



#### Related articles:

**Starting fresh** (page 16)

**Who wants our hymnals?** (page 17)

**'Do you really think I want to live this way?'**  
(page 18)

**Tips from a pro**  
(page 21)

*The Lutheran*,  
January 2016

#### Contact us:

**The Lutheran**

8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60631  
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540  
[lutheran@thelutheran.org](mailto:lutheran@thelutheran.org)  
[www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org)

*The Lutheran* is the  
magazine of the  
Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

## Study guide:

**\$2.00**

# Starting fresh

*Readers tell what they've tossed—and even how cleaning has revived mission*

By Robert C. Blezard

Accumulation. Clutter. It's when things grow old, wear out or become obsolete, yet we keep them around. They take up space in the attics, closets, basements and garages of our homes and congregations. But our hearts and minds can also become cluttered with ideas that no longer work, and our congregations can become bogged down with outdated ideas. From time to time our physical spaces need a good cleaning, and so do our mind-sets.

## Exercise 1: Clutter assessment

Have each member of the study group go through their house and assign a "clutter grade" (A is clutter-free and F is clutter chaos) to each of these places: attic, bedrooms, closets, living room, dining room, basement, garage and other spaces. Share:

- What would be your overall grade?
- Which is the most cluttered area?
- What does the clutter consist of? How did it get there?
- What does the clutter say about your life? Your attitudes?
- What are you going to do about it?
- Now as a study group (you might divide into teams) go through your church and assess the clutter you find in these places: the narthex, classrooms, office, kitchen, pastor's study, conference rooms, storage rooms, basement and other spaces. Share:
- What would be the overall grade? What's the worst grade?
- What does it say about your church? Its attitudes?
- What can you do about it?

## Exercise 2: Accumulation

Clutter happens when we accumulate too much stuff. And it's getting worse. People find closets in older homes way too small for their clothes. And even our houses are too small, which is why the self storage industry is booming.

- Do you fight clutter? Do you have more accumulated stuff than your grandparents did? (And more space?)



### Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

### Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to [rcblezard@embarqmail.com](mailto:rcblezard@embarqmail.com)

### Contact us:

## The Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60631  
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540  
[lutheran@thelutheran.org](mailto:lutheran@thelutheran.org)  
[www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org)

*The Lutheran* is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

# Study guide: **Starting fresh**

## *continued*

- Why are we more acquisitive today?
- How have we changed as people?
- What does it mean to accumulate and hold on to possessions?
- What are the spiritual dimensions of accumulation?
- How can we fight it?

### Exercise 3: Give 'stuff' away

As a study group, take the 100-item giveaway challenge: Over the next 100 days, covenant to find at least 100 items (not junk—stuff that's useful) to give away. Check in with one another regularly to see how it's going. When done, discuss:

- What did you learn?
- What was the hardest part? The easiest?
- Did it change how you thought about your "stuff"?
- As a variation, make the challenge part of your Lenten celebration or post-Easter countdown to Pentecost. Or make it a yearlong 365-item giveaway.

### Exercise 4: A 'buying fast'

Clutter creeps into our lives because it's easy to accumulate. As either an alternative or a complement to giving stuff away, your study group can covenant to go on a buying "fast." For a period of time—100 days, a month or two, a church season or maybe even a year—agree not to buy any new stuff. Draw up some rules (food is not stuff) and exceptions (it's OK to replace worn-out socks or underwear, and emergencies happen). As you go, discuss what you are experiencing. What's hardest? What's surprising? What's joyful? What are you learning about stuff? About yourself?

### Exercise 5: Bigger barns

Jesus warned: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Then to illustrate, he told the story of the rich fool. Read Luke 12:15-21 and discuss:

- Why was the rich man foolish?
- What did possessions mean to him?
- What was his understanding of sufficiency? Of security? Of generosity? Of gratitude?
- How do you compare in your own attitudes?
- What "bigger barns" do you build?
- What is a Christian understanding of sufficiency and the value of possessions? How would this understanding help us declutter our lives?



