siblings in Christ (including many ELCA full communion partners) by officially engaging with the Poor People’s Campaign. So my questions are: Do we truly understand what it means to fully embrace our Christian identity and give everything away? Are we truly working to dismantle the systems and structures that keep all from accessing the abundance that God created?

God has chosen a side. Are you ready to choose a side? 🌿

OPENING HYMN

"We Are Called" (ELW 720)

THEME VERSES

- Acts 1:15-26
- John 4:7-42
- John 1:35-51
- Acts 1:8
- Matthew 28:18-20
- Acts 2:1-13
- Acts 10:44-48

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, open our minds and our hearts to your Word that we may learn together and grow in faith. Open our mouths to your Word that we may share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet. Open our arms to your Word that we may show our faith through our actions. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (ELW)

We are called!

Session four

Calling networks

BY KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

INTRODUCTION (2 minutes)

In our first session, we examined the call stories of a number of Old Testament prophets. In our second session, we reflected on the experience of being called by Jesus as we examined the calls of the disciples and the call of Paul before considering our own. In the third session, we considered how God's call is always a call to serve others, which requires us to discern what specific needs our neighbors have.

In this session, we will ponder the communal dimensions of God's call.

Some readers may remember that in the early days of cell phones, when one signed up for a phone plan with a limited number of minutes per month, some cell phone companies offered personalized "calling networks." The consumer could designate several individuals as "Friends and Family," and calls to and from those numbers did not count toward the monthly usage limit.

The idea of a "calling network" is a helpful way of thinking about the fact that God's call is both individual and communal. Sometimes God's call is direct and easy to discern. But often it is others—our calling networks—who help us understand God's call in and for our lives. Experiencing how others help us can prompt us to be attentive to the ways in which we can also be of help to others.

THE COMMUNITY OF "THE TWELVE" (8 minutes)

 **Read:** Acts 1:15-26

In the second session of this Bible study, we looked at several scriptural passages related to Jesus calling his inner circle of disciples. The Gospels frequently refer to Jesus' disciples as "the twelve." We noted that the number 12 was a symbolic representation of the 12 tribes of Israel.

After Judas' betrayal of Jesus and subsequent death, the number of disciples is incomplete. A replacement is needed to bring the number back up to 12.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

1. What steps do the disciples take to choose a replacement for Judas?
What do you think about this process?

In the ancient world, casting lots was a way of making a selection, not unlike drawing straws or tossing a coin. For some people, the result was attributable to chance, while for others, the result was attributable to divine will.

Casting lots is really the least important element in this passage from Acts 1. The disciples had already decided that the replacement for Judas should be someone who was with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. They nominated two possible candidates for the position from among those who met this basic criterion. Then they prayed that God would make God's will known.

In this context, casting lots was not entirely random. Both candidates were already qualified to join "the twelve." I think it's safe to assume that if the lot had fallen on Joseph called Barsabbas rather than on Matthias, that would have been perfectly acceptable. This was a choice between two qualified individuals to fill the vacant position.

We never hear about Matthias again in the rest of the New Testament. Whatever role he played in the early church—beyond the fact that he was chosen and appointed an apostle—is not something

that the authors of the New Testament writings thought it important to record. The point of this passage is not that Matthias is an exceptional individual but that God can be trusted to provide qualified leaders to meet the needs of the Christian community.

Think about how leaders are chosen in your congregation or community. You might think about calling a rostered leader to your congregation, electing a bishop for your synod or identifying lay leaders. What is the process for identifying qualified leaders? What is the process for choosing among candidates for leadership positions? What role does prayer and trusting God's will play? How does the story of Matthias' selection for a leadership position in the early Christian community shape your thinking and feeling about yourself as a leader in the Christian community today?

**THE COMMUNITY OF THE WOMAN AT THE WELL
(20 minutes)**

📖 **Read:** John 4:7-15, 27-30, 39-42

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is a familiar one for many of us. Often we focus on the woman's conversation with Jesus, including her relationships with men and the powerful theme of "living water." In this study, we will look at the story as a call narrative—a story of how an individual, and eventually a community, are called into relationship with Jesus.

In the first session of this Bible study, we saw that there is a pattern in the call stories of Old Testament prophets. They are called to a particular task; they object to the task; God overcomes the objection; and the prophet accepts the commission.

