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Study guide:

Religion—good for our health and well-being

By Robert C. Blezard

Studies show that people who attend church live longer, live more healthfully and have greater enjoyment. What's the secret? Is it the healing power of God, the enriching community or the positive influence of faith practices and beliefs? The answer is *yes!*

Exercise 1: Your stories

How has your faith made you healthier and happier? Share:

- What keeps you connected to church?
- What would your life be like without Jesus?
- When has God helped you in a crisis?
- How does faith sustain/nourish you?
- What does God's grace mean to you? God's love?

Exercise 2: Lost or directed?

Think of a time when you were totally lost, either on foot or while driving. What happened? How did it feel to not know where you were or where you were going? What emotions did you experience? What thoughts came to mind? How did you regain your sense of direction? How did it feel to be back on track?

How does faith give us a sense of where we are and where we're going in life? In what ways does faith give us direction and certainty? What would your life be like without your faith? Would you be "lost"?

Exercise 3: Miracle life

Do you believe in miracles? Why or why not? How would you define a miracle to someone who didn't belong to a church? Have you ever witnessed or experienced a miracle? Can you explain or share with the study group? How do miracles strengthen your faith and bring you closer to God?

Exercise 4: Real friends

Sure, you may have 478 friends on social media, but how many of them would you call in the middle of the night if you had an emergency? How important are relationships to your overall church experience?



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Why? Are your church friendships different from those in other spheres of your life? How?

Besides church, what other place or situation do you have in your life to gather with people who have similar interests, passions, values and beliefs? To what degree do your church relationships enhance and improve the quality of your life?

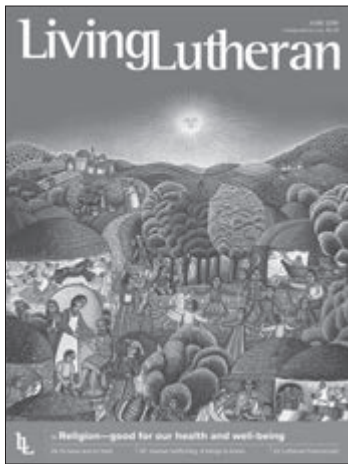
Exercise 5: Healthy habits

Lutherans are definitely OK with the responsible consumption of alcohol in moderation, but like most Christians we disapprove of drunkenness or recreational use of drugs. It's just one of the ways that our faith supports values and encourages habits that promote health and well-being and discourages unhealthy practices. Thinking of how our faith calls us to care for ourselves and to love our neighbor as ourselves, what are some other ways our faith promotes health of body, mind and spirit? What are practices that lead to greater well-being?

Exercise 6: 'Faith has made you well'

What is the connection between faith and wellness? Three of the Gospels tell the story of the woman with a hemorrhage who touched Jesus and was healed. Read one of the accounts in Mark 5:25-34 and discuss:

- With what medical condition has the woman suffered? For how long? How has she suffered in finances, relationships and other ways?
- When have you suffered from a medical condition? What was your suffering like?
- After 12 years and spending all she had, what do you imagine her emotional state was like? What would she have been feeling?
- What does she believe will happen in an encounter with Jesus? What power does she think Jesus possesses? What happens when she touches Jesus' clothing?
- By what name does Jesus call the woman? What does that signify?
- Jesus clarifies that it was her faith—as opposed to simply his power—that has healed her. What is the connection between the two? What does it mean for all of us who follow Jesus?
- The woman has been cured of the hemorrhage, but is this the extent of the healing? What other dimensions of “wellness” does Jesus bring to the woman? What dimensions does he bring to us all?
- What do you conclude about the connection between faith and wellness?



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Extra credit: Now consider the story of the cleansed leper in Luke 17:11-19. What parallels does his story have with the hemorrhaging woman's? What evidence is there that his wellness extends beyond the physical cure of his leprosy?