### About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds

degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

### Contact us:

## The Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60631  
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540  
[lutheran@thelutheran.org](mailto:lutheran@thelutheran.org)  
[www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org)

*The Lutheran* is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

# Study guide: **Starting fresh**

*continued*

## Exercise 6: Sharing

To prepare for the reign of God, John the Baptizer advised his followers to share: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11). Would this advice also help us simplify our lives? Read Luke 3:7-14 and discuss:

- John gives advice to three groups of people. What does that advice have in common?
- How must followers change their relationship with wealth and possessions? Why should they change this relationship?
- What are the spiritual issues?
- Can they be followers and not change?
- If you gave away the things you no longer truly needed, how would that benefit you? How would it benefit others? Who would you become?

## Exercise 7: New attitudes

Many congregations and leaders are stuck in old patterns of thinking and outdated ways of doing things. How big a problem is this, and why? Working as a study group, list as many attitudes, assumptions, ideas, approaches, programs or ways of doing things that served your congregation years ago but not so much now. How would your congregation change if those things were magically removed from church life and replaced with newer ideas? What happens if they aren't?

Formulate new ideas to replace the old ones. Brainstorming together, come up with ways that church leaders can work to create a climate of openness to new ideas.

## Exercise 8: Renewed minds

Through our faith, Jesus leads us to new ways of living that align our lives with the purposes and values of God. Paul puts it well in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Discuss:

- What core values and ideas of Christianity are counter to our culture's when it comes to such ideas as violence, community, individuality and economics?
- What worldly ideas or attitudes have you challenged and rejected as a result of your faith?
- How have you been transformed?
- What areas of your life and mind need to be renewed? How much "clutter" is there?



# Starting fresh

Text by Julie B. Sevig  
Photos by Kathryn Brewer

These are just a few of the things readers found when cleaning out church cupboards and closets, basements and attics:

- Mimeograph supplies.
- A poker table.
- A Sunday school Christmas program from 1942.
- Chicken incubator lights.
- And, wait for it ... chickens—live ones.

As a nod to the new year, *The Lutheran* posted a reader call that asked, “What does your congregation need to toss (literally and figuratively)? Old hymnals or old attitudes? Felt boards or outdated programs? What have you cleaned out that caused both a chuckle and relief?”

Few people offered up attitudes or programs they’d like to get rid of. But plenty of folks have cleaned out hymnals and felt boards. Clearly, emptying the storage bowels of church buildings caused both a chuckle and relief. And much more.

Pam Raynor Warnor, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Mayville, N.Y., found the 1942 program while desperately searching for anything she could use this Christmas season. Something from more than seven decades ago wasn’t what she had been hoping for.

But Lauren Ashley, Nativity Evangelical Lutheran Church, East Brunswick, N.J., did make a Christmas find worth keeping: “I found Christmas cards we used

**‘That card has been sitting there about 20 years just waiting for me to clean up the church.’**

to cut up and make new cards for the home-bound. In them was a card from my grandpop from 1993, his last Christmas with us. That card has been sitting there about 20 years just waiting for me to clean up the church.”

## And then there were chickens ...

Stephanie Quick Espinoza, St. Stephen Lutheran Church, West St. Paul, Minn., was a missionary in Costa Rica when she had to clean out the chickens that were laying eggs in the sacristy/storage closet.



Readers tell what they’ve tossed—and even how cleaning has revived mission

Another person on Facebook was curious enough to ask what she did with them. “I put them outside and then they got through a broken window again,” Espinoza responded. “So I fixed that and they finally stayed out.”

In an unrelated response, Arianna Hilsen Arends of St. Paul, a joint United Church of Christ and ELCA congregation in Lewiston, Minn., said chicken incubator lights were the weirdest thing she found during the last church cleanout.

### Hymnals and robes, oh my!

“Probably get rid of the black hymnals,” suggested Rico Ludovici on Facebook. “You know, the ones from before the mythic red hymnal.”

Hymnals and choir robes were often addressed in a cleaning project.