I am not saying that the Samaritan woman is a prophet, but we do see a similar pattern here in her story. First, Jesus asks the woman for a drink (a task). The woman raises objections, which Jesus

counters. Then Jesus asks the woman to call her husband (a second task). Again the woman raises objections, and again Jesus responds in a way that counters her objections. Then the woman returns to the city to tell others about Jesus.

The nameless Samaritan woman experiences the call of Jesus herself, and her response is to invite others into this same experience.

📖 **Read:** John 1:35-51 and John 4:28-30

“Come and see” is a repeated invitation in John’s Gospel.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

2. In each of these passages, who says “Come and see”? To whom? What happens next?

Early in John’s Gospel, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God. Two of John’s own disciples then follow Jesus. Jesus invites them with the words “Come and see” (John 1:39).

In the next scene, Jesus calls Philip, who then tells Nathanael he has found the promised one. Philip’s response to Nathanael’s skepticism is “Come and see” (John 1:46).

After the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at the well, she returns to her community and invites the townspeople to “Come and see” Jesus for themselves (John 4:29).

The woman doesn’t claim to have everything figured out. In the NRSV, the second half of John 4:29 is translated as “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” In the original Greek text, the grammar of this question suggests that the answer may be negative. In other words, the Samaritan woman thinks it is possible that the man she has encountered might be the Messiah, but she isn’t sure. She recognizes that she might be wrong. But despite the fact that she is

not 100 percent certain, she still shares her experience and invites others to “Come and see” Jesus for themselves! This can be an empowering awareness for us! The woman at the well is not an expert in theology, but she is willing to share her thoughts and invite others into the conversation.

📖 **Re-read:** John 4:39-42

For sharing aloud or reflection:

3. What are the two reasons stated in this passage for the Samaritans’ belief in Jesus?

It’s time for a personal confession: These are my favorite verses in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. I chose John 4:7-42 as the Gospel reading for my ordination as a pastor because of these final four verses, especially the last one.

These are verses about how people come to faith! Initially, John reports, the people believe because of the woman’s witness to them. Eventually, after they spend some time with Jesus, they believe because they have heard and experienced Jesus themselves. Once the woman has shared her own experience with the others, her role is to get out of the way. She may be the one who first introduced the people in her town to Jesus, but the purpose of her witness is for them to meet Jesus for themselves!

This is an example for all of us. Our calling as Christians is not to have all the answers. It is to invite others to “come and see” Jesus for themselves—and then get out of the way. The focus of our witness is Jesus, not ourselves.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

4. Who are the people in your life who have played the role of the Samaritan woman—who have invited you to “come and see” Jesus?

5. Are there people who might need you to play the role of the Samaritan woman by inviting them to “come and see” Jesus for themselves? How might you do this?

EXPANDING THE NETWORK (8 minutes)

The story of the Christian community is a story of ever-expanding networks of faith and witness.

📖 **Read:** Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18-20

For sharing aloud or reflection:

6. Where does Jesus tell the disciples to go, and why?

The phrase “to the ends of the earth” in Acts 1:8 is a spatial reference. The witness of the disciples, which begins close to home in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, is intended to reach the entire planet.

The phrase “all nations” in Matthew 28:19 is a human reference. In the Greek text of the New Testament, the word for “nation” is *ethnos*, from which we derive the English word “ethnic.” In the Scriptures, the phrase “the nations” does not refer to countries or political territories but to diverse groups of people. Often “the nations” is contrasted with the Jewish people. (You may be more familiar with the use of the word “Gentiles” to refer to people who are not Jewish; the word “Gentile” is derived from the Latin word that was used to translate the Greek word *ethnos* when the New Testament was translated from Greek into Latin.)

Note that in both texts, Jesus is clear that the Gospel is not just intended for insiders; it is intended for everyone. Our witness starts where we are, but it must not end where we are. Like the disciples, we are sent out to reach a wider audience—to reach people who may not be like us. “Come and see” is always followed by “Go and tell.”

DIVERSITY IN THE NETWORK (15 minutes)

In the second session of our four-part Bible study, we considered the call of Paul, who started out persecuting Christians but then came to believe in Christ himself. Paul understood his call from the risen Jesus to be a call specifically to witness to the Gentiles. This led to some conflict in the early church. Because Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel, some early Christians thought that Gentile believers should observe Jewish laws and customs, too, while others, like Paul, thought that this was unnecessary.

