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Study guide

Form a faithful foundation

By Robert C. Blezard

Lutheranism provides great recipes for faith formation, such as the baptismal affirmation found in Evangelical Lutheran Worship (page 236)—to live, hear, proclaim, serve and strive. Like the recipes we use in our kitchen, our faith formation recipes are useful only when we work with them—measuring out the ingredients of our lives, mixing them into our relationships and community, and then providing sufficient energy and time for the desired result. Unlike our kitchen creations, where we may burn a batch of cookies or our soufflé may fall, our faith formation recipes will never fail. The Spirit always works with us to bring us spiritual growth and depth. So let's get cooking!

This study guide follows the five baptismal promises, with discussion questions and exercises to explore.

Exercise 1: To live among God's faithful people

Explore this statement: "With their living witness of discipleship, faithful people not only challenge us to live with greater devotion, but they also encourage and inspire us to do so."

- From whom did you learn the faith? How did those important people prepare, guide and lead you into deeper discipleship?
- Who are the two or three most faithful people you know? Describe how they serve as mentors, coaches or examples to the people around them. How does their presence in the faith community impact the lives of others?
- In what ways might you be a role model and mentor to people in your community? To your family? How could you be a better role model?

Regular attendance at worship: If you really want to live among God's faithful people, weekly attendance at church presents an ideal opportunity.

- Do you agree or disagree with the previous assertion about church attendance? Why or why not? What has your experience been?
- Do you attend worship regularly? Why or why not? Has your attendance in church changed over time? How, and why?
- Fill in the blank and discuss: "I would attend church more often if _____." Repeat as often as necessary.



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- For the sake of interesting discussion, divide your group in two and have one come up with arguments to agree with and the other to disagree with the following statement: Regular worship attendance is key to fulfilling our baptismal promise to live among God's faithful people.
- How important is participation in church social and service activities to living among God's faithful people?

Review your relationships: In *Power Surge* (Augsburg Fortress, 2000), ELCA pastor Michael W. Foss identifies spiritual friendships as one of the "six marks of discipleship" that help God's people grow. "Spiritual friends pray for and with each other, encourage each other, share insights into Scripture, and help one another reflect on the ways God is present and active in their lives" (page 102).

- Do you agree with Foss' description of spiritual friendships? Explain. What has been your experience?
- Do you have any friendships you would describe as "spiritual"? How is your faith expressed and evident in that relationship?
- List your 10 closest friends. For each, ponder the basis for your bond of friendship (why you are friends). How much are faith and spiritual growth part of each relationship? Are there any of these relationships where you could increase the spiritual component?
- What roles do trust, prayer, honest sharing and mutual accountability play in spiritual relationships that lead to growth? Why are they so important? Can they be fostered?
- Why is it important to have spiritual friendships in order to follow the vow to live among God's faithful people?

Exercise 2: To hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper.

The ELCA's 1997 statement *The Use of the Means of Grace* declares: "Proclamation of the word includes the public reading of Scripture, preaching, teaching, the celebration of the sacraments, confession and absolution, music, arts, prayers, Christian witness, and service" (page 11).

- This quote identifies 10 specific ways that God's word is proclaimed. For each, discuss how God's word is proclaimed. How do we "hear" the word proclaimed in that way? (And is hearing just with our ears?)
- Because we are all different in personality and temperament, God speaks to us all differently. Of the 10 ways, which ones enable you to hear the word most clearly? Why? When have you understood the word of God speaking to you?
- What does it mean to "hear" the word of God? Is it like hearing a baseball game, the sound of waves crashing on the shore or a newscast?



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- Is “hearing” the word of God passive? Is a response necessary? Why or why not? If so, what kinds of responses are appropriate?
- How do you optimize your ability to hear the God’s word? What can you do better to prepare, to listen, to hear and to respond to the word?

In *Power Surge*, Foss identifies weekly worship attendance as one of the six marks of discipleship that help God’s people grow: “It is in the gathering of God’s people around word and sacrament that the community of faith affirms its calling, receives the gifts of grace, is nourished and strengthened and sent back into the world to love as God loves” (page 94).