Exercise 7: Living with illness

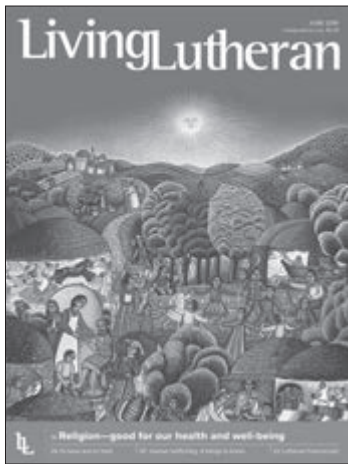
Though we celebrate physical health, we also remember that many of our most faithful, devoted brothers and sisters live with illnesses, medical conditions or diagnoses that cause them discomfort and suffering. Paul talks about living with suffering, a “thorn in the flesh” that God would not remove, but which ultimately became a source of strength. Read 2 Corinthians 12:6-9 and discuss:

- Describe how Paul's explanation of his “thorn in the flesh” (God gave it to him to keep him from being too elated and boastful) is out of sync with our current understanding of illness and disease. Does God inflict illness upon anyone for any reason? How do we explain suffering?
- Even if someone is suffering one aspect of life—say, physically, mentally or emotionally—does that preclude health in other areas? Can you think of a person who exemplifies good health in some aspects of life even while living with illness? Can you share a time when you yourself did?
- Paul said God told him that “power is perfected in weakness.” What does this mean to you? Have you ever witnessed power perfected in weakness? Did Jesus embody this idea?
- Have you ever endured suffering only to realize that it made you, on the whole, a stronger or better person? Share or explain how. Can you think of a person for whom this was true?

Exercise 8: Soul restoration

Psalms 23 remains one of the most beloved and best-known pieces of Scripture. For thousands of years its six short verses have provided comfort and strength to God's people. Read it aloud three or four times. Read slowly, savoring the phrases and words as if you were enjoying a box of chocolates. Discuss:

- What images of healing and strength do you find? What specific things does God our “shepherd” provide to us that promote health and wellness? What are the health benefits of rest, peace, protection, plenty of good food and drink, emotional security?
- What does it mean that God restores our souls? How have you experienced God's restoration of your soul?



About the study guide author:



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Exercise 9: New life

Life in Christ is all about transformation. We become new people when we walk the path of faith and discipleship. In his letters Paul often talks about this, as in 2 Corinthians 5:17—"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Martin Luther took this to heart in his theology, which undergirds our own tradition. Discuss:

- What does it mean to be "in Christ"? How does your congregation help you live and dwell more deeply "in Christ"?
- How does being "in Christ" transform us into new (or renewed) people? When have you seen this happen? How has it happened to you?

Religion—good for our health and well-being

By Megan Brandsrud

Religion's necessity and relevance is up for grabs more than ever with the religiously unaffiliated ("nones") now the second largest religious demographic in North America. According to *National Geographic*, U.S. nones have overtaken Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants and followers of non-Christian faiths over the past decade. This has had a major impact on how people see the world and live their lives.

But all is not lost.

Several recent studies have cited the benefits of living a religious life, including one from the Pew Research Center that said 40 percent of religious U.S. adults say they are "very happy," compared to 29 percent who are less or not religious.

How can religion and happiness be connected, what are the benefits of living a religious life and what influence does it have on people? With more people saying "no thanks" to religion, *Living Lutheran* took a look at the potential benefits for those who have kept the faith.

While the relationship between well-being and religion is dependent on how religious experience is understood, Thomas S. Taylor, an ELCA pastor and certified psychoanalyst and clinical social worker with the Lutheran Counseling Center on Long Island, said positive correlations between the two are "no accident."

"Think about it," he said. "How many other social groups and institutions are involved in someone's life from cradle to grave? For many, religious experience is unique, maybe with the exception of family, among social institutions and groups in having the potential for a lifelong involvement and influence."

Taylor said those who are introduced to religion at a young age start to build faith at a key developmental phase—often when they are at the peak of seeing their parents as all-knowing and caring. This creates a space for idealized authority and caregivers.

"This early childhood foundation of believing in an idealized and gracious caregiver—God—stays with us as an anchor throughout our lifespan," he said. "But as our faith life develops, it expands in our realization that just because I'm a person of faith, I am not immune to bad things happening to me and my loved ones."

Taylor said recognizing that reality can determine if someone continues to mature in their faith life. "When religion is seen as a key element to health and sustained happiness throughout life, it's because it isn't a static type of faith life, but one that is in flux, adapting and expanding to integrate the slings and arrows life offers."

Tori Saunders, a member of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, knows firsthand about having a faith in flux. Before her son's birth, Saunders and her husband struggled for seven years to get pregnant. The situation was painful and challenged their marriage, but their faith kept them strong.



Photo: Ron Wimmer, Wimmer Photography

Dale and Tori Saunders struggled for years to get pregnant before the birth of their son, Gunnar (19 months). They credit their faith for helping them through an emotional time that tested their strength and marriage.