This may seem strange to us. The majority of Christians in the world today are of Gentile (non-Jewish) heritage, so the idea that Christians should adopt Jewish cultural practices doesn’t make much sense to us. Sharing the same faith doesn’t require sharing the same culture. But perhaps this idea isn’t as foreign to us as it sounds. Think about “the way we do things” in your congregation. When new members join a congregation, they are often expected to assimilate to pre-existing patterns of behavior. The assumption can be that becoming a member of a congregation means “becoming like us” who are already members. Thinking about it like this helps us to understand why the early church found cultural diversity to be a challenge.

📖 **Read:** Acts 2:1-13

As we saw earlier, Jesus commissions his disciples as witnesses to go “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) and to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Acts 2, the story of the first Pentecost, provides a picture of one of the ways God equips the disciples for this task. In Acts 1:8, Jesus promises, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples and empowers them to speak in the languages of the many different people who are present. This is a clear indication that the

mission of the disciples is not assimilation. The disciples are equipped to meet others where they are, in all their diversity.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

7. In what ways has God equipped you to be a witness?
8. The Pentecost story offers a picture of cultural diversity among the first Christian believers. What kinds of diversity are present in your congregation? Does your congregation reflect the kinds of diversity present in your community?

COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT (8 minutes)

When we considered the case of Paul in the second session of this study, I mentioned that biblical scholars typically refer to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus as a "call" rather than a "conversion." One commentator actually suggests that the real conversion in the story is not a conversion of Paul but a conversion of early Christian leaders to accept Gentile believers as well as Jewish believers into the church.

Jesus' first disciples were Jewish. When they came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah promised to Israel, it makes sense that they understood themselves as part of a movement—the Jesus movement—within Judaism. To open themselves to others, especially non-Jews, required new insights and new commitments.

Acts 8:26-40 records the story of Philip teaching and baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch. A eunuch is a man who has been castrated. Although Acts 8:27 indicates that this man "had come to Jerusalem to worship," he would not have been allowed into the Temple, because eunuchs were considered blemished or impure (see Deuteronomy 23:1-3 and Leviticus 21:18-20). Although a believer,

this man was not accepted as a full member of the community of faith. When the eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36), he is asking whether there is any reason he should still be excluded. Philip's answer, shown through his actions, is "No, nothing prevents you from being baptized, not even the fact that you are a eunuch." In the act of baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip is demonstrating that the old rules don't apply.

 **Read:** Acts 10:44-48

Notice how Peter's question in verse 47 parallels the question of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36. In both stories, long-established barriers are being removed. Why? Because first Philip, then Peter, then the community of Jewish believers in Jesus (called "the circumcised believers" in verse 45) recognized that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on people without respect to those long-established barriers. Those who were formerly excluded were now included in the community of faith—not because church leaders made a decision to be inclusive but because they recognized God's inclusive action! What is reported in Acts 10:45 is repeated by Peter in Acts 11:18: God's gifts have been given "even to the Gentiles." If God is doing something new, who are we to set limits?

COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT AND THE CHURCH'S CALL (15 minutes)

As we have seen throughout this study, all of us are invited to respond to God's call through lives of faith, service and witness. Some individuals are also called to public ministry in and on behalf of the church.

In the ELCA, and in some other denominations, we talk about internal and external call. An individual's internal call to public ministry is confirmed by the church's external validation of

that person's gifts. Sometimes the individual recognizes the call and is affirmed by the community. Sometimes it happens the other way around: The community identifies someone's gifts for ministry first and then the individual comes to recognize and claim that call personally. Either way, the call of the individual and the call through the community belong together.

For sharing aloud or reflection:

9. Think about the pastors who have served your congregation or pastors you have known in other contexts. What did they have in common? What were some of the important differences?
10. Drawing from your experience, what do you think are the most important qualifications and characteristics for pastoral ministry?

The year 2020 marks the 50th anniversary of women as pastors in North American Lutheranism. (Women began serving as Lutheran pastors in some European countries in the 1920s and 1930s.) Two of the three predecessor bodies of the ELCA—the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC)—ordained the first woman to serve in their denomination in 1970. The third of the ELCA's predecessor bodies, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), formed in 1976, ordained the first AELC woman to serve that same year.

How did this come about, despite centuries of tradition as well as scriptural passages instructing women to keep silent in church? I think the answer is the same answer we see in Acts. It is not just that individual women sensed a call to pastoral ministry. It is also that the community of believers recognized that the gifts of the Holy Spirit for ministry

had been poured out on women as well as men!