- In what ways does weekly worship attendance offer us the perfect opportunity to hear the word of God?
- When we are at worship, sometimes we can be too distracted to hear the word. Why? Can you share an experience? What has been helpful to you to better hear the word of God in worship?

In *the Large Catechism*, Martin Luther called the Lord’s Supper “food for the soul ... so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened” (*The Book of Concord*, page 469; Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

- Referring, perhaps, to Luther’s catechisms, what is our Lutheran understanding of the Lord’s Supper? What happens and why? What promises of God are conveyed and reinforced in the Lord’s Supper?
- Why does Luther refer to the Lord’s Supper as “food for the soul”? Do you agree with his description? Why or why not? What elements ring true for you? What has been your experience of the Lord’s Supper?
- How many times in a month do you partake of the Lord’s Supper? In a year? Is that sufficient to nourish your soul? How might your faith life change if you made it a point to receive it more frequently?
- Because a pastor’s involvement is necessary for eucharist, we can receive the Lord’s Supper most readily in community worship. Is this a barrier to your receiving communion? How can you work around it?

Exercise 3: To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.

“Proclaim the Message with intensity; keep on your watch. Challenge, warn and urge your people. Don’t ever quit. Just keep it simple” (2 Timothy 4:3-4, *The Message*). It’s easy to say we’ll proclaim the message, but many of us find it hard to do.

As a study group, pair up and practice talking about your faith to one another. In 2-minute intervals, take turns talking about the following four topics: “Here’s what it means to be a follower of Jesus”; “Here’s why faith is important to me”; “This is what God is up to in my life”; “Here’s some reasons you should consider following Jesus too.” Then discuss as a group:



Study guide: **Form a faithful foundation** *continued*

- Is it hard to talk about God to others? Why or why not? Under what circumstances is it easier? Harder? What are the biggest barriers? How can you overcome them?
- When you talk to others about your faith and God, how does the topic come up in conversation? With whom are you most comfortable talking about God?
- How can your everyday talk reflect the power of God in your life without you feeling “pushy” or awkward? Do you know people who accomplish this? How can you do better?

“Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words” is probably the most famous quote attributed to Francis of Assisi. While scholars question its origin, the saying certainly captures the sentiment that our actions count when it comes to preaching the gospel.

- Do you hear this quote as advising people *not* to preach the gospel with words? Would preaching the gospel without using words be an effective evangelism strategy? Explore. Would preaching the gospel with words only, regardless of our actions, be an effective policy? Why or why not?
- Make a list of actions or behaviors that would “preach the gospel” without using words. When done, explore which of them are cultivated in your congregation’s faith formation strategies. How many do you participate in?
- Explore the reasons why it’s easier to talk about the gospel than it is to embody it in your daily life.
- Discuss whether it is more important to “talk the talk” of Christian faith or to “walk the walk.” At the end of the day, is it your words that reveal the truth of your heart or your actions?

Exercise 4: To serve all people following the example of Jesus.

Service is hard-wired into Christian discipleship. Jesus taught: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35b). Discuss:

- What does Jesus mean? Is this crazy talk, or deeply prophetic insight into the nature of righteousness? Explain.
- Why and how can Jesus assert this? What must be his underlying assumptions about power, human nature and spirituality for him to make this bold statement? How can you/we take this into our heart and make it our own?
- Who is “first,” according to our North American culture? Describe the attributes of someone who is “first” by U.S. standards. In what ways is Jesus’ teaching counter to our culture?
- When Jesus teaches that we must be “servants to all,” does he mean we have to be subservient? What is the difference between subservient

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and servant? Looking at the Bible, how does Jesus embody a servant's heart without being subservient?

- Looking at Jesus' teachings and example, what does it mean to be a servant? As a group, create a generic "job description" for a servant.

In *Power Surge*, Foss declares that service to church and beyond is one of the six marks of discipleship that we can cultivate to deepen our walk with Jesus: "There is no getting around it, the Gospel of John tells us that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son' (John 3:16) and that God intends to keep loving the world through us. ... Service is a key mark of discipleship."

