



Report of the Church Periodical – *The Lutheran*

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Statement of Purpose

The Lutheran is the monthly magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, nurturing an understanding of the faith, mission, and ministries of this church and providing informed editorial content about relevant concerns in the Church's common life. The governing description of *The Lutheran* appears in churchwide provision 17.30. and following, printed in Section X of this volume.

Report of Work for 2005-2007

The magazine continues its commitment to the highest standards of journalism as it serves the Church of Jesus Christ through the print medium. The quality of writing, editing, and illustration upholds a history of excellence. As evidence, The Associated Church Press honored *The Lutheran* with eight awards for its 2005 issues and six awards for its 2006 issues.

The magazine reports on the ministries, congregations, and members of the ELCA, reflecting their faithfulness and diversity, and remains committed to nurturing the faith of readers and their witness to Christ in their homes, communities, congregations and beyond. *The Lutheran's* mission statement expresses the magazine's editorial purpose:

"*The Lutheran* magazine belongs to the people of the ELCA in all our diversity. The magazine:

- Nurtures an awareness of Christ's presence in our lives and the world;
- Shares the stories of God's people living their faith;
- Connects us with the global Christian community;
- Provides an open forum for discussion; and
- Challenges us to bring God's grace and care to all."

The biggest change at the magazine over the past biennium was in the position of editor. The Rev. David L. Miller resigned to accept a call at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Upon the recommendation of the Advisory Committee and the presiding bishop, the Church Council elected Mr. Daniel J. Lehmann to a four-year term as editor, effective Jan. 1, 2006. Mr. Lehmann is the first layperson to serve as editor.

In a move to make *The Lutheran* more "churchly" and "newsy," a number of changes have been introduced. The presiding bishop's column was moved to the prominent position of the last page and increased in length by 75 percent. The editor's column switched to page four, focusing on possible concerns raised by the content of each issue and the nature and role of the magazine in the life of this church. An effort has been made to ensure that articles have more balance and depth, reflecting the full width and breadth of belief and practice found throughout this church. Further, articles of greater theological substance, such as "Walking with Paul" in September 2006, have been solicited and highlighted. In addition, several changes in columnists have been made: The Rev. Stephen G. Marsh, the first featured monthly columnist in the magazine's history to be a person of color/language other than English; the Rev. Mark Allen Powell writes about contemporary Christian music; and the Rev. Thomas A. Lyberg addresses contemporary worship.

Cover stories are gleaned primarily from the preferences of readers from among 25 topics to be covered in the upcoming year. Editorial discretion remains, however, to substitute major breaking news as warranted.

Publishing functions once performed by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, are now conducted by the editor. As such, a contract extension with Quad Graphics, Sussex, Wis., was reached in 2006 which resulted in reduced printing costs. In addition, the advertising sales position of the magazine was moved in 2006 from the publishing house to *The Lutheran*. Recognizing how the relationship between Augsburg Fortress and *The Lutheran* has evolved, the Church Council amended continuing resolutions at its April 2007 meeting to stipulate that the publishing house will provide services as agreed upon by the president of Augsburg Fortress and the editor. As a result, the publishing house now provides staff for circulation, subscription fulfillment, billing, and collection.

The magazine's budget for 2006 was \$3.7 million; circulation provided \$2.64 million and advertising generated \$1.02 million, with a surplus of \$266,261. The budget for 2007 is \$3.5 million; projected income from circulation is \$2.43 million and from advertising is \$1.02 million.

Major directions for 2007-2009

Despite the positive cash flow of the past two years, the long-term health, even survival, of *The Lutheran* magazine remains in question. Paid circulation stands at 300,000, and under current economic conditions a break-even threshold is roughly 240,000. The magazine began in 1988 with a circulation in excess of 1.2 million—by far the largest religious publication in the United States. Decline set in almost immediately, however, with circulation falling roughly 25 percent in each of the five-year periods of 1988-1993 (27.7 percent), 1993-1998 (26.3 percent), and 1998-2003 (22.7 percent).

During this same period the magazine received the reputation of editorial liberalism and staff elitism, and the magazine became a lightning rod for criticism of the ELCA as a whole, due in part to this reputation. This all was played out upon the background of a general decline in magazine readership and an erosion of membership in smaller congregations.

This is where the magazine faces its greatest exposure to failure. Circulation is best in small, often declining congregations but there virtually is no circulation in larger, growing parishes. Seventy of the ELCA's 100 largest congregations (based upon average worship attendance) take no—zero—magazines. All of this—divisive theological and social issues, shrinking readership, perceived liberal leanings, being on the declining side of congregational demographics—contributed to a circulation decline of 34.4 percent during the four-year period of 2003-2007 with losses averaging nearly 35,000 subscriptions each year. At that rate, the magazine faces collapse in less than a decade.