Last year, 2019, marked the tenth anniversary of the ELCA's decision to lift the barriers to service in rostered ministry for partnered members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This was a much more difficult conversation for our church. As with the ordination of women, I believe that this decision was the result of a communal recognition that the gifts of the Holy Spirit for ministry had been poured out on people whom we had previously excluded from ministry. The church's action was a response to God's inclusive and abundant action.

📖 **Read:** Romans 10:12-15 aloud

11. Where and on whom do you see the gifts of the Holy Spirit being poured out? How can you lift up these people and affirm their gifts?
12. Do you have "beautiful feet"? Where are those feet leading you to bring the good news?

CLOSING HYMN

"Lord, Speak to Us, That We May Speak"
(*ELW* 676)

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (*ELW* page 317).

Pray the closing prayer together. Then make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person next to you and say, "Go out with good courage, in the name of Jesus" or other words. 🌿

We are called!

Session four Calling networks

BY KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To recognize the scriptural pattern of communal discernment
- To recognize the ways in which others have helped us to discern and claim our callings
- To embrace our responsibility in helping others to discern and claim their callings

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)

ON DIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

Diversity is not limited to matters of ethnicity, language and gender. If our congregations are to reflect the diversity of the communities in which we are located, we are also called to attend to diversity of age, ability, socioeconomic status, ideology, etc.

For many years, it was popular to speak of the United States as a “melting pot,” an image that suggests different ingredients fusing together into one homogeneous mixture. In recent years, the image of the U.S. as a salad bowl has become more common. Many ingredients are present in a salad, but each retains its identity and makes a distinct contribution to the salad as a whole: the crispness of the cucumber, the crunchiness of the croutons, the sweetness (or tartness) of the dressing, etc. The salad bowl can also be a useful image for the church, reminding us not only that we do not all need to be alike but that the whole is better because of the diversity of the parts.

At the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA adopted a “Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity.” You may wish to read this report and think about how to implement its recommendations in your own context. You can download it at download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Strategy_Toward_Authentic_Diversity.pdf.

A NOTE ON LABELS

It was difficult for me to write the sections of the study dealing with the Samaritan woman and the Ethiopian eunuch because the Scriptures do not record their names. There is more to the woman than being a Samaritan. There is more to the Ethiopian man than being a eunuch. Just to refer to “the woman” in John 4 and “the man” in Acts 8 feels too generic, but to keep referring to them by their labels seems to limit their identity to a single characteristic. I share this experience with you to prompt your own reflections on how we talk about

people. How do we acknowledge the uniqueness of each person without reducing them to labels or categories?

This session of the “We are called!” Bible study also uses the term LGBTQIA+ which refers to individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual or Androgynous. The “plus” sign indicates that this is not an exhaustive list. Some people identify their gender or sexuality with other terms.

Sometimes people who identify in these ways are described collectively as “sexual and gender minorities.” It’s interesting to note that some theologians have used Acts 8 as an argument for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the church because as a eunuch (a castrated male), the Ethiopian man baptized by Philip would be classified as a sexual minority.

50 YEARS OF ORDAINED LUTHERAN WOMEN IN NORTH AMERICA

If you are interested in learning more about the ordination of Lutheran women in North America, several articles in the online *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* focus on the history and theology of the ordination of women. You can access them at elca.org/JLE/Topics/Women's%20Ordination

In addition, Dr. L. DeAne Lagerquist, professor of religion at St. Olaf College, and one of her students, Erin Magoon, have created a website for the 50th anniversary, including photos, biographies, timelines and other resources: pages.stolaf.edu/lutheranwomensordination/story-map/

CHANGE IS HARD WORK

A major focus of this session is communal discernment. It’s important to point out that discernment and even decision-making are early steps in a much longer journey of faithful action. Even while we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of Lutheran women in the U.S., we need to recognize

that clergywomen wait longer for calls, are paid less than their male counterparts, and experience gender-based discrimination in their ministry.

A video produced by the ELCA North Carolina Synod in which male pastors read aloud inappropriate comments made to their female colleagues sheds light on these disparities. You can view this video at youtube.com/watch?v=bTcaAkG86QQ or Google “Seriously? Women in Ministry.”

Also, although the ELCA’s predecessor denominations began ordaining women in 1970, it was almost a decade before the first woman of color was ordained in 1979. Clergywomen of color wait even longer for calls than white women and experience both gender-based and racial discrimination. And although the ELCA has allowed partnered LGBTQIA+ individuals to serve as pastors since 2009, they wait even longer still for calls.

