



## Study guide: **Simplicity**

*Consider embracing it*

**By Robert C. Blezard**

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"If you're like me"

*The Lutheran*, October 2010  
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The economy is forcing many families and congregations to tighten their belts. Others are cutting back because we don't know what the future will hold. Most everybody is rethinking the role money plays in our lives. Though downshifting can be painful, many are learning anew the joys of simple living.

### EXERCISE 1: 'IN GOD WE TRUST'

Examine a few coins or bills of different denominations. Look for "In God we trust" on each one.

- What do the words mean to you?
- Is it significant that "in God we trust" is printed on our money?
- Is it ironic?
- Does our culture place more trust in our money than in God?
- What evidence supports your position?
- Have you placed more trust in money than God?
- How trustworthy is money?
- Is the economy forcing our culture to rethink our priorities and our trust? How about you?

### EXERCISE 2: YOUR SITUATION

Our current economic woes began in 2008 with a meltdown of financial institutions on Wall Street.

- What was your financial life like before then?
- How has the downturn affected your family?
- Is your income the same?

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- Do you spend as much?
- Have you cut back? Is your future as secure?
- What lessons have you learned?

### EXERCISE 3: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Through relentless advertising our consumer culture brainwashes us to feel unhappy and discontent when all our wants aren't satisfied. The idea of "simple living" restores sanity by asking how much we really need and encouraging us to be happy with that.

- When you were growing up or just starting out, did you have as much money?
- When you became an adult, what was your first home or apartment like? Were your needs met? Were you happier then?
- Did you become happier when you earned more?
- How much do you really need to be happy?
- Why, then, do you want more?

### EXERCISE 4: OUR DAILY BREAD

The Lord's Prayer expresses Jesus' teaching about how we should pray, and each line is bursting with meaning. Read how Martin Luther defined "our daily bread" in the Small Catechism (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 1163).

- Do you agree with Luther?
- If you had everything in Luther's explanation of daily bread, would you be content?
- How many items on Luther's list require money?
- What do the others require?
- Would money help you acquire them?

**For action:** Rewrite Luther's explanation of "daily bread" using modern language and images. Meditate on your words whenever you recite the



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Lord's Prayer. Ask God to help you find satisfaction in "daily bread." Rewrite Luther's explanation again, this time imagining what "daily bread" would mean for your congregation. Publish your result in your church newsletter or bulletin.

### EXERCISE 5: MISSION STATEMENT

Examine your congregation's mission statement.

- What are the top priorities?
- Does it mention money, directly or indirectly?
- Is money required to accomplish your congregation's stated mission?
- What can be accomplished without money?

Now look at your congregation's current year budget.

- Which items aren't related to the congregation's mission?
- What are the top priorities?
- How do they compare or contrast with the mission statement's top priorities?
- What conclusions can you draw?

**For action:** Write a mission statement for your life.

- What are its priorities?

Now look at your financial statements.

- What are their priorities?
- Compare and contrast the top priorities of each.
- What conclusions can you draw?

### EXERCISE 6: RETHINKING MATERIALISM—LUKE'S VISION

Except perhaps for the ones who have been taken in by the heretical "prosperity gospel," North American Christians live with great tension about money. On the one hand, our consumer culture values wealth creation and spending; on the other hand, our Savior directs us to give away our money



## Study guide: **Simplicity** (continued)

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and trust God. How are we to live?

More than the other Gospel writers, Luke connects faithful living to how we handle money. As a study group, spend as many sessions as you can reading Luke carefully and noting whenever Jesus teaches about money and possessions. For a briefer study, examine these passages from Luke—6:20; 12:15; 12:33; 14:33; 16:13-14; and 18:18-27.

- What conclusions can you draw?
- How does Jesus call us to live?
- Do we live that way?
- What verse among those listed provides us comfort?