“Definitely keep several of each previous hymnal,” offered Jim Watrick, Christ the King Lutheran Church, West Chester, Ohio. “The oldies are goodies. I miss the prior red hymnal.”

Tucker James Nelson, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Virginia, Minn., cautioned against throwing out a heap of hymnals: “I think churches need to have organized archives, which should involve keeping at least one copy of old hymnals. It’s important to see how the faith has progressed and changed.”

Reader Marilynne Smith, First Lutheran Church, San Diego, suggested giving hymnals away to people who want a copy for home.

Nancy Roper Bickley, Martinez, Ga., was one who ventured into less literal territory: “I’d like to keep the old hymns.”

Audrey Seaberg, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Quincy, Wash., took advantage of the Facebook post to say her church is currently looking for a home for purple choir robes. Troy Olson, ministry associate at Luther Crest Bible Camp, Alexandria, Minn., suggested she donate them to the props closet at a nearby camp.

Olson also offered an attitude that should be pitched: “The idea that ‘children are our future.’ They’re here and now, just like you and me.”

And those youth need a decent place to sit. Juli Lejman-Guy, St. John Evangelical Lutheran, Bellevue, Ohio, said her congregation needs to “get rid of all the old couches with no springs or padding left in the outdated ‘youth’ room to make room for today’s youth.”



## Who wants our hymnals?

*The Lutheran* asked ELCA worship staff for some tips on getting rid of hymnals, choir robes, music, etc. BethAnn Lynch, coordinator for worship and liturgical resources, and Scott Weidler, associate director for worship/music, said:

- Give members a chance at hymnals. Then recycle those that are left (better stewardship of creation than having them end up in a landfill). The synod office might know of a congregation that needs them, but shipping costs (especially sending well beyond your community) are often prohibitive. Nursing homes sometimes want hymnals, but be sure to ask first (don’t just drop them off). Some people have taken the cover off of old hymnals and turned them into an angel craft project. We encourage congregations that purchase new hymnals to raise enough money to also buy them for a mission congregation (or one that can’t afford its own).
- If another congregation doesn’t want your hand-me-downs, choir robes can be used to make blankets or quilts.
- If falling apart, recycle old choir music. If the music is still good but no longer wanted or needed, offer it to a neighboring congregation. Local chapters of the American Guild of Organists ([www.agohq.org](http://www.agohq.org)) may help serve as a “broker.”
- As with any old electronics or technology, organs can be junked. If a pipe organ still has life in it, contact the Organ Clearing House ([www.organclearinghouse.net](http://www.organclearinghouse.net)). Consider donating an unused piano to a family with a promising young keyboard player, perhaps even nurturing and nudging them into leading music at church.





## Cleaning out storage areas gives leaders a chance to marvel at the advances in technology.

### Time marches on

Cleaning out storage areas gives leaders a chance to marvel at the advances in technology—and mourn that filmstrips are still in the cabinets.

In addition to filmstrips and a projector, Calvary Lutheran, Two Rivers, Wis., during renovation found in the church attic cassettes and vinyl LPs “that have the ‘ding’ when you’re supposed to change to the next side,” Kay Richter said.

Several folks said they found and threw away an array of videos, as well as “millions of foam craft kits,” Concordia hymnals, 10 years of vacation Bible school kits in their original boxes, John Ylvisaker’s “contemporary” liturgies from the 1970s, Lutheran-Episcopal dialogues, an apron with pockets on every inch of it—filled with toys and treats, and a black and white film about Martin Luther on huge film reels.

Karyn Aarthun Ervin, St. John Lutheran Church, Riverton, Wyo., was the one who found a poker table in the storage closet: “No one knew how it got there.”

Although Paul Simmons, Saron Lutheran Church in Ashland, Wis., was willing to throw out the videos he

found of “talking head lectures” from the 1970s, he said he wouldn’t throw out the felt boards. “They’re sentimental favorites” and can be used “when the video stuff won’t work,” he said.