Recognizing the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to these leaders is not enough. Changing denominational policies to allow these gifts leaders to serve is not enough. We are also called to support these leaders. Just as the early church needed to undergo a cultural transformation to be genuinely accepting of diverse people, so the church today is called to be transformed so that all the members of the body of Christ might flourish. 🌸



BY JORDAN MILLER-STUBBENDICK

WOMEN AT THE TOMB

We stand together in sadness and joy.

WHEN THE SABBATH was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back (Mark 16:1-4).

I envy the women at the tomb. *Really?* you might ask. *Why is that?*

The women are facing a difficult, deeply traumatic experience. Their dear friend, Jesus, has been cruelly executed. Life looks very different for them now. But—they are stumbling through this experience *together*. Each woman has a small community of others who understand, the nuances of what it means that Jesus, their teacher and friend, has died.

Depending on which Gospel you consult, this community includes Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome and Joanna. In re-fashioning the jagged edges of their lives into a new mosaic, these women can call on one another for support and understanding. They can walk through the trauma with a web of support.

This is how God created us to live: in close community with other people, sharing the sorrows and joys of our lives. Life's most joyous times are enhanced by this kind of mutuality, and the most trying days are eased by knowing that we are not alone.

Holy Week is a time of both extremes—from the wrenching loss of Good Friday to the triumphant exultation of Easter Sunday. The women named in the Gospels give us an image of life that is traveled in community. The women at the tomb face deep sorrow and astonishing joy in quick succession; and they bear witness to it all together.

I wonder if they stayed in close contact for the rest of their lives, bound together by this almost unbelievable shared experience.

WHAT DOES COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE?

What does it take to develop close, lifelong community? That's a question I wonder about with some frequency. My own childhood was defined by my relationship with my best friend and her family. Our two families were the kind of friends you read about in books or watch in movies. We went to church and school together. We shared vacations. Our parents each listed the others as emergency contacts, and if need be, would have served as guardians of the other family's children. There are few significant memories of my growing up years that do not involve this family in some way.

In their own fashion, my family and my friend's family each served as the women at the tomb for the other. Times of profound grief and deep joy were witnessed together—as well as the many, many ordinary days in between. Community, when I was growing up, was located right where I lived—within my family and close friends, whom I got to see at least weekly, if not every day. Now—with the very notable exception of my spouse and sons—my community takes on a different shape.

In this season of life, my family and I don't yet have the deep and lasting kind of friendship

with another family that so shaped my growing up years. My dearest friend lives 800 miles away. We text and talk often, but in a good year, we see each other in person twice. Other friends also live at a distance. My friends who live geographically closer tend to value different things. Faith in God does not shape the rhythm of their days in the same way that it does mine, and that is hard.

These days, community includes dear friends who live in Missouri, South Carolina and Michigan, as well as developing friendships with other moms of young children in my neighborhood. It holds space for my next-door neighbor, who keeps treats in her car for my dog, even though she doesn't have a dog of her own. My community encompasses my parents. My husband and kids and I sleep over at their house almost every Sunday night to have time to really talk and rest together. My community includes my in-laws, who live a thousand miles away. My community is somewhat scattered, more like a patchwork quilt than a garment that is made all of one piece. Based on my experiences of community as a child, my community as an adult used to feel sparse and somehow lacking. Lately, though, I have tried to view it through another lens.

CALLED TOGETHER

Perhaps the definition of community is wider than I once thought. Community can span distances, varied life situations, age and even

...resurrection does not happen without death...

death. My grandmother died when I was a senior in college, but she is a member of my community, for sure. Community does not always remain static or in one configuration for years on end. It can be fluid, changeable, open to new shapes and unexpected subtractions and additions. What we experience now is not necessarily what our community will always look like.

I wonder if even the women at the tomb were surprised by their own community. They probably did not expect things to turn out as they did—to be standing at the empty tomb, confronting first death, then life, in short order. Maybe they weren't even that close to each other before that weekend. But whatever they were before those days, as they moved together through Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, they became a community.

As we move through the events of Jesus' death and resurrection each year, we, too, are called into community together. Holy Week calls us into community as women, in particular. Women were the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, the first to share this astonishing news of life and hope with the world. How they share this news varies, depending on which Gospel you

consult. In Luke's Gospel, the women tell the male disciples and are dismissed—but they have set the good news free in the world, and it makes its presence known anyway. In Mark's Gospel, the women are seized by terror and say nothing to anyone—but they must say something to someone, eventually, because the news gets out, and here we all are.