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# If you're like me


*Sitze is a former stewardship and hunger ELCA churchwide staff member who writes about congregational life and lives in Wheaton, Ill.*

Consider embracing 'lifestyle simplicity' as a core identity and set of behaviors

By Bob Sitze

**I**f you're like me, simple living isn't one of your lifestyle options anymore. And if your church is like mine, becoming "a simple congregation" isn't optional either. For families and congregations, these are perilous times, although still filled with joyful possibilities.

Since it's October, "reformation" and "stewardship" fill your mind and your congregation's pew racks with thoughts about what's important and hopeful. That's why



**Y**ou don't hoard more facial tissue and communion wine just because you can save \$1.25 a box when you buy them in quantity. And you don't measure personal or congregational success by the increasing size of your McMansion or McCathedral!

DESIGNPICS

I invite you to consider in the paragraphs that follow how you and your congregation can embrace “lifestyle simplicity” as a core identity and set of behaviors.

It's probably obvious that a few years back “more” and “continuing growth” died the merciful death that all unsustainable concepts eventually face. You don't consume more toothpaste, gasoline and soy meatballs just because they're out there and someone wants you to buy them. You don't hoard more facial tissue and communion wine just because you can save \$1.25 a box or bottle when you buy them in quantity. And you don't measure personal or congregational success by the increasing size of your McMansion or McCathedral.

These are perilous times, and only shortsighted folks still think they can buy or borrow their way

out of any kind of continuing repression. If you're like me, you're not shortsighted or dim-witted. You're a *Lutheran*, for God's sake, and for God's sake you're trying to do what God requires, what Christ invites and what the Spirit makes possible with your life.

### **Simplifying your mission**

In one of his ageless sketches, comedian Jack Benny is confronted by a robber's insistence, “Your money or your life.” Benny defers for several moments. When pushed by the robber for his decision, the characteristically frugal Benny replies, “I'm thinking about it!”

What he was thinking may have seemed simple, but at a deeper level his choices were incredibly complex.

In these times difficult and complicated questions face both you and

your congregation, perhaps intensifying the necessity to make choices about your part of God's mission.

The questions might look like these:

- In a culture that moves too fast, that carries too much stuff and that fears too readily, how does any person or congregation live joyfully and purposefully?
- What, really, is most basic, most necessary, most purposeful about your life (and your congregation's life)?
- What parts of God's mission depend on money and which don't?
- If “money follows passion,” what do you work on first?
- Because attention is the first commodity—without attention, nothing

**For a study guide, see page 26.**





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else happens —  
to what do you or  
your congregation pay  
attention?

As you think about how you will live—as an individual, family or congregation—you’ve probably come to embrace several axioms about living in these times. I don’t know what yours might be, but here are some of mine:

- If I don’t have money, time or attention, I can’t use, spend, save or offer them for God’s purposes.
- God isn’t a slot machine waiting for just the right prayer from me in order

to shower me with goodies. I’m a beggar, after all.

- My congregation can’t maintain viable ministries if it can’t depend on the attention, money and time God gives me to steward.

• Just like my family, my congregation can find “enough” and be happy about it.

- Just like my family, my congregation can live simply.

Like me, you’re likely trying to put into practice what you know to be true about living simply in these times. Heading toward simplicity means slowing down; living within your means; saving more, ramping up your understanding and practice of generosity; and finding satisfaction, serenity and joy inside of what others might think of as scarcity—all good ideals for the life of a reformation-minded steward of God’s gifts.

The helps for personal lifestyle change are plentiful (see the resources on page 23).

You have around you the examples of others who provide courage and conviction when they run short. Unlike some stereotypes about simple-livers, these folks are noticeable not because they display Jeremiah-like grimaces or carry large balls of twine and homemade yogurt in their camel’s-hair backpacks. Instead, they’re basically content people, calm in the face of need, grateful about what they have—and who they are—instead of whining about what they don’t have or they can’t ever become.

You can learn from them, as they can learn from you.