“Throughout my struggles to get pregnant, I never stopped praying to receive a child in God’s time and in [God’s] way,” Saunders said. “When I found out I was pregnant, the struggles made me appreciate what a blessing I truly have been given with my son. But the years of struggling to get pregnant caused a slow breakdown of communication and affection between myself and my husband.”

The couple found a Christian counselor to help them work on their marriage, Saunders said, and they started a daily devotional so “God was part of our individual healing, as well as healing our marriage.” She credits her faith and the power of prayer for helping them strengthen their marriage and find themselves in a good place with a healthy toddler.

“It surprised both of us that by asking God to take the lead in healing our marriage and rebuilding trust how quickly strides were made in both areas,” Saunders said. “Without prayer and faith in God being there and directing our steps, we would be a long way from where we are now.”

Power of prayer

Saunders isn’t alone in exalting the practice of prayer, as the Pew Research Center reports that

55 percent of Americans pray every day. Prayer is so prevalent in the U.S. that the government has recognized a national day of prayer since 1952.

Taylor said prayer and other practices that accompany living a religious life can have positive benefits for one’s mental health. This is good news for people who already incorporate prayer into their everyday life.

“There are many spiritual practices, such as prayer, meditation and mindfulness, that nurture our ability to better redirect our energy outside of ourselves,” Taylor said. “When any of us become depressed or anxious, we tend to withdraw and become preoccupied with ourselves and default to survival mode. Directing our preoccupied energy outward interrupts depression’s downward spiral and anxiety’s escalation.”

Kevin Massey, vice president for mission and spiritual care at Advocate Health Care, Chicago, has witnessed the power prayer has for hospitalized patients. “People request prayer perhaps more than any other single thing,” he said. “It’s a verbal presence of God that helps them cope with their situation. People feel God’s presence closer when they’ve had the ability to hear and experience prayer.”

Can singing hymns be good for your heart?



Photo: Lyda Lee, Lyda Studios

Researchers at the Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden found that choral music has a calming effect on the heart—especially when sung in unison, according to a National Public Radio (NPR) article. Their research was based on a study of high school choir members' heart rates.

"When you sing the phrases, it is a form of guided breathing," Bjorn Vickhoff, a musicologist who led the research project, told NPR. "When you exhale, the heart slows down. The members of the choir synchronize externally with the melody and the rhythm, and now we see it has an internal counterpart."

With music and singing being an important shared experience in religious cultures, this study could explain the calming effect singing favorite hymns in church can contrive in people of faith.

"Singing one's faith [has been] an important part of being Lutheran from the very beginning," said Scott Weidler, ELCA program director for worship. "The *ELCA Principles for Worship* says, 'In the church, the primary musical instrument is the human voice, given by God to sing and proclaim the word of God.' Our tradition recognizes that even if it isn't perfect, there is something really important in congregations coming together to sing."

People of faith can also have a foundation and perspective beyond themselves that can provide comfort, strength and peace during times of crisis. Taylor said the identities of people of faith are grounded in teachings and understandings of Scripture and mission in the world.

"For Lutherans, this is based on our baptismal proclamation that we are 'reborn children of God, made members of the church, the body of Christ,'" he said. "Remembering who and whose we are, especially when we find ourselves lost, confused or uncertain in our daily life, can be a key guidepost to navigating through life's twisty pathways."

Christians commit to believing in a presence that is neither material nor observable. This practice and acceptance of believing in something that can't be seen can make people of faith well-equipped to cope with challenges because they can imagine a future beyond a crisis.

"The active component in faith that supports coping in a difficult time is the capacity of faith to kindle hope," Massey said. "Hope is an anchor that you can throw into the future and faith is the chain on the anchor you can use to pull yourself toward the future."

"People who lack faith might lack [the understanding that the] future can hold promise. The present moment is only the present moment. The God who lives in the present also lives in our future and faith, therefore, can be a bridge to a future and enhances the ability to cope."

Community of faith

Sometimes what benefits someone most from living a religious life is the connection to a faith community.

"In mental health we see that there are imbalances that are present in the neurology of a person, but what seems unique is that being part of a community can transform that neurology," Massey said. "When one is part of a community, the particular senses of satisfaction and belonging, the experience of emotions can attest itself in physical ways."

In addition to offering socialization and a sense of belonging, faith communities are characteristically known as sanctuaries of support, and this is likely most exemplified during times of crisis. Massey, who has served as a parish pastor and chaplain, said people often seek out spiritual support when they are hospitalized. While health-care chaplains play an important role for people who lack a faith community, he said a visit from someone's congregation is superior.

