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Study guide

An animated anniversary

Celebrating 60 years of Davey and Goliath

By Robert C. Blezard

As it observes the 60th anniversary of its first showing, *Davey and Goliath* can boast of having inspired and instructed several generations of Christians with stories of faith and values. The iconic stop-motion cartoon featuring a boy and his dog ranks as one of the most enduring and influential religious programs for children.

EXERCISE 1: SHARING

Millions of people around the world have seen *Davey and Goliath*. What's your experience? As a study group, share:

- How old were you when you first saw *Davey and Goliath*?
- Do you remember the episode?
- What feelings and thoughts did it arouse?
- Did it have an impact on your faith at the time? How did it contribute to your faith formation?
- How do you feel about the show now?

EXERCISE 2: WATCH AND LEARN

Davey and Goliath episodes are available to stream via YouTube. Whether you are a fan from way back or new to the franchise, check out some of the classics. Perhaps you can begin a study group session watching an early episode and a later one. Then discuss.

- If you remembered the show from childhood, what did you think as you saw it anew?
- If it was new to you, what were your impressions?
- How would you characterize the way the show weaves in messages about faith and values?
- Do the older episodes stand the test of time? Would they (or do they) resonate with today's children? Explain.
- How well have the later episodes done in updating the characters, setting and themes for a new generation? Explain.



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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EXERCISE 3: MEDIA VALUES

Our popular media reflects our society's values, but it does more than that: media actually helps shape it. Do you agree with this proposition? Consider that Clark Gable caused a scandal with this line in the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind*: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." Or that Rob and Laura Petrie, married characters in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) were portrayed sleeping in separate beds due to "decency restrictions."

- When you were a child, what values were upheld or promoted in the popular media around such topics as sexuality, acceptable language, honesty, loyalty and family? How have things changed since then? Why do you think this is so?
- Why do shows that "push the boundaries" on values seem to get a lot of press and notoriety? How does "shock value" translate into higher ratings and profits?
- When popular media pushes the boundaries on taboo subjects, how does that affect cultural acceptance of those taboos?
- How do wholesome media like *Davey and Goliath* help counterbalance edgy media?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the distinction between media that merely entertains and programming that edifies, informs and uplifts? How much of our media diet is devoted to each? How can people of God promote programming that enriches and not merely entertains?
- What kind of media do your children or grandchildren enjoy? Is there a place in their media world for *Davey and Goliath*? How might the show's characters and themes be incorporated into social media and games? How might our church lead this effort?
- *Davey and Goliath* began with a \$1 million investment in 1958. In today's dollars that would equal about \$9 million. Considering the show's impact on generations of Christians, was the investment worth it? If today's ELCA earmarked \$9 million for children's educational ministry, on what kind of media might it be spent on?
- The United Evangelical Lutheran Church invested heavily in the original *Davey and Goliath* program. Why is it important that our church continue to invest in materials to help form the faith of our youth and children?
- Whether it's *Veggie Tales* or *Davey and Goliath*, how can children's popular programs help educate young people on values and form them in the faith?
- *Davey and Goliath* was popular because the program was creative and produced something relevant to its time and people's needs. Moreover, it employed a hugely exploding technology and medium, television. What opportunities exist in today's expanding media for the church to help form faith in young people?

AN ANIMATED ANNIVERSARY

CELEBRATING 60 YEARS
OF “DAVEY AND GOLIATH”

By John Potter



For many children of the 1960s and 1970s, it's a familiar scene: Sunday morning sunlight pours in through the window as you sprawl out on the living room floor. Some families busy themselves as they get ready for church—you may even already have on your Sunday best. From the family TV, a familiar voice bellows: “Oh, Daaavey.”

The voice belonged to young Davey Hansen's talking dog, Goliath, in the stop-motion animated series *Davey and Goliath*, a perennial TV staple. The program, conceptualized by the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) and Clokey Productions Inc.—headed by *Gumby* creators Art Clokey (1921-2010) and Ruth Clokey (1923-2008)—premiered 60 years ago, in February 1961.