- Why is serving a mark of discipleship? In other words, why do we draw closer to Jesus and develop in our faith the more we serve others? How does that work?
- How do you understand "service" in your life? How does that understanding find expression? Do you envision it to be "service" mainly to people or to organizations?
- How is "serving" different from "working" in order to be compensated? What "reward" can we reasonably expect for serving others? Are we engaging with the right attitude if we serve *primarily* in order to reward our egos and "feel good"?
- How are these observations about servanthood related to the previous exercise—Jesus' teaching that the "first" must be "last and servant to all"?

Exercise 5: To strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

- What does "peace" mean for our world? For your community? For you and every individual? Are there degrees of peace?
- What are the marks of peace for our world? Does the mere absence of war necessarily mean there is peace? What kinds of "un-peace" are there besides war and violence? If a nation is largely living without daily fear, oppression, anger, conflict or sadness, can that be said to be a country of peace? What does it mean to be a Christian peacemaker to the world?
- Is your community peaceful? In your answer, describe what you mean by peace. What are the issues and influences that either disturb the peace or threaten to do it in? What would/does it mean to be a Christian peacemaker in your community?
- Is your family and circle of friends at peace? Why or why not? What problems keep the group from achieving a higher level of peace? How can you be a Christian peacemaker to your family and friends?
- Are you at peace? Why or why not? How can you be a Christian peacemaker to yourself?

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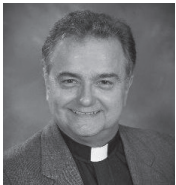
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- As a study group, draft a generic job description for “Christian peacemaker.” How would you adapt it to fit specific categories for world, community or family/friend peacemaker?
- Jesus declares that peacemakers “will be called children of God.” Why? What does this mean?

Scripture calls on God’s people to be advocates for justice. Speaking for God, Isaiah tells people to “Do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). Micah 6:8 makes it plain: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

- How do Micah and Isaiah use the word “justice”? What does it mean to them? What does it mean to the communities they are addressing?
- In the U.S., the term “justice” is used most often in the context of criminal and civil laws. Is this what Micah and Isaiah are talking about? Discuss whether the legal association is more helpful or more distracting when considering what the prophets meant by “justice.”
- Why does Isaiah link justice with *acting* on behalf of the oppressed, orphans and widows? What do these three groups have in common? Why are they mentioned in the same verse as his call for us to seek justice?
- Isaiah uses three verbs to describe how we are to seek justice: rescue, defend and plead for. What do these verbs have in common? Can we do these things without getting involved in the lives of the oppressed, the orphan or the widow? What do these verbs imply about how we love and care for our neighbor? How much do we have to love in order to then act on behalf of another?
- Who are the oppressed, the orphans and the widows in today’s world? How can we “seek justice” for them?
- Micah calls on us to “do justice.” What does that mean? How can we “do justice” in our daily lives? What does it mean for you? For your congregation? For our church?

“Peace and justice” are paired, not merely in our baptismal vow but in many other Christian prayers and writings. In other words, they go together and belong together.

- What is the connection between the existence of peace and justice? Why do they go together?
- Can you have real peace without justice? Why or why not? Can you have real justice without peace? Why or why not?
- Why does God call us to be forces for peace and justice in the world?