### **Toward a simpler congregation**

When it comes to a simple congregation though, the models may be few

and far between. For an example of a congregation that faced involuntary simplicity, see the article on First Lutheran of Newton, Iowa (page 25).

Expectations for excellence in congregational life are high. “Best practices” stories and the exhortations of denominational leaders can inadvertently create a “keeping up with Pastor Jones” mentality. It may seem like the descriptors of healthy congregations are more like requirements than invitations or examples.

For those reasons, pastors like Howard D. Vrankin of First sometimes note anger among parishioners who expect staff members to keep programs going even in tough times.

Let’s be honest: It’s probably more difficult to voluntarily simplify a congregation than to deconstruct or detoxify your lifestyle.

How to start toward a simpler congregation? Try these thoughts and the behaviors they imply:

- Be honest with each other about the way you and your congregation live.
- Start talking about how your congregation can help members manage their calendars, checkbooks or family commitments.
- Stay fiercely attached to an understanding of God’s mission that starts with members’ power and influence to do God’s work in their daily lives.
- Rethink “abundance” so it’s more about satisfaction than satiation.
- Declutter your congregation’s space, calendar and programs.
- Start all your planning with assets—useful gifts—in mind.
- If you don’t have the assets for a ministry, don’t do it.
- Face the possibility of your church’s dying, and then prepare for resurrection.
- Realistically define the role of pastor or church staff.
- Be grateful for what you have and who you are.

First’s members discovered other

ideas about becoming a simpler congregation. Their leaders considered their own axioms for simplifying congregational life, including:

- Stay nimble and flexible so you can adjust to circumstances quickly. “Think of planning as tactical, not strategic or long range,” Vrankin said. “Your planning can be more like playing jazz than performing a symphony.”
- Move quickly from idea-formation to carrying out the ideas and ideals you’ve considered.
- Because shared adversity draws people together, name it as one of your assets.
- Listen to each other, then listen again. Judy Lackore Monroe, a council member of First and a nurse by profession, puts it this way: “As a leader, you can’t change a congregation any more than a doctor can make a patient care for his or her body. Instead, listen for the stories that signal the start of change.”
- Don’t get stuck on guilt, anger, problem-solving or pain-killing. These all make congregational life way more complicated than it needs to be.
- Help members and leaders learn from their lifestyle shifts how the congregation can make the same kind of fundamental changes.
- Take the members’ focus off money, the pastor or the congregation’s image.

### **A process you can start now**

Because it’s October—and because you’re getting excited again about reformation and stewardship themes—this is a good time to make simplicity a key feature of your identity and practice as a congregation.

If you’re feeling the slow crushing of economic, environmental and cultural realities, you may be even more strongly motivated to think of simplicity as a key ingredient in your

congregation’s life.

To start the process, right after you finish reading this issue of *The Lutheran* try any of these tasks:

- Pray with hope in these matters.

## **Resources**

- Alternatives for Simple Living. ELCA-supported nonprofit organization offering the most complete array of wisdom and resources about simple living ([www.simpleliving.org](http://www.simpleliving.org)).
- *Make It Simple: A Congregational Stewardship Resource for Stewardship Education* by ELCA stewardship staff. An adaptable annual stewardship response program (online at [www.elca.org/makeitsimple](http://www.elca.org/makeitsimple) or for sale as a CD set at [www.augsburgfortress.org/store](http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store)).
- *Starting Simple: Conversations About the Way We Live* by Bob Sitze. Invitation to start significant changes in your life and congregation with conversations ([www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org)).
- *Sustaining Simplicity: A Journal* by Anne Basye. Compelling chronicle of one year in the life of a simple living adherent ([www.augsburgfortress.org/store](http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store); additional resources at <http://archive.elca.org/hunger/resources/simple/leader-guide.html>).
- *The Race: A Simplicity Musical* by Jay Beech. Invigorating musical about a lifestyle that’s running too fast (Baytone Music, [www.baytonemusic.com](http://www.baytonemusic.com)).
- *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* by Duane Elgin. The classic work on the subject of simple living (second revised edition, 2010; available at most online bookstores).