Some audiences—Lutheran or not, religious or not—knew of its connection to the Lutheran church; others didn't. But for millions of people around the world today, including many Lutherans, *Davey and Goliath's* legacy endures.

In 1958, ULCA President Franklin Clark Fry (1900-1968) designated \$1 million of the church budget to fund the production of a TV program. The ULCA contracted with the Clokeys, who had already had success with the creation of the iconic stop-motion animated character Gumby, to create a children's show, *Davey and Goliath*.

An active ULCA member and the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, Ruth Clokey began her career

producing religious programs for the Lutheran church in the 1940s. She met Art at Hartford (Conn.) Seminary, where they both attended and were interested in creating faith-based films.

The Clokeys and the ULCA landed on a series centered around the Hansen family: parents Elaine and John, sister Sally, brother Davey—who was initially 10 years old but aged as the show continued—and Goliath, who served as Davey's conscience and whom only Davey could hear talk. In a typical episode, Davey would find himself in a bind and Goliath would guide him through it, facing situations where faith in God would help the characters overcome a challenge.

AN AMBITIOUS UNDERTAKING

Although God was frequently mentioned and the family attended church, the series wasn't explicitly Lutheran. Many Lutheran viewers, however, would recognize the show's theme song as Martin Luther's famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and notice the Luther rose in the opening and closing credits. Scripts were written by children's book author Nancy Moore in consultation with the church.

“We use a series of parables, the same device Jesus used to speak to all depths of understanding and all degrees of comprehension simultaneously,” Richard Sutcliffe (1918-2008), then-ULCA associate director of the Department of Press, Radio and Television, said in a 1961 interview

(*Gumby Imagined: The Story of Art Clokey and His Creations*; Dynamite Entertainment, 2017). “These are placed in modern settings and use situations and language today’s generation knows.”

While the stories were being developed, preproduction began at the Clokey Productions studio in Glendora, Calif. Using the same stop-motion animation process Art Clokey pioneered with *Gumby*—in which objects and characters are moved incrementally between photographed frames so they appear to be in motion—the crew created steel ball-and-socket armatures covered in foam rubber for the characters, with dozens of facial movement pieces for the heads that were often swapped out for each frame. Unlike *Gumby*, though, *Davey and Goliath* required realistic sets and costumes for its real-world setting.

On Feb. 25, 1961, the show premiered in syndication with its first 15-minute episode, “Lost in a Cave.” Between 1961 and 1967, 39 episodes and four 30-minute holiday specials would air. Episodes of the show were given, free of charge, to nearly 200 television markets in North America. The series also appeared overseas, including Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Cantonese translations.

In 1962, the ULCA merged with other churches to form the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), which took over funding of the series. Between 1971 and 1975, the LCA funded another run of 27 episodes and two 30-minute specials. In addition to the spiritual themes of the earlier episodes, the 1970s stories deal with integration, racism, violence and other topical issues. Now in junior high, Davey faced more complex situations.

In interviews, Ruth often pointed to 1961’s “The Polka-Dot Tie” as her favorite episode for the ways it dealt with race and inclusion (according to her, it was met with resistance by some networks). The 1970s episodes dove deeper into the topic, and the series was one of the first on TV to feature integrated minority main characters.

According to *Gumby Imagined*, a 1973 study by the American Research Bureau concluded that the show was seen by 5.1 million people a week on commercial TV. Other studies showed that “churched and unchurched” child viewers showed significant gains in their identification of religious values after watching the show.

DAVEY AND GOLIATH RETURN

In 1988, the LCA joined with the American Lutheran Church and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to form the ELCA, which would hold all rights to Davey and Goliath going forward. Throughout the 1990s, the show was referenced in some of the most popular Generation X-focused pop-culture properties.