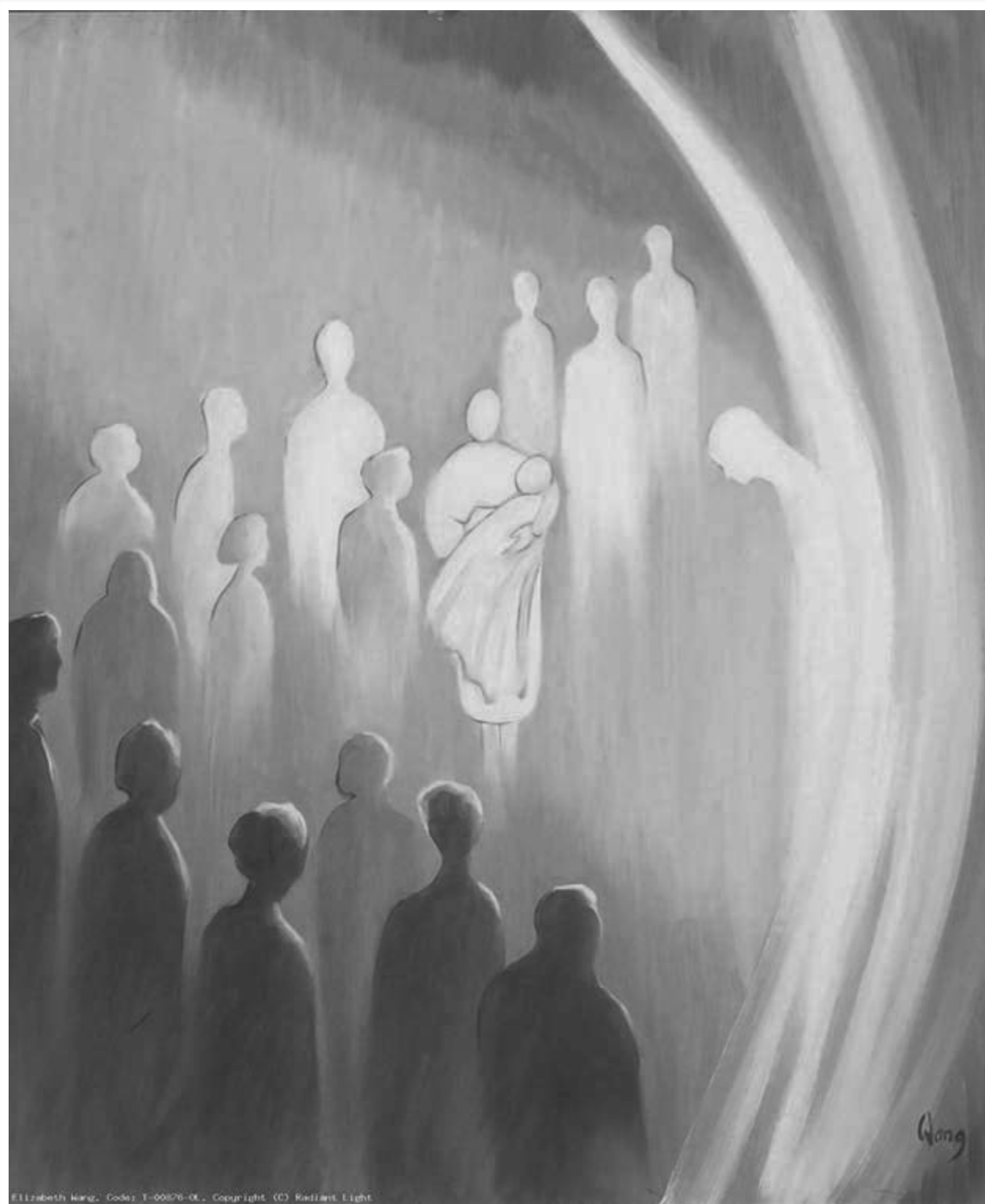
FORM A FAITHFUL FOUNDATION

Holding one another to our baptismal promises

By Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

*“Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:
to **live** among God’s faithful people;
to **hear** the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper;
to **proclaim** the good news of God in Christ through word and deed;
to **serve** all people following the example of Jesus;
and to **strive** for justice and peace in all the earth?”*
Response: “We do, and ask God to help and guide us.”

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 236)



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Whenever Lutherans gather around a baptismal font and speak these words, it's a reminder that "from the moment we are born, we are part of God's family and community, called to reflect the love of God in the world," said Amy Santoriello, a deacon and director of faith formation and outreach at Zion Lutheran Church, Penn Hills, Pa.

The baptismal covenant is one way to describe faith formation, a lifelong process that "doesn't start in Sunday school and end in confirmation; it starts with our birth and ends in our burial," she added. "Faith formation is holding [one another] to our baptismal promises that not only parents and sponsors make, but the whole community."

Brenda Smith, ELCA program director for faith practices and the Book of Faith Initiative, agrees—it's why her ministry organizes online resources for congregations and individuals around the five "gifts of discipleship" found in the promises of baptism: to live, hear, proclaim, serve and strive for justice.

While in seminary, "[I] saw how a pastor can make a difference in the lives of others by guiding them in their faith," she said. "But [I] also realized the importance of going out into the community and sharing the light of Christ."