One pastor said someone passing through town “asked longingly if we still had the felt board her mother had made. My secret heartfelt thought was, ‘Oh, I hope not.’”

St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Lake Worth, Fla., declared: “We could open an antique store!”

Pat Radd of Nelsonville (Wis.) Evangelical Lutheran Church, one half of the Tomorrow River Parish, found spackle pots used for making egg coffee years ago. Her find resulted in a Facebook teaching moment regarding egg coffee—how to make it and how in some congregations only certain people had that job.

Carla Thompson Powell, United in Faith Lutheran Church, Chicago, said, “If books have a copyright date before my birth year I look very skeptically at them, especially if they are about ‘contemporary worship’ or youth ministry. ... If brochures have copyright dates after 1980 but before 2005, they better have amazing content to earn their place in the brochure rack.”

## ‘Do you really think I want to live this way?’

By Angela K. Zimmann

**M**y son is 16. Sometimes I forget because he can banter with adults; hold his own in a variety of social settings; and has attended three high schools in two states and two countries, finishing with outstanding grades, lovely friends and a pleasant demeanor.

But my son is 16 and, in case I ever forget, his bedroom provides the proof. Usually I just shut the door and pretend that the space doesn’t exist. But one day last week I just couldn’t take it anymore. No matter how much I tried to deny or ignore, forget or repress, I knew what was behind that door—my phenomenal son and his astonishing mess.

I peeked in and saw him sitting at the computer surrounded by school papers, college admission papers, a garbage can (or two) overflowing with empty bags of chips and laundry strewn everywhere (dirty? clean? who could tell?). And the icing on the cake: his pet chinchilla had kicked up a mess of dust, food and other unmentionables that completely covered one corner.

“Seth! This is unbelievable ...,” I started in. Before

I could gather a full head of steam, he swung around toward me.

**“Mom. Mom! Do you really think I want to live this way?”**

For a moment I had forgotten what my son is juggling right now: advanced placement classes, marching band, the school play, speech and debate—and on it goes.

He was doing all he could to keep it all together, and that didn’t include the laundry. And am I really any better for all of my lecturing and hectoring? I’m juggling, too, just hoping that I can keep it all together, keep the laundry done, the refrigerator stocked and the bills paid—and on it goes.

**Do you think we want to live this way?**

Our lives are full of clutter. Physical clutter, yes, and mental clutter too. Are these the lives to which we are called to live as Christians?

**Do we really want to live this way?**

More importantly: Does Jesus really want us to live this way?

Maretta Hershberger offered what may be a cautionary tale for pastors, church secretaries and Sunday school superintendents everywhere: don't leave your stuff for someone else.

As a new secretary of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, South Bend, Ind., she has the "dubious privilege" of cleaning the office of a pastor who retired two years ago: "On top of his desk, I found church bulletins from 1991. On the up side, I did enjoy his joke file. ... Still, with my work about one-fourth finished, I have already carted out nine bags of trash, one of which was completely filled with old church supply catalogs."

### Freed to do God's mission

Wayne Olsen, St. Paul Lutheran, Teaneck, N.J., wrote a spirited response just as his congregation celebrated its 90th anniversary. "It would probably take another 90 years for us to empty out our building," he said.

20 ►



In Luke 10, we read the familiar story of Jesus visiting his dear friends Mary and Martha. Martha is a lot like my son Seth, a lot like me and maybe a lot like you. Martha has a life cluttered with many things, many tasks. And Martha is frustrated. She's working hard. She wants everyone around her to be working hard too.

But Martha's sister, Mary, has different priorities. Mary sees right through the busy clutter of life, right through to what Jesus calls the "one thing," the "better part." Listening, learning, worshiping and spending time with the Lord—that is Mary's focus, not the other clutter that takes up our time, eats up our money and lays waste to our souls.

#### Do we really want to live this way?

Do we really want to work longer and harder ... so we can buy newer and bigger stuff ... so we can clutter up our space and time ... so we can be too busy to listen, learn, worship and spend time in Christian community?