- Audit informally the things your congregation does well. Think of the reasons why this is true.
- Find one other person with whom you can discuss this article—and the rest of this issue’s contents.
- Name the places in your lifestyle—personal or congregational—where contrition and repentance are necessary. (Martin Luther was a little more insistent when he named “terrors of conscience” as a starting point for repentance and forgiveness.)
- Read the resources or visit the websites listed with this article (page 23). Take your questions and comments about what you observe or learn to your pastor or church council.
- Think about which adversities threaten the sustainability of your congregation. How could their presence be a strong motivator for your congregation to move toward simplicity?
- Pray with joy in these matters.

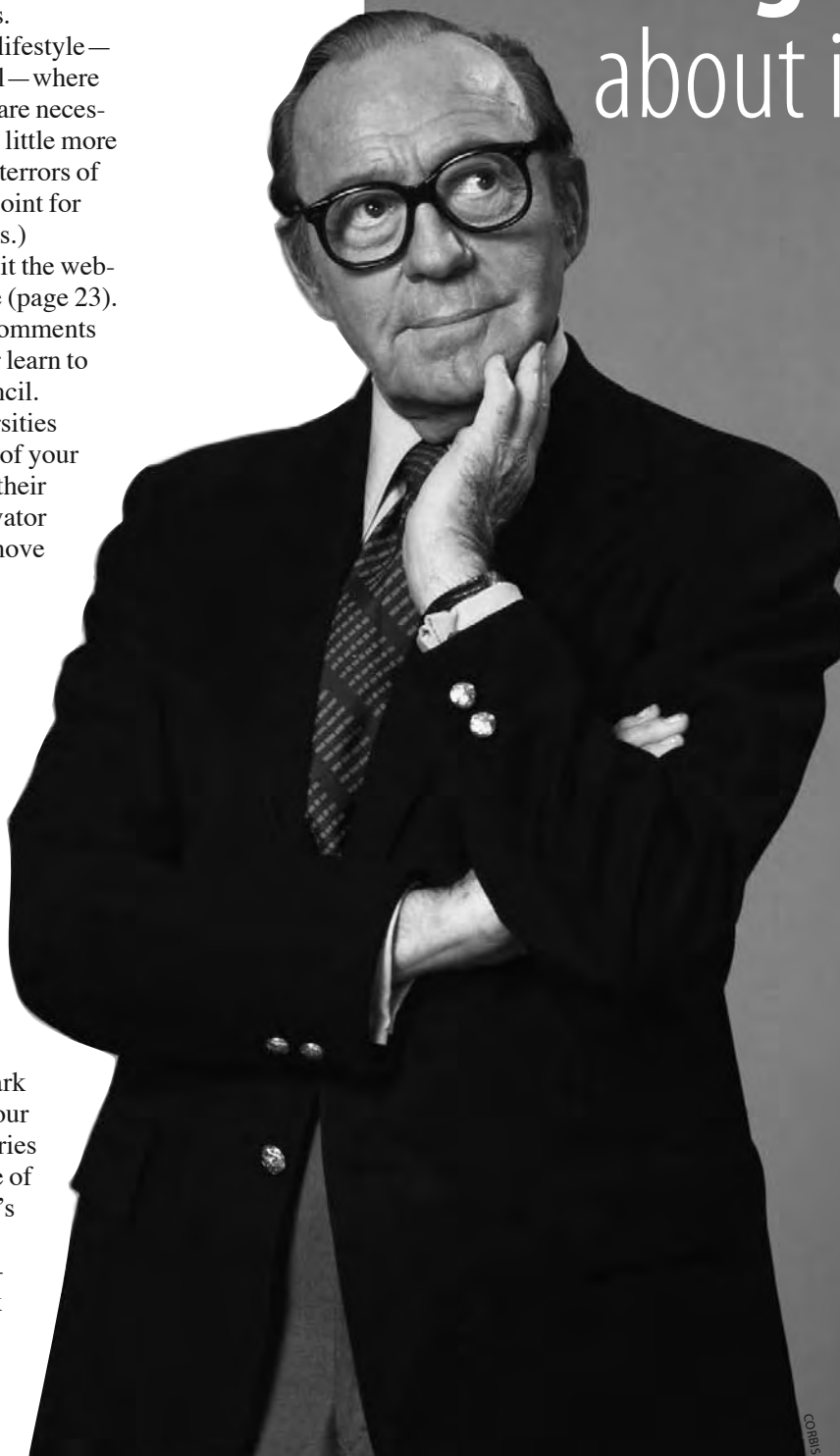
As your personal history—and those of your congregation and this denomination—progress toward simplicity, hold strongly to your conviction that living simply is now the way forward into God’s will for the world.