Martin Luther taught that through baptism every Christian has a holy calling in the world, a vocation from God that is lived out in work, relationships and every part of our daily lives. Leadership is one such baptismal vocation. Just as Luther insisted that Christian ministry wasn't limited to priests, monks and nuns, Lutherans today recognize that church leadership is not restricted to pastors and deacons. Leaders come from every part of the church and serve in any number of ways, including behind the scenes.

"Live among God's faithful people"

Santoriello's leadership "among God's faithful people" has come full circle: her current call as deacon is to her former home congregation, where her faith was formed through participating alongside

her family living out their faith in ministry.

"My mother would ask us at night if we 'did justice, loved kindness and walked humbly with God today,'" Santoriello recalled. "Once when I was 6, the toilet in Zion's transitional housing unit was broken, and my friend and I were responsible for filling up the tank and flushing it. We did it for hours! That's how 6-year-olds help. My parents were making sure that lived faith was something they modeled, and we were expected to contribute."

Sometimes it's a home away from home that provides Christian community—like Living Water Ministries at Stony Lake, New Era, Mich., which its executive director, C.J. Clark, called "a mission that happens to own a camp." A former camper and summer staffer, Clark has long known that "camp is a place that creates a space for kids to connect life to God. ... [As a camper] I'm hearing about the love of Christ, experiencing it with others, and learning to see Christ in others and in myself."

Five years ago, Clark worked with nearby synods to create Bridge Builders, a weeklong faith formation and leadership development camp program for high school students that tackles issues of systemic racism. Clark estimates that Bridge Builders has so far served around 130 participants, more than a third of whom are people of color.

The program's success, Clark finds, lies in the way a camp community "dismantles stereotypes and changes perceptions," and in the deep connection to God's presence that encourages people to imagine a world patterned more after "the kingdom of God" and to "carry this real world" back to their regular lives. Youth who have attended Bridge Builders have now begun leading conversations about racism in their synods.

"Hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper"

Elizabeth Rawlings, the ELCA pastor of The Sanctuary, the Lutheran/Episcopal campus ministry at the University of Washington, Seattle, recalled a moment that changed her understanding

of faith: “When my dad was dying, he said that he assented to faith in an intellectual way, but had felt ‘allergic’ to a personal relationship with God.”

Her father’s confession prompted Rawlings to “spend more time sitting with God. The Spirit does speak, but our world is so busy, with so much noise; so in order to hear what the Spirit is saying, I sit in silence, to listen.”

Students at The Sanctuary also often sit in quietness. “My sermons are very conversational, and I leave room for questions,” Rawlings said. Often her questions are greeted by silence from introverted students. “I almost stopped doing it,” she admitted, “but then I found out that they loved it.” She realized that students might ponder a question for days before reaching out to her to ask, “How do we read the Bible?” or “How do I remember that God loves me every day?”

Many of the students identify as LGBTQ+, and Rawlings, who is bisexual, knows that to lead such conversations for those who are in a critical stage of their faith development means “being real and practicing what I preach ... being open about when and how I struggle.”

Rawlings’ own practices of listening to God through centering prayer also shape the small group conversations she leads. “We check in each week with two questions: Where have you seen God, and where do you need prayer? Knowing they will have to answer these questions encourages them to look for God in their week,” she said.

“Proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed”

“I often think about what is different between a church organization and a nonprofit,” said Laura Carson, deacon and faith formation coordinator at Peace Lutheran Church, Las Cruces, N.M. She finds that it is precisely faith that makes all the difference in what it means to be a leader in the church.

“The church makes decisions based upon faith, not just the bottom line,” she said. The ability to trust that “it’s in God’s hands,” Carson continued,

“From the moment we are born, we are part of God’s family and community, called to reflect the love of God in the world.”



Illustration: Elizabeth Wang, T-00065-OL-V1, © Radiant Light, radiantlight.org.uk

stems from “a deeper faith that is the foundation under everything we do.”

This faithful foundation can help leadership blossom when both rostered ministers and lay members are encouraged to grow by trying new things. Carson knows this from personal experience: her opportunities as a youth to help lead ministries in her home congregation encouraged her to seek a call to the ministry of word and service.

Now, Carson works to nurture faith formation for all ages. “The church has so often focused on faith formation for the first third of life,” she said, “but I point out that we also have two-thirds of our lives left to grow, and that’s when we have a fully formed brain!”

