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Study guide

The road to redemption

By Robert C. Blezard

While serving time in state prison for stabbing a man with a box cutter, Erich Kussman embarked on an amazing journey that brought him to God. Then his path led him to an Ivy League seminary and ordination as an ELCA pastor. At his congregation, he now uses his hard-won life lessons to serve the community. We can learn much from his story.

EXERCISE 1: STEALING FOOD

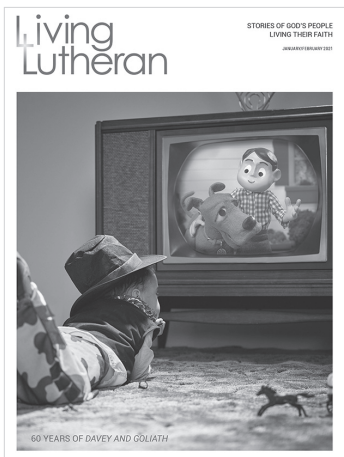
Dad out of the picture and Mom a drug addict, as a youth Kussman and his hungry siblings survived by burglarizing houses for food. “We were hustling and bustling just to get by,” Kussman said. “Living the street life was my world. It was what I knew.” Discuss:

- If you are comfortable sharing, what kind of a childhood did you have? Can you describe your family? What challenges and opportunities did you have?
- If you are comfortable sharing, how did the way you grew up compare with Kussman’s childhood?
- What kind of life path could you imagine for a child with Kussman’s experiences and upbringing?
- What challenges would such a child face in education? Socializing? Career? Relationships? Other areas?
- Is it any surprise that Kussman found himself dealing drugs and in prison for assault?
- What do you think is the most remarkable part of his story?
- If you had lived his kind of childhood, how would you have fared?

EXERCISE 2: LIFE’S LESSONS

It’s said that we learn life’s most important lessons the hard way. Or, rather, that hardship teaches us much more effectively than happiness. Discuss:

- Do you think that is true? Why or why not?
- What is the most important lesson you have learned the hard way?
- Kussman’s life has been harder than most. What do you think it has taught him?
- How do you think Kussman’s life experiences have shaped his perspective as a person of faith? As a pastor?
- What can we learn from Kussman’s story?
- What can you take from his story and apply to your life right now?



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EXERCISE 3: GOD MOMENTS

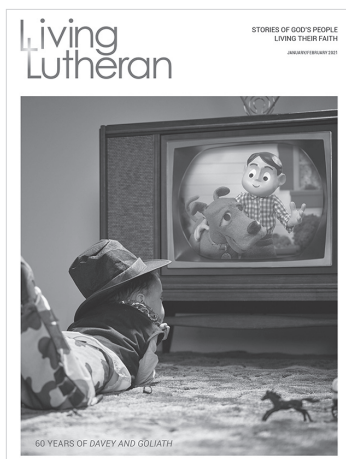
God works in mysterious ways, the old saying goes. Sometimes a journey of faith follows one momentous “God moment” after another that occur like dominoes falling in succession. For Kussman, the first “God moment” domino might have been the jail cell he occupied that was once a chapel and was still used for Bible study. Chart the other “domino” God moments that led Kussman from jail to college to Princeton Theological Seminary to St. Bartholomew. Then discuss:

- What strikes you about each of the domino God moments in Kussman’s life? What do they have in common?
- How did the God moments relate to the ones that came before and after? Is there a pattern? A direction?
- How would you explain the sequence and trajectory of the events? Coincidence? Luck? What?
- Do you think God is actively at work in our lives? How? Why?
- When something happens to you that seems unusually fortuitous, do you think God might have had a hand in it? Explain.
- What distinguishes a “God moment” from a mere stroke of luck?
- How might you explain God’s guiding hand in Kussman’s life?
- When has a “God moment” happened to you?
- As a study group, come to a “domino theory” of how God works in our lives.

EXERCISE 4: PRISONERS’ BAD RAP

From our politicians, our news outlets and our entertainment media, American culture may tend to give a one-dimensional characterization of people who serve prison time for crimes. When you think “inmate,” what images, words or ideas come to mind? Appoint a study group scribe to write them all down. When the list is complete, discuss:

- What are our culture’s main sources of information about prisons, jails and those who are incarcerated?
- Is the kind of information those sources are likely to convey generally negative or positive? Rank each of them on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “very positive” and 10 being “very negative.”
- Looking at your list, what do the words, images and ideas have in common? How are they unique?
- Considering the list as a whole, how would you characterize it on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “very positive” and 10 being “very negative”?
- Do you think our culture’s overall characterization of incarcerated people is fair?
- Looking at Kussman’s life story, does he fit the typical characterization? How or how not?



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- There are about 1.4 million incarcerated people in the United States. How many Kussmans might there be? What does society owe them? How can we give them a chance?
- If you are comfortable, share stories of any personal contacts you have had with an inmate or someone who has returned to society (returning citizen).
- If you have not had personal contact with an inmate or someone who has returned to society, how do you know if your impressions of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people are correct?
- As a study group, come up with five good ideas for learning more about the incarceration system in our country.

EXERCISE 5: "WE VISITED YOU"

In his renowned teaching on the judgment of the nations, Jesus specifies those in prison as being of special concern for God's people. Read Matthew 25:31-46 and discuss:

- The first verses set up the context for this teaching. Can you summarize it? What does it mean? Is it just an illustration or a revelation of what will happen?
- What is the difference between a sheep and goat?
- Besides prisoners, Jesus mentions several categories of needy people. What are they? Why would Jesus include them alongside prisoners?
- Is it easy or hard for our culture to consider prisoners as needy human beings? Why? Explain. Is it easy or hard for you? Explain.
- When it comes to our culture's attitudes about those in prison, are we more goat-like or sheepish? Explain?

EXERCISE 6: PRISON MINISTRY

Most congregations and Christians understand the need for ministries to serve the neediest in our midst. Discuss:

- What programs in your community assist people with the human necessities of food, water, clothing, housing or medical care? What ministries in your synod? In your congregation?
- Why do you think these ministries are so popular for God's people?
- Now talk about the ministries in your community, synod and congregation that help people who are either incarcerated or returning to society. How do those ministries compare in number, resources and interest to the ministries that feed the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless and sick? How do you explain the difference?
- Meanwhile, God elevates the imprisoned alongside the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless and sick as people deserving special love (see exercise on Matthew 25:31-46, above). What are some barriers, obstacles or stigmas that need to be



About the study guide author:

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confronted in order for God's people to be more interested in or less resistant to prison ministries?

- How can your congregation do more? Make an action list of five good ideas and give it to your pastor or congregation council for implementation.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

- Watch the episode of *The Redeemed* featuring Kussman on the A&E network's Facebook page (facebook.com/aetv) or look for it on YouTube (youtube.com/ae). Then share impressions and return to the study guide's exercises and questions.
- Invite a returning citizen to address your congregation or study group and share his or her story. Listen respectfully, with an open mind and heart. Alternatively, invite a prison chaplain, prison ministry worker or advocate for the incarcerated to speak.
- Access and study the ELCA's 2013 social statement "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries." It can be found at elca.org/socialstatements, along with a study guide to help you dig deeper.