In 2001, the advertising agency BBDO contacted the ELCA about featuring the characters in a campaign. After a nearly 30-year hiatus, a new Mountain Dew commercial in which Davey and Goliath star aired.

“The commercial was part of our plan to introduce the characters to a new generation, and it worked,” said Eric Shafer, then director of ELCA Communication Services.

The characters were also brought in costume to the 2003 ELCA Youth Gathering and received an enthusiastic response, said Shafer, now pastor of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Santa Monica, Calif. “When they came on stage, this whole younger generation knew who they were.”

Following the commercial, the ELCA produced a one-hour documentary special, *Oh Davey! History of the Davey and Goliath Television Series*, which was broadcast on ABC-TV affiliates in 2003. The hope was that the momentum would lead to a new era of Davey and Goliath, Shafer said.

Royalties from the Mountain Dew ad funded the production of a 60-minute Davey and Goliath special, which would ultimately air as *Davey and Goliath’s Snowboard Christmas* on the Hallmark Channel in 2004.

Clokey Productions produced the special—creating new figures and sets for the project—with Ruth and Art’s son, Joe Clokey (1962–2018) producing and the ELCA guiding the story. The episode returned to the series’ focus on spirituality and inclusion—this time introducing Davey’s friends Sam, a Jewish boy, and Yasmeen, a Muslim girl.

While Davey comes to better understand the true meaning of Christmas, he also learns more about respecting other traditions—and finding similarities, despite different backgrounds. ELCA staff worked with Jewish and Muslim scholars on the script, Shafer said.

Although *Snowboard Christmas* was the last Davey and Goliath episode produced—at least, for now—the series’ characters, and the themes it explored across decades, remain potent for today’s audiences.

“Especially in these times, when virtues like these are not promoted in public media as much, [it’s noteworthy that] *Davey and Goliath* stood for kindness and goodness and inclusivity and the love of God for all people,” Shafer said. “It showed this to all people—some for the first time—on national TV. That’s a theme that I’m so proud the Lutheran church has been involved with.”



1958

Franklin Clark Fry, president of the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), designates \$1 million of the church budget to fund the production of a TV program.

1959

The ULCA contracts with Clokey Productions Inc., headed by *Gumby* creators Art and Ruth Clokey, to create a children's show, *Davey and Goliath*. Scripts were written by children's book author Nancy Moore in consultation with the church.

1961-1962

Episodes of the show are given, free of charge, to nearly 200 television markets in North America. The series also appears overseas, including Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Cantonese translations.

1961

Davey and Goliath premiered in syndication on Feb. 25 with its first 15-minute episode, "Lost in a Cave."

1962

The ULCA merges with several other Lutheran churches to form the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), which takes over funding of the series.

1965

The first *Davey and Goliath* special, the 30-minute "Christmas Lost and Found," airs.

1967

The LCA funds three more specials: "New Year Promise," "Happy Easter" and "Halloween Who-Dun-It."

1971

A fifth special, "School ... Who Needs It?" airs.

1971-1973

The LCA funds another run of 27 episodes. In addition to the spiritual themes of the earlier episodes, these stories deal with integration, racism, violence and other topical issues. The series includes some of the earliest minority main characters in a children's show.

1975

The final special of the original series, "To the Rescue," airs.



2005

Scholastic Inc. issues four new *Davey and Goliath* story and activity books. *Life* magazine runs a feature story on *Davey and Goliath*. Starlight Home Entertainment and the ELCA distribute a DVD compilation of classic episodes and bonus material. “Davey and Goliath’s Camp Creation” curriculum is again offered through Augsburg Fortress.

2004

A new special, *Davey and Goliath’s Snowboard Christmas*, is broadcast on the Hallmark Channel. “Davey and Goliath’s Camp Creation” vacation Bible school curriculum is offered through Augsburg Fortress. And the Luther Institute’s Wittenberg Award is given to Davey and Goliath’s founders: Art Clokey, Ruth Clokey, Frank Klos, R. Marshall Stross and Richard Sutcliffe.