As you consider your own life, your community may be all that you hoped it would be. Or perhaps it looks very different than you thought it would. Maybe you, like me, sometimes long for your community to have a different shape than it actually does. It helps me at those times to remember that even calling and community have loneliness in them. The women at the tomb knew this too. They stood at that tomb as a group, but they still had to live alone within their own minds and hearts. They still had to reckon with their individual experiences of grief and joy. They held both emotions in tension—their own experiences of Jesus' death and resurrection, with a group of others who helped them to hold these events and their feelings about them.

The women at the tomb learned that resurrection does not happen without death. This can be true for the shape of our

communities too. Perhaps we occasionally need to let go of our old or idealized versions of what our communities should look like, so the actual community that nourishes our lives can come into being. We may discover that our communities are broader than we initially imagined them to be.

The rhythm of the church year connects us to a story of faith that is larger than any of us. Our friends who live far away, the ancestors we didn't know well—they have lived this story too. Walking through the story of life, death, resurrection and many ordinary days each year brings us together. Our community walks behind us, in front of us and right next to us, holding our hands.

Holy Week calls us to many things. One of them is knowing that we are not alone. We do have a community to walk with, that walks with us, whether that community lives where we do, whether members of that community live on earth or in heaven. I picture Amy in St. Louis, Courtney in Charleston, Meredith in Traverse City, my grandmother who died in 2003, and family and friends near and far. They stand at the tomb with me during Holy Week and in other times of sorrow and joy.

Perhaps we are all the women at the tomb, standing with our community in moments of sadness, exultation and ordinariness. Even if it doesn't always look like we thought it might, it is enough. 🌸

Darkness is your candle.





Who will bring us the light today?

BY VIOLET CUCCINIELLO LITTLE

EACH TUESDAY AT The Welcome Church we begin Bible study by lighting a candle and asking two questions: “Where have you *seen* the light of God this week? Where have you *been* the light of God this week?”

When we first started this practice, our group of 30 to 40 men and women had no problem answering the first question. Powerful testimonies flowed of how God showed up in the daily lives of these folks battling homelessness, addiction, abuse and a variety of illnesses.

However, people hesitated to respond to the second question. It was as if they couldn’t imagine that, in their present situations, they could be a light for anyone, anywhere. This weekly pattern continued until one day I rephrased the question.

Opening the session, I held the candle. As was often the case, I had nothing with which to light it. I’d usually ask someone for a match, but instead I said, “Who will bring us the light today?”

Several folks jumped up to help. With that simple question, the mindset of the group shifted. Maybe each one of us did have the potential of bringing the light of God into the world.

In chapter 8 of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that he is the light of world. In an earlier Gospel—Matthew—we hear these words spoken to us: “You are the light of the world. ...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:14, 16).

We hear these same words spoken during the Rite of Baptism. It is no accident that they are spoken by a representative of the congregation while inviting the newly baptized to share their light with the community.

Although in The Welcome Church people are experiencing homelessness, and our need for one another might be more visible than in other congregations, the reality is that we as people all need one another to survive.

According to the *Journal of Aging Life Care*, our social networks thin with age, impacting our bodies and health as greatly as experiencing high blood pressure, obesity or smoking. Jesus, raised in the Jewish tradition of shalom, which embraced the wholeness and well-being of the entire community, prayed “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). Later Paul would also describe what this looks like: “...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” (Romans 12:5).

We are called to community. Consider that the word “religion” shares the same Latin root as

“ligament”—a word meaning “to bind.” For many of us living in America, this concept is counter-cultural. We are called to Christian community, which focuses on *interdependence*, rather than independence. Communities of faith are not so much about pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, but about working together to provide boots for those who have none and to help each other put them on.

Proverbs 31:8-9 reads: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” When we live in community, speaking out means not trying to be the voice of the voiceless, but learning to become better listeners and advocates, so all voices can be heard. At its best, community is the mirror that shows us the face of God in everyone we see, leading us and guiding us to the next best thing for ourselves and for the good of the whole. One challenge of community is to remain broken open to one another, while not falling to pieces. How do we offer the light within, while keeping that same light burning?

AVOIDING BURNOUT

Over the years I’ve officiated at a number of weddings. Often, folks have wanted to include the tradition of the unity candle in their ceremonies. The first time I witnessed this tradition, the couple lit the center candle each from their own lights, and then blew their individual lights out.