#### Do we really want to live this way?

Or are we called to lay aside the clutter and sit at the feet of Jesus? Maybe you have heard of the Protestant work ethic. Hard work and frugality, diligence as duty. If you're like me, maybe the Shaker phrase "Hands to work, hearts to God" seems to have been taken right

out of the Scriptures, right along with cleanliness is next to godliness (that one isn't in the Bible either).

A little later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds us of the lilies: they neither toil nor spin—they just are. And they just are beautiful.

Martin Luther said: "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God." Do our hearts cling to busy schedules and cluttered lives? Or do they cling to the promises of and the relationship with Jesus?

Maybe it's time to declutter our lives, to refocus on "the better part." Maybe it's time to be a little less Mary, a little more Martha: to simplify and organize, not so that we can "do more with less!"—but simply so we can do less and be more.

#### Do we really want to live this way?

I pray that we—my son, myself, my family and all of you—may be inspired to declutter, refocus and embrace the one who calls us to sit at his feet and reminds us:

"There is need of only one thing," not two, 10 or a 100 things.

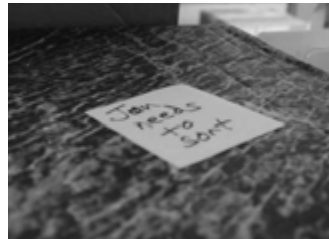
One thing.

Our Lord,  
Jesus Christ.



#### Author bio:

Zimmann, an ELCA pastor, is visiting professor of preaching at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.)



**“We have 60 members today and 200 choir booklets from 1950. We keep them ‘just in case.’ ”**

“Beneath the dust bunnies, mold and mildew lie children’s games never opened and ‘Welcome to Our Neighborhood’ letters never sent. We have (no lie) 72 different keys for the building. We have 60 members today and 200 choir booklets from 1950. We keep them ‘just in case.’ ”

Acknowledging that it sounds like George Carlin’s “A Place for My Stuff” routine, he observed that church buildings become reliquaries for stuff and that council time and energy is filled with discussing upkeep and storage. He credits the current pastor with cleaning house and clearing the air, “freeing us to do God’s work.”

“Of course,” he added, “in our moments of clarity and lucidity, we hear God’s word and work to take care of the things that really matter. ... If anybody reading this needs a Martin Luther Colorforms set, a 1939 filmstrip machine, an overhead projector, a lawnmower allegedly owned by [reformer Philipp] Melancthon, and enough felt animals to fill 40 arks, give us a call.”

Members of United Lutheran Church in Oak Park, Ill., also found that cleaning out their building gave them a renewed sense of mission.

To maintain their aging building and serve the community, they needed to get more people through the doors, Sandy Williams said. That required shredding decades-old checks, recycling green hymnals and church directories, sifting through papers and ledgers from the Norwegian predecessor congregations, and throwing, among other things, broken toys from the nursery, an old folding machine and Sunday school books from long ago.

It was like an Easter egg hunt for those doing the work,



she said, another egg in every opened cabinet. It caused gnashing of teeth from members, who wanted “things to be like the old days.”

“My reply is always that our church is like a large ship and it takes time to turn it around. And that’s what we’re doing,” Williams said.

Joy McDonald Colvet was one of three staff members of Christ Lutheran Church on Capitol Hill, St. Paul, Minn., who spent an afternoon “cleaning house.”

Among the treasures: dog-eared copies of Good News for Modern Man version of the Bible, worn-out choir robes that had gathered dust for a decade, flower vases from years of funerals, the belongings of a homeless woman, and an artificial trellis left by a wedding party.

**‘At the end of the day, shelves looked fresher and spaces looked clean.’**

“With comments like ‘the church is not a junkyard,’ we boldly decided we could part with many things,” Colvet said.

“Perhaps we were inspired by Marie Kondo’s *The*

*Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* or perhaps it was just time, but at the end of the day, shelves looked fresher and spaces looked clean.”

There is still more to do, she said, but it was the step they needed to take “to help our space feel more alive, open, joy-filled and ready to receive whatever comes next in our collective story. Thanks be to God.”