1988

The LCA joins with the American Lutheran Church and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to form the ELCA, which now holds all rights to *Davey and Goliath*.



1990s

Throughout the decade, *Davey and Goliath* is referenced in prominent pop-culture properties such as *The Simpsons*, *Friends* and *Mad TV*.

2018

Episodes are available to stream on Amazon Prime Video and Tubi.



2008

Episodes are made available on iTunes.



Photo: Will Nunnally

2003

Davey and Goliath products are licensed, including plush and bendable toys, bobbleheads, shirts, lunchboxes and more. A one-hour documentary special, *Oh Davey! History of the Davey and Goliath Television Series*, is produced by the ELCA for broadcast on local ABC-TV affiliates. And the characters appear at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly and the ELCA Youth Gathering, where a new Davey and Goliath short on baptism is shown.

2002

Millions of children have now grown up with *Davey and Goliath*. The program has been translated into seven languages and broadcast on every continent except Antarctica.

2001

After a nearly 30-year hiatus, the characters are featured in a Mountain Dew commercial. Ad royalties are used to fund the production of a new *Davey and Goliath* special, to be developed over the next several years.

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“With *Davey and Goliath* spilling into my life every Sunday morning before church, I was reminded as a little kid that ‘church’ was far bigger than one building filled with one congregation. And the fact that it preempted other, non-[stop-motion animated] cartoons demonstrated to me that it was pretty important.”

—**RICK STEVES,
TRAVEL WRITER AND TV HOST**

“Growing up, *Davey and Goliath* were my after-church Sunday friends. I would watch them when my family got home, and I remember being excited to hear ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God’ and see the Luther rose. More importantly, though, I remember how *Davey and Goliath* helped me figure out how to be a kind person.”

—**CRAIG ALAN SATTERLEE
BISHOP, NORTH/WEST LOWER MICHIGAN SYNOD**

“When I taught Sunday school, we incorporated the shows into our lessons. The kids loved to watch—they were the perfect length for our class. [I have] great memories of also watching [the show] on TV as a kid.”

—**CINDY SWEENEY,
FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH, PALOS HEIGHTS, ILL.**

“There is an episode of *Davey and Goliath* where Davey is angry because his parents make him ‘work, work, work.’ I remember feeling so connected to Davey in this sentiment. There were other episodes where Davey laughed, cried, fought with his siblings, was disappointed and so much more. Much like Mister Rogers, this show gently educated and brought generations of children a new understanding of themselves and the world. Congratulations, Davey and Goliath, on 60 years of not only entertaining children but showing love and grace and heart.”

—**SHELLEY BRYAN WEE,
BISHOP, NORTHWEST WASHINGTON SYNOD**

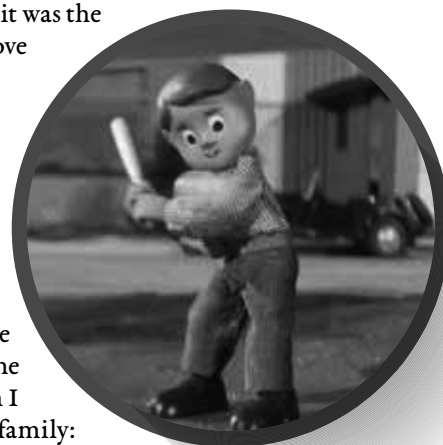
“Watched it every Sunday growing up in rural America. One of the shows that helped form a generation. God bless Davey and Goliath!”

—**@JENSON57201, ON TWITTER**



“*Davey and Goliath* is a classic in my heart because I grew up with them. I remember watching the show as a youngster and [how I] couldn’t wait each Sunday morning to see the adventures of the boy, his dog and their family and friends. I think one of the reasons that ‘A Mighty Fortress’ is my favorite hymn is because it was *Davey and Goliath*’s theme song. Being a cradle Lutheran, I was also proud of the fact that it was produced by my church, who used the medium to share our faith.