Carson isn’t only expanding the “who” of faith formation, but also the where and when: she is developing “Faith on the Go,” a website-in-progress that will offer online faith formation resources to meet busy people where they are.

Proclamation and leadership can also come from surprising places. Clark recalls a week of camp designed for youth on the autism spectrum when a young man was moved at the final campfire to share his testimony. In a long, halting speech, the young man told the story of his mother saving him from drowning—and how he now connected that story to Jesus’ saving death on the cross. “His peers applauded,” Clark remembered. “He was able to connect his life and faith and have the space to be heard.”

“Serve all people following the example of Jesus”

Santoriello consistently finds that the service ministries of her congregation help people of all ages to naturally incorporate faith into their everyday lives.

At Zion’s food pantry, which serves 150 families each Saturday, “we have a picture of our oldest and youngest volunteers together, and they’re 83 and 3,” she said.

The 3-year-old belongs to a family whose parents wanted to volunteer but weren’t sure what to do with their children. Santoriello suggested they bring them along. Now “they do it as a family; that’s how they spend their Saturday mornings,” she said.

Santoriello emphasized that service doesn’t just come from faith—it forms faith. “The faith conversations we have between adult volunteers and kids [are something] you can’t replicate and you can’t force,” she said. Church becomes a place where kids learn “there are adults who will always love [them] unconditionally”—and adults learn too, she added.

For Darin Johnson, campus pastor of Agape House—a ministry of San Diego State University whose student community he said has personally experienced “struggling with food and housing, losing weight, sleeping in cars, being robbed and [sexually assaulted]”—service takes on a different meaning: “we serve each other.” This happens literally at a weekly Wednesday night meal, but also in opportunities for students to share their stories and to give and receive support.

Following Jesus’ example, Johnson argued, means challenging a notion of faith that imagines “the individual is at the center,” instead striving “to meet as equals [and] to acknowledge that the relationship itself is at the center.”

Johnson teaches students “how to build relationships, not just as a means to an end, but as the end,” so service is measured by “the quality of our connectedness—do we know each other?”

“Strive for justice and peace in all the earth”

As an African-American child in Harlem, New York City, attending her grandmother’s Baptist church, Smith had trouble connecting the blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus up on the wall with the hardships facing her community. “I thought maybe Jesus doesn’t like black people,” Smith recalled. “A lot of people were struggling—where was God in this community?”

“Faith formation is about what it means to be a child of God, and to live in this world as a Christian.”

Smith later became a pediatric nurse, and while teaching nursing at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio, started taking classes at nearby Trinity Lutheran Seminary to learn more about faith. “I loved it, loved Lutheran theology,” Smith said. “I was hearing about God’s grace, as opposed to having to earn God’s love.”

Smith pursued a degree for hospital chaplaincy until she realized that pastoral ministry in a congregation would allow her to teach, nurture others and pursue justice in her community through encouraging—and challenging—others to use their gifts.

Like Smith, Johnson considers justice “a right relationship, not just a foregone conclusion or political ideology,” he said. “If I know someone, I’m in it with them. Justice flows from relationship, the messiness of community: who’s in charge? Who decides? Who tells the story?”

In Johnson’s ministry, the answer to these questions is increasingly the students themselves, who have organized together to work for change within their university and community.

Justice happens, he said, “when people recognize the power of God at work in their weakness and vulnerability ... when they realize they’re not alone. When a community gets perspective and is no longer isolated, maybe religion is not an escape but a deeper engagement in a rhythm of contemplation and action—a beloved community.”

“We do, and ask God to help and guide us” “Do you intend ... to live, hear, proclaim, serve, strive?” These marks of the life of a baptized Christian tell us that faith formation is “truly about forming a person of faith through the practices of faith,” Carson said.

Rawlings concurs: “Faith formation is about what it means to be a child of God, and to live in this world as a Christian.”


For the church, leadership begins here: in our baptized identity as children of God, the heart of a faith that is formed in us our whole lives long. 



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Throughout 2018, in connection with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton’s Leadership Initiative, *Living Lutheran* will explore the nature of leadership in the church. Find out more about the initiative at elca.org/leaders.

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org.



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