Tom Pairan, Nazareth Lutheran Church, Chatfield, Ohio, also felt a sense of victory: “I found the Ark of the Covenant in the church basement, probably from a vacation Bible school drama. It made me feel like Indiana Jones.” □



**Author bio:**

Sevig is managing editor of *The Lutheran magazine*.



# Tips from a pro

Gwynnae Byrd, owner of Home Transitions, a business that helps people organize, is also vice president of St. John Lutheran Church in Sacramento, Calif. She credits an article called “Tackling spiritual clutter” from *The Lutheran* (December 2012) for launching a three-session seminar at her congregation that helped members address the spiritual, physical and mental clutter in their lives.

In the new year, many will resolve to get organized, but that rarely gets accomplished, she said. Byrd did her own transition from practicing law to helping people get organized for life. Here she shares some of her expertise with *The Lutheran*.

## ***The Lutheran:* How is cleaning and organizing a church like cleaning and organizing a home?**

*Byrd:* The principles remain the same whether it's a house, an office or another entity. A neighboring Lutheran church was closing and St. John took on its stuff, which meant inventorying all of it, including kitchen supplies, choir robes, Bibles and three pianos, so we've just been through this.

Congregations want to do the same thing people want with their own stuff—decide what has value and what they want to move on to whoever can use it. Finding a good place for it is key. That might mean a school or the homeless shelter rather than Goodwill, for instance. Find out who deals with church organs or pianos and whether they're worth saving. Where might there be a need for coffee urns and pots? Avoid throwing everything into a dumpster. Archive paperwork. Find a new purpose for stuff. If you can't, be honest and say this has to go.

## **What's one of the hardest parts?**

Deferring the decision is tempting, but professional organizers help clients make decisions now instead of postponing. If a client decides they can let go of something, then helping them find a new home for it can be satisfying. That's definitely motivation.

## **Is there anything particular to cleaning out the church?**

Like any other nonprofit, they don't want to be wasteful. They'll use the other side of the piece of paper and leftover craft supplies, so they end up keeping things. We want to be good stewards. We want to be environmentally conscious and not toss things into the landfill.

Also, we all want to be respectful of honoring memories of people. It's not that different in church. When siblings discuss and fight over their parents' stuff, it's a microcosm of what might happen in church. There are



those who want to hold on to something no matter what, those who want to get rid of it and people in the middle.

I often suggest that we can take photos of special items and put them in scrapbooks, or bring an item out and use it—whether it's Grandma's china or a church's old icons. If there are things at church that have family names on them, let the family members have first dibs. If no one knows who the people in the photos are, it's hard to see a value in keeping it just for the sake of keeping it. The watchword for everything is that it has to have a purpose. Is it used or does it bring you pleasure? Clutter is all the stuff that doesn't have a purpose for you—church environment or at home.

If there is a historical reason to keep something, great. If it is kept to beautify, great. Holding on to it because of guilt is not a reason, especially if it's burdening you. We are often burdened by our stuff.

## **What about people who are afraid to get rid of certain things because they just might have value?**

There is also a psychological value in having no clutter. If you can't get a closet door closed or find your keys in the morning, that's probably weighing you down. There is a lot of value in reclaiming your space and time, including restoring your well-being and the ability to relax and enjoy your space.

## **Who are some of your favorite recipients of stuff?**

Recycle to local theater companies, drama departments, Craigslist, Freecycle. Share free stuff in the community if there is a need. Or get realistic and know that it has got to go in the trash.

## **And for both home and church, what's the payoff?**

On an even bigger scale, getting organized helps us get rid of mental clutter. Get your vision clear for who you want to be and what's important to you. Eliminate busyness, delegate and prioritize what is causing you stress. Live a more purposeful life. Being more grounded will help you achieve spiritual and mental calm. What is it that's causing buzzing, whirling around in your head? Today's busy lives are not just about stuff. Stuff is a magnification of weight, emotional stress.