“Looking back on it now—and I own all the DVDs, so every once in a while, I watch one for old time’s sake—it was the simple notion of God’s love and acceptance that had such wide appeal. The characters were normal, everyday folks just like me, my family and my community. That’s what hit home for me about the show. The other thing that endures for me is that Goliath is really the only celebrity impression I can do, according to my family: ‘Gee, Davey!’”



—**CHAD HERSHBERGER,
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND BOOKKEEPER,
UPPER SUSQUEHANNA SYNOD**

“My sister and I watched *Davey and Goliath* faithfully as kids and we both loved it. I often imitated Goliath when answering someone with the quote, ‘I don’t know, Daaavey.’”

—**TERRI ROBERTSON,
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT FOR ACCOUNTING AND
COMMUNICATIONS, PACIFICA SYNOD**

“My memory is that it was on Sunday mornings, and so that was a little difficult, since our family’s main goal then—five young boys by 1961—was getting ready for church. But I can still remember Goliath’s ‘Gee, Davey’ in four different tones, and my surprise that something having to do with church was on television, in an entertaining way.

“Another Sunday morning activity, if I was ready in time, was to spread out the comics section from the

Pasadena Star News on the floor. *Davey and Goliath* and the comics were kind of one thing [for me]. A child's joy in the early light of morning on a day when the family was together."

—**BRIAN STEIN-WEBBER,**
DIRECTOR OF SEMINARY RELATIONS, PACIFIC
LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,
BERKELEY, CALIF.

"I always watched *Davey and Goliath* as a little girl in the living room before heading to church and Sunday school. It was my warmup to Sunday morning at Cross of Christ [Lutheran] Church in Houston, Minn. I loved their calm, sweet lessons."

—**@CLARKBAR,**
ON TWITTER

"I was not raised as a Lutheran, but my older brother loved that sort of animation and so we watched it every Sunday morning. Although I was not aware of it at the time, I suppose it was my first introduction to Lutheranism. My most vivid memory is the trumpets playing 'A Mighty Fortress' at the beginning."

—**MICHAEL RYAN,**
FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH, WHITE OAK, PA.

"We could only get the show on a PBS station 100 miles from us that showed it on Sunday mornings at 8 a.m. It was fuzzy and grainy, which meant adjusting the rabbit ears a few times for better picture. I can still hear the theme song in my head, and I'm taken back to our living floor, hearing Goliath call out, 'Daaavey.'"

—**CYNDI NIELSEN,**
TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, EVERETT, WASH.

"I am a lifelong Lutheran. I grew up with *Davey and Goliath* and loved the stories. I watched them on Sunday morning after breakfast while my mom was getting ready for church; I was in high school before I figured out the theme song was 'A Mighty Fortress.' Davey was someone I could relate to. The themes were things that happened in everyday life and made me feel not alone in the experiences I had at school."

—**RON CLARK,**
PROVIDENCE LUTHERAN CHURCH, HOLLAND, OHIO

"I grew up watching *Davey and Goliath*. I liked the stories, the way the characters were animated and how each show had something to teach about values and faith. Growing up near San Diego, where there weren't as many Lutherans as there were in other parts of the country, I was impressed that my church was responsible for this show. I guess it made me feel proud, in a way.

"Many years later I was serving as a pastor, and a local funeral home contacted me about a family that needed help with a service for their grandmother, who had been a lifelong Lutheran. In meeting with them to prepare for the funeral, her granddaughter casually mentioned that her grandfather, who had died many years earlier, had been one of the producers of the *Davey and Goliath* show. They spoke with great pride about his work helping create and produce the show. I let them know how much I had enjoyed the show, and how honored I would be to lead the service for the spouse of someone who had made such a difference in my life and faith."

—**MARK W. HOLMERUD,**
BISHOP, SIERRA PACIFIC SYNOD



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