Be courageous in your thoughts and in your actions. Be grateful for adversity and peril. Mark the examples and life of your forebears and contemporaries who persevered in the face of difficulty. Rejoice in what’s coming next.

And if you’re like me—and I hope you are—thank God for your lifework as reformer and steward.

May God keep you joyful. □

# I’m thinking about it...



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# First Lutheran seeks what should be first

Some congregations choose simplicity; other congregations have no choice. And still others embrace what's necessary so it becomes a blessing. First Lutheran Church in Newton, Iowa, fits the latter description.

Faced with the closing of the town's major employer and the eventual loss of more than 3,000 jobs, First's leaders knew they would have to pare the congregation's expectations and lifestyle. They would have to find a way of "being church" that could be supported by a drastically reduced membership and a severely diminished budget.

It was clear that the consumerist-corporate model of congregational life wasn't sustainable anymore.

Rather than seeing this reality only as an overwhelming problem—staff reductions, program cuts, fear and anger, loss of large numbers of families—leaders saw another possibility: First could eventually prosper as a "simple congregation."

Over several years and after facing all the predictable stages of grief that beset people and congregations, the leaders came to a breakthrough insight. As Howard D. Vrankin, pastor, recalls the moment: "We realized that we are a family, and we want to go somewhere with our family."

From their association with Dwight Dubois of the Center for Renewal at Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, they adopted a

helpful mantra: "The church of Jesus Christ has a mission; the mission of Jesus Christ has a church; and we are that church."

In small groups and families, the congregation embarked on a year-long, in-depth exploration of Dave Daubert's *Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation* (Augsburg Fortress, 2007).

Gradually members came to see they could reduce their expectations that staff would lead and carry out programming. They realized they could draw each other into exciting ministries that were in line with their personal and congregational assets.

Council member Judy Lackore Monroe recalled, "When we came to the end of it—the closing of the Maytag plant—we knew who and what was left and what we could do with it."

Without staff to depend on, parishioners assumed leadership of ministries that could be sustained. A small cadre envisioned and brought into being a ministry—supporting a hospital in Tanzania with presence, sweat and money—that galvanized a can-do spirit and infused congregational life.

Committees were whittled, "stewardship drives" ended and new

**Members of First Lutheran Church in Newton, Iowa, attend a Tuesday evening worship service in a local park. Since the closing of the town's largest employer and resulting downturn of the congregation, members of First have learned to focus on "first things"—discipleship and mission.**

leaders emerged. Families that had learned to do with less applied those behaviors to congregational programs and events. Mission became less dependent on money and more evident of joyful creativity. Cooperative ventures with other congregations increased.

First is slowly regaining membership, restoring its health as an enterprise of God. Most likely, though, the congregation will never return to its former ways of thinking about being God's people or getting God's work done. At First now, "first things"—discipleship and mission—are first.

A simple matter, indeed. □

Bob Sitze