Anita Marth, a member of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Granite Bay, Calif., sustained life-threatening injuries in a small airplane crash in 2015. She doesn't know where she and her family would be today without the support of their faith and church community.



Anita Marth (left) talks with Josie Freiberg after the service at Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Granite Bay, Calif. Freiberg and her husband, Dave, drove 150 miles to visit Marth in the hospital the day after she was in a small plane crash.

"I have witnessed faith in action within and through the members of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection," she said. "They showered us with prayers, cards, phone calls, visits, hugs, and offers of meals and support. I know my recovery was made possible by the love and prayers poured out to us."


In March, Marth was diagnosed with breast cancer. She underwent surgery and has several months of chemotherapy and weeks of radiation treatment ahead of her. Again, she quickly credits her faith for helping her stay strong.

"My faith has remained growing and centered on Jesus Christ, my savior," she said. "My faith family has rallied around my family and me once again. I am known affectionately as 'God's miracle.' During my hospital stay and the cancer diagnosis, I have literally been carried by the power of healing prayer and can attest to God's abundant grace through faith. I know God has a remarkable purpose for me."

'Our communities of faith have, as a tradition and out of conviction, committed ourselves to being specialists in providing support to those in need.'

While there is no guarantee that a secular community that meets regularly wouldn't have the same socialization benefits that a faith family provides, Taylor thinks religious communities have a "head start," so to speak, because they have traditions and practices that have been passed down from generation to generation.

"Our communities of faith have centuries of practice offering support," he said. "Crystallized in the Sermon on the Mount, Christianity's tradition places charity and the care of widows, orphans, the sick, the imprisoned and the poor at the center of our faith's action in the world. Our communities of faith have, as a tradition and out of conviction, committed ourselves to being specialists in providing support to those in need."

So what is religion good for? While that answer varies depending on one's religious tradition and experiences, the more one's faith life develops and adapts, the more possibility it has to enhance someone's health and contribute to sustained happiness throughout life. 

For a study guide, find this article at LivingLutheran.org.



Brandsrud is an associate editor of *Living Lutheran*.

Practices of a tangible faith

By Rochelle Melander

When my daughter was 3 she had a series of seizures. Someone said to me, "You'll be OK; your strong faith will get you through." I was an ordained ELCA pastor with two master's degrees, but I had no idea how something as intangible as faith could carry me through the unknown days ahead. Looking back, I can see that God strengthened and sustained me through the people and practices of the faith community.

The following practices can make an intangible faith seem more evident and have been associated with multiple health benefits, including strengthening the immune system, reducing rates of depression and anxiety, and boosting the sense of life satisfaction.

Connecting

In the days following my daughter's seizures, my husband and I camped out at the hospital. Family and friends called and stopped by, bringing food, hugs and gifts. I called friends, colleagues and clients to share what had happened.

TRY: Go to church. Learn the names of a few people and connect with them each week. Engage with your community by joining a Bible study, work team or discussion group. But don't limit your faith connections to church. I exercise daily with people from a variety of denominations. Their greetings and smiles start my day right.

Focusing and savoring

After my daughter's seizures, her medical team told us to watch her carefully. The seizures could happen at any time and she could be in danger if she was near water or stairs. Being on seizure watch caused anxiety and affected our ability to work, but it also brought a gift. We played and laughed with our daughter. I still treasure those memories. The practice of attending to the present moment is called mindfulness and recalling it is called savoring.



TRY: Next time you attend church, focus on a favorite moment, like the opening hymn or communion. You can also plan to savor the holy moments of every day, like eating an orange or watching the birds. During the moment, pay attention to what you see, hear, taste, touch and feel. Afterward, recall the experience and remember how it affected you. Some people have found that recording favorite moments in a journal helps them feel grateful and cherish their experiences.

Volunteering

As my daughter healed, we visited other congregation members who'd experienced health crises. We tried to support them in small ways, like bringing our dog to cheer them. We also benefited from hearing their stories.

TRY: For maximum benefits, choose a volunteer activity you like that connects you with people. For example, if you love children, volunteer with a tutoring program. If you prefer gardening, helping out at a community garden might be a better fit.

In Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day," she confesses to not knowing what prayer is but knowing how to pay attention. Like Oliver, I still don't know what faith is or if I'm any good at it. But I do know how to engage with others around the joys and sorrows of life and to savor the moments we share. Perhaps this is enough.



Melander is the author of *A Generous Presence: Spiritual Leadership and the Art of Coaching* (Rowan & Littlefield, 2006) and editor of *The Word in Season*.