I remember having a visceral reaction to this gesture. It was as if, in their union, they were each giving up their individual existence. From then on, I’d suggest that couples light the unity candle to symbolize the new relationship, but allow their individual candles to also remain lit.

The challenge of living in community is to honor our unity—to see and feel and love all parts of the body—while not having our individual lights snuffed out. The good news is that the love of God provides fuel for us all. Still, burn-out happens, and during those times, we long for the answer to our weekly question at Bible study, “Who will bring the light?”

By making ourselves vulnerable to the lives of others, we also open ourselves to burnout—a word used almost interchangeably with the words “stress” and “exhaustion” despite subtle, significant differences. Overextending ourselves can cause us to become overstressed. We may also feel lethargic or even have periods of hyperactivity. Being overstressed can also lead to anxiety. When we become “burned out,” however, we tend to become distant and less engaged. We might feel helpless, lack motivation and lose our sense of purpose. While stress leads to anxiety, burnout often leads to depression. Yet the greatest help for our overwhelming stress or complete burnout often comes from being part of a community.

...what we perceive as darkness could be the light to lead us back to ourselves and one another...

DARKNESS AS A CANDLE

So how do we see the light around us when we seem surrounded by the darkness? A 13th century Persian poet, Rumi, once said, “What hurts you, blesses you. Darkness is your candle.” It’s a reminder that even in darkness, there is light—and what we perceive as darkness could be the light to lead us back to ourselves and one another—the light which John says, “the darkness did not overcome” (1:5). In Genesis, darkness is also a place of creation, a place out of which God created light. Even when we sit in places of burnout, feeling depleted, God surprises us with a ram, a song or a hand to lift and connect us again. When we feel we have nothing left to give, we must open our hands to receive.

Sometimes we follow Jesus’ example and go to “a quiet place,” unplugging from phones and computers, to rest and pray. I once heard a story about one of the inventors of the transistor radio. While traveling to a conference where he’d be honored for inventing these small portable radios, he stopped to eat at a restaurant. Inside he saw a family: mother, father and two children, each listening to their own radios, with

no conversation during the meal. According to this urban legend, he left the restaurant wondering if things would have been better without his invention! Though advances in technology offer so many ways to connect us, they can also be a source of detachment and separation. Rest and listen to what quiet offers.

During those times when the light seems dim, we can also turn to others who can listen to or sit with us in the darkness. Reach out to those closest to you, but also know that others, such as counselors, therapists, spiritual directors or pastors are waiting and wanting to be with you.

Know that it’s okay to say, “No,” setting boundaries for what you can and cannot do. Hidden in every “No” is a “Yes.” So what doors does saying “No” open for you? “No” just might give you time to re-create, and recreation is essential to our well-being. In just about every gathering of The Welcome Church, we offer food, clothing and other basic resources essential to our daily needs; but we also offer journals, paint and craft items such as yarn to re-create together.

To feed your hidden “Yes,” connect with a cause that means

something to you. When one of our folks learned that in order for incarcerated women to receive the health care products they needed, they had to forfeit a call with their children, she became a spokesperson in City Hall, attending advocacy meetings to change this ruling. Another participant connected with a local pet store to cuddle rescue dogs. Someone else, homebound and feeling very alone, began writing thank-you notes to those who visited her congregation.

In the end, the best way to re-kindle that light is to stay close to God and each another. Not long ago, a young woman who was six months pregnant came to me for help with getting things for the son who would soon be born. I posted a simple plea on social media for items that we could offer in a baby shower. The response was amazing: For weeks, baby items filled my porch. This mom, who’d never even had a birthday celebration before, was overwhelmed by the love and support of people she had never even met. Even the women within our own church community, women who were living on the street and in extreme economic poverty, brought gifts, including a book of blessings that they wrote for this yet-to-be-born child.

We long for community—a place where we receive and bring the light of God. In community, we most clearly come to know ourselves as made in the image of God. 🌿



‘All Anew’ brings us to ‘Just Love’

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFISKY

WHETHER YOU WERE among the 3,322 women who gathered in Minneapolis for the 2017 Gathering or you participated from afar by following social media or news releases, the “All Anew” theme stirred up change for us as individuals and as an organization.

We are daughters of a troublemaker, Kelly Fryer told us. We are called to follow Jesus’ example of standing with those on the margins, even at great risk to one’s own personal comfort or

reputation. When we do this, Fryer reminded us, we stand side by side with Jesus.

“Anew” is not an event, Leymah Gbowee informed us. It is a process. And Jesus renews us all daily to do his work. It is in working together, not in a silo, that we will bring change to a world plagued by racism, violence and greed.

While we Lutheran Christian women are good at mercy, we must move into justice work, Alexia

Salvatierra implored. We are called to treat each other as family, exercising both compassion and justice.

Being a Christian is not easy or comfortable. If you are comfortable in Jesus, Angela Khabeb warned us, you are doing it wrong. God of the universe blesses everyone.

We are daughters of a troublemaker...

Here we are now, nearly three years after the “All Anew” Gathering. How have you been living all anew? Have you been seeing the world with new eyes? Offering up altered prayers? Sensing the needs of neighbors in a different way? Recognizing that your definition of “neighbors” has changed?

The elected leaders of our churchwide organization—the executive board members—took seriously that “All Anew” call and began looking at ways the organization could renew itself as it and our participants seek to achieve our shared mission and purpose. At the board’s request, the churchwide president, Lisa Plorin, appointed an exploratory committee to examine the organization’s future and propose ways to best meet the organization’s mission and purpose in a changing world.

That committee, chaired by Jody Smiley (former churchwide vice president and current president of the Virginia Synodical Women’s Organization), sent several recommendations to the executive board this past fall. The board received and discussed those recommendations and has now sent proposed constitutional changes to the voting members of the Eleventh Triennial Convention (2020), set to meet in the days before the “Just Love” Gathering. The proposed

constitutional changes invite the organization to consider new and changed ways of being. Some of the proposed changes would ratify ways in which the organization has been evolving over its 30-plus years of existence. Some proposed changes reflect the changing world in which we live. You can read the proposed constitutional changes on our website at welca.org/convention.

This July, Lutheran women will be gathering in Phoenix to explore the theme of our 2020 Gathering. Building upon the “All Anew” momentum, we are motivated and equipped to “Just Love.” It’s a call to follow Jesus and love as he did during his earthly ministry. Be part of the conversation. Go to welcatg.org to register for the 2020 Gathering. 🌿

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What other surprises await?

BY CATHERINE MALOTKY

GOD, YOU CALL us in surprising ways. Would Matthias have ever guessed that one day he would join the 12 disciples? Would the Samaritan woman, to whom you surprisingly spoke at the well, have ever guessed she would find a way to respectability again? When I first offered prayer to you in this magazine more than two decades ago, I could not have known your calling to me to give witness to your liberating love that welcomes all.

My daughter fell in love last year, and this year, she and her intended bought a home and married. They are learning about their options for starting a family, complicated because they are an infertile couple but want children in their life together. They will be wonderful parents. I know I am biased, but they are self-aware, sensitive, thoughtful, bright and compassionate. They are gainfully employed in occupations that contribute meaningfully to their communities. They have supportive families and a deep well of friends.

My daughter and her wife are the best. I am proud of them, and like any mother, I hope the best for them.

But I know there are places where they and their family would not be welcomed or even, in some cases, be safe. There are people who cannot see their love as the wonder it is, or their presence in the community as a gift.

There was a day when I might have felt the same. I grew up in a home parented by a father and a mother, and knew of no other kinds of families. I, like so many of us, was taught that attraction to people of my own gender was deviant and wrong.

But life happens to us as we age. I came to appreciate the extra challenges I faced as a female in a world that seems to favor male workers, and the styles of work we label masculine. I was socialized to act demure, to take care of others first, to affirm the gifts of others but keep mine under wraps. I was told I could not be a pastor because I was a girl.

As our communal awareness grew, and women were first allowed to be ordained 50 years ago, my imagination also grew. My heart opened to the idea that perhaps studying theology was a path I could take, that preaching the gospel in my voice, from my body, was a calling that people in my community could now affirm—not all, of course, but a growing number.

Over the years, I have learned from my community regarding other issues about which we were once so sure. Slavery is not God-sanctioned, for example, and our LGBTQIA+ siblings fall well within the cornucopia of God's imagination. My daughter and her wife are legally married today, a miracle of cultural transformation, and a redemption of our previous denial of the breadth of your creation, God. I am so grateful for all those who struggled and worked for generations so this marriage could happen. I pray that someday, my beloved daughter and her wife will no longer hear that they and their love are unwelcome.

I know you are not done with us, God. You will continue to call us into a fuller expression of your love. What will you call us to lean into next? What surprise awaits us? Where will Easter's redemptive promise call us? In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌸



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