



Recommendations: Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible

Background

In response to many voices calling for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to renew its engagement with Scripture and Lutheran approaches to the Bible, including a memorial from the North Carolina Synod considered by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly [CA05.06.27], an *ad hoc* committee has been at work for almost two years. The Office of the Presiding Bishop, the Office of the Secretary, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, and the Vocation and Education unit, in regular conversation with the Conference of Bishops and others, developed an initial proposal for a consultation and a five-year initiative.

As word of the draft proposal spread, and when *The Lutheran* magazine and ELCA news service reported that such an initiative was under consideration in the ELCA, many individuals submitted suggestions, expressed strong support, and indicated an interest in participating in some way. These also helped shape the concept.

The Church Council was kept apprised of the development of the initiative by regular reports. At its November 2006 meeting, the council voted [CC06.11.55]:

To receive the report of the *ad hoc* committee for a five-year initiative, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible”;

To affirm the planned January 2007 consultation, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible”;

To direct that a report on the proposed initiative be prepared, with recommendations and expenditure plan, for consideration by the Church Council in April 2007;

To request that a report and overview of the initiative, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible,” be developed for possible recommendation by the Church Council to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly; and

To assign direction of this initiative to the presiding bishop, with programmatic implementation to be carried out by the Vocation and Education unit.

Consultation—January 2007

The committee planned a consultation, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible,” the purpose of which was to explore issues surrounding Lutheran understandings of the authority of Scripture and to lay groundwork for the proposed initiative.

Some 90 people gathered in January 2007 for the consultation. These included lay people and rostered leaders, parish pastors, teaching theologians, bishops, specialists in such areas as worship, preaching, and theological education for all ages, and Augsburg Fortress staff. Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson convened the conversation with an opening address. Keynote speakers were Professor Diane Jacobson of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., and Professor Erik Heen, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (The three presentations

are available online at www.elca.org/bookoffaith). In a variety of ways, the consultation dwelt in the Word through worship, hearing, and study.

Much of the consultation was devoted to eight working groups on aspects and arenas of the Bible’s place in Christian life: adult studies; children and the Bible; ethics, daily life and contemporary issues; evangelizing and outreach; hermeneutics; theological education; worship and preaching; and youth and young adult ministries. Each group addressed the needs and opportunities in that area and moved toward initial identification of elements that might be part of the initiative.

The “Book of Faith” Initiative

A proposal for a five-year “Book of Faith” initiative has been developed out of the consultation. The initiative would pursue the dual objective of broader and deeper engagement with Scripture in the ELCA and renewed teaching and use of Lutheran approaches to Scripture, which have proven fruitful for 500 years. “Book of Faith” would not be merely a theme or emphasis that would be succeeded by other emphases. Rather, the intent is to form culture and customs in this church that will open it to a new level of valuing and being shaped by the power of the Word.

Although decisions about what will be included await approval of the initiative by the Church Council and the Churchwide Assembly, there is a clear consensus on several things that would help the ELCA seize the opportunity God is giving it now. There is a call for new learning resources for all ages; wider awareness of what is already available; common effort with Renewing Worship; an accessible resource on Lutheran approaches to Scripture (hermeneutics); a study of effective teaching methods for all ages; support in experiencing meditative uses of the Bible; and enabling the evangelizing use of the Scripture. Again and again, participants encouraged making use of emerging technologies for communication and taking particular interest in youth and young adults.

The initiative would aim to engage all expressions of the ELCA—congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization—as well as outdoor and campus ministries, colleges and universities, seminaries, and other agencies and institutions. Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, is committed to the effort and will collaborate with the Vocation and Education unit in leading the churchwide organization’s involvement. Leaders of the Women of the ELCA have expressed interest in building on their long-established role in engaging the Scriptures. The board of Lutheran Men in Mission at its February 2007 meeting voted to support the proposal for the “Book of Faith” initiative. The committee for the Hein-Fry Lecture Series already has committed to collaborate with this initiative as it plans for the next several years.

Ecumenical and global contexts and partnerships also will be important in this effort. When Presiding Bishop Hanson, in his capacity as president of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), addressed the 60th anniversary celebration of the LWF in Lund, Sweden, he said, “I believe that central to this fundamental ecumenism will be renewed and new practices of hearing, reading, and studying Scripture together, both within our communion and with our companion churches. Could the decade leading up to 2017 have this as a primary and public focus? In our multicultural communion, can we commit to becoming fluent in the first language of faith—the language of Scripture? It is very important that we build upon the results of the LWF study published in *Witnessing to God’s Faithfulness: Issues of Biblical Authority*.”

Expenditures for 2007, the initiative’s first year, are anticipated to be less than \$50,000 and will come from the Vocation and Education budget and from a designated fund that was established by the Church Council for the proposed consultation and initiative. The draft budget of the Vocation and Education unit for 2008 contains \$166,000 for the initiative. This would supply staff, support, and resources, including some Web development. The planning committee assumes that some projects, such as publication of major resources, expanded efforts for a particular age group, or expansion of Web usage, would require special subventions that might come in the form of designated gifts or grants.

Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, the publishing ministry of the ELCA, has been fully represented in the planning of the consultation and initiative. Augsburg Fortress and the Vocation and Education unit anticipate a broad partnership, parallel to that between the churchwide organization and the publishing ministry for the Renewing Worship project. Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, is prepared to commit staff and financial resources to the initiative.

Recommendation for Assembly Action

1. To rejoice with the whole Church of Jesus Christ in the revelation of God’s Word conveyed to the people of every generation, declaring God’s gifts of mercy and grace, forgiveness and hope, reconciliation and peace, and to confess that we often have failed to hear and heed the Word of God and to benefit from God’s gifts;
2. To give thanks for the Bible through which the Word of God has spoken to God’s people throughout the ages;
3. To remember with enduring esteem the multitudes throughout the ages who embraced the tradition received by the community of the faithful and passed to succeeding generations the glad news of God’s steadfast love;
4. To recall with gratitude the work of Martin Luther and that of the other reformers whose Word-inspired renewal grew from their study of Scripture;
5. To acknowledge with joy the power of the Word of God in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, evident in many ways, including:

- a. The affirmations of the constitutional Confession of Faith that:
 - (1) “Jesus Christ is the Word of God,”
 - (2) “The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God...,”
 - (3) “The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God” (provision 2.02.a, b., and c.), and
 - (4) “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life” (provision 2.03.);
 - b. The empowered proclamation, study, teaching, worship, meditation, song, community, and service through which the people of this church daily hear, share, and live the witness of Scripture;
 - c. The members, congregations, synods, church-wide ministries, agencies, institutions, and networks of this church, and their planning and programs, including the ELCA Plan for Mission adopted in 2005, which are undergirded by the Bible and seek faithfully to express God’s Word;
6. To recognize that one of the six constitutionally stated purposes for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through its congregations, synods, churchwide ministries, and related institutions and agencies is to nurture members “in the Word of God so as to grow in faith and hope and love, to see daily life as the primary setting for the exercise of their Christian calling, and to use the gifts of the Spirit for their life together and for their calling in the world” (provision 4.02.e.);
 7. To embrace the passion and commitment that is richly shared among people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for the witness of Scripture in forming and guiding the members of this church individually and corporately in daily life;
 8. To express the hope and desire that—in the time leading up to the ELCA’s 25th anniversary in 2012 and to the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in 2017—this church will be sustained and renewed by the Word of God, thereby fostering deeper and broader use and understanding of Scripture of its members, equipping them for the life of disciples;
 9. To recognize and give thanks that the Word of God speaks and is valued throughout Christ’s Church and that, globally and ecumenically, there are other movements and occasions for renewed attention to the authority of the Bible that will inform and enhance our own understanding, including the work already begun and anticipated in the Lutheran World Federation, the recent proposal among the U.S. Reformed churches for a Lutheran-Reformed consultation on the authority and role of the Word of God in the life of the churches, and the Roman Catholic Church’s intention to celebrate in

2015 the 50th anniversary of the Vatican II statement *Dei Verbum*; and

10. To acknowledge with gratitude the action of the 2005 North Carolina Synod Assembly in memorializing this church to undertake a renewed study of the authority of Scripture in the life of the Church.

8. To look beyond the time and scope of the “Book of Faith” initiative to what can be built on that work and to other ways in which God’s Word will continually renew this church.

Recommendation for Assembly Action

1. To invite and encourage all members, expressions, institutions, and partners of this church to commit themselves regularly and increasingly to hearing, reading, studying, sharing, and being formed by God’s Word;

2. To call members, congregations, synods, churchwide ministries, and institutions and agencies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to engage in a five-year collaborative initiative—identified as “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible”—with the goal of raising to a new level this church’s individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency, deeper worship and devotion, and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture;

3. To urge that this initiative be designed and carried out in ways that affirm the Bible’s power through the work of the Holy Spirit to speak in all settings and to all ages, with attention to individual and corporate use of the Bible by members and leaders in worship, devotion, study, proclamation, teaching, moral formation, addressing social issues, and evangelizing;

4. To commit the churchwide organization to substantial engagement in this initiative in extensive collaboration with synods and congregations;

5. To request that the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—who “as its pastor, shall be a teacher of the faith of this church and shall provide leadership for the life and witness of this church” (provision 13.21.)—lead this initiative personally and through collaborative programmatic work with the Vocation and Education unit in partnership with Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, as the publishing ministry of this church, and many others;

6. To anticipate the wide availability and use of a rich constellation of existing and new resources as well as the creative use of new means of communication, mindful of the global and ecumenical context, in exploration of the nature and authority of Scripture in the life of individuals and the whole Church;

7. To affirm funding of the churchwide organization’s share of this “Book of Faith” initiative primarily through the regular operating budget in recognition not only that this initiative is of foundational and ongoing importance, but also in confidence that support for mission will grow from congregations through synods for churchwide ministries; and

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