All of this begs a bigger question: What is the primary purpose of *The Lutheran*? Since its creation the magazine was to be the principal communication vehicle of the ELCA, linking congregations with synods, the churchwide organization, and to the Church worldwide. This means of connectedness exhibited by predecessor publications was seen to be vital for the success our predecessor church bodies; this relationship remains true today for *The Lutheran* and the ELCA. Therefore, this is not just the magazine's problem. It is mostly ours, to be sure, but we are not alone in addressing, *with a sense of urgency*, the well-being of *The Lutheran* and by extension the ELCA.

Hopefully, readers have noted within the pages of the magazine during the past year and a half more substance with better balance so it is a magazine worthy of purchase and support. And we will continue to do a better job of making connections between the churchwide organization, synods, and congregations, noting those dimensions that make us, altogether, the ELCA. We at the magazine are doing our best to rebuild relationships with members, congregations, and synods by attending more Synod Assemblies. In addition, we have taken numerous steps to reduce production and indirect cost of sales, and constantly are looking for ways to cut costs and increase efficiency, to be good stewards of the resources entrusted to us. We invested \$150,000 in promotion during 2006 and \$175,000 is budgeted for 2007. We now solicit congregations during key intervals, and attempt to reach members about individual subscriptions when their congregation's group plan is cancelled.

More needs to be done, however, and the magazine must help. Without a stable circulation base, cost reduction and efficiencies alone will not get the job done. We need advocates for *The Lutheran* at every level, from churchwide officers to bishops, to parish pastors, to members of local Congregation Councils, who will speak up for the magazine. We need advocates to raise visibility among members. Even a minimal commitment to *The Lutheran* will make a difference. For example, if every ELCA congregation took just 50 magazines—at a cost of less than \$400 annually—circulation would grow to be 520,000.

We requested this year 90 to 120 seconds of podium time to address Synod Assemblies so our visiting staff members can bring a message of encouragement and support for those gathered, to help reintroduce the magazine.

Confusion about congregation subscriptions and lack of firsthand knowledge has hurt our subscription base, so during the summer of 2007 the magazine will mail every non-subscribing congregation a package with complete subscription details. From congregational, leadership, and individual plans, an annual subscription to *The Lutheran* can be purchased for as little as \$8 per subscriber for 12 issues. For those congregations that decide, for whatever reason, not to subscribe, we hope to solicit individual subscribers through bulletin inserts, fliers, and the like.

Finally, *The Lutheran* will launch a new subscription program in 2007 called the Synod Plan. The plan will be offered first in synods that currently include a synod supplement in the middle of the magazine. Since most synods produce supplements four times a year, we will offer to sell the magazine to congregations not already on some type of subscription plan the four times the supplements appear at a rate of \$3.95 per subscriber a year.

The magazine assumed production of synod supplements January 2007, so they now will appear in full color on high-quality paper in a style consistent with the rest of the magazine. While this change will cost the magazine an additional \$22,000 a year, we hope to find new revenue or cost reductions to eliminate the cost currently assessed synods for the supplements.

Which brings us to something new and hopeful—*The Little Lutheran*. Prototypes of this magazine for very young children have been widely distributed, and the launch issue of has been timed to coincide with the 2007 Churchwide Assembly. *The Little Lutheran* is a monthly picture book for children ages six and younger designed to help children learn about God's love for them. It contains stories, prayers, puzzles, activities, and rituals to help children become aware of God's presence in and around them, and will help introduce them to the knowledge that Jesus Christ is their savior and friend. It is designed to help parents, grandparents, and the like nurture a child's spiritual awareness from a young age.

Candidly, the target audience for *The Little Lutheran* includes *oma und opa* (grandparents) whose children might have a hard time talking about matters of faith with *their* children. By coming in the mail 10 times a year, addressed to the child, the parent will need to help the child explore the pages of *The Little Lutheran*. In turn, we hope it will prompt religious reflection on the part of the parent.

The Little Lutheran has the potential of being marketed to other Lutheran church bodies, and also printed under the title *The Little Christian* for our ecumenical partners. *The Little Lutheran* represents a major investment of time and resources. There are risks in this new venture, of course, but to conduct business as usual invites greater uncertainty and potential peril.

In sum, while we cannot erase perceptions about the past, we can, and do, emphasize that the magazine is and will be the voice of all responsible views within the ELCA. As good stewards we will strive to find economies and new revenue streams wherever possible, but we must rebuild our circulation base. Nothing less will do, and we need your help to sustain this vital connection for the ELCA. I pray you will join the staff of *The Lutheran* in taking a chance on, and voicing your support for, this church's magazine.

Daniel J. Lehmann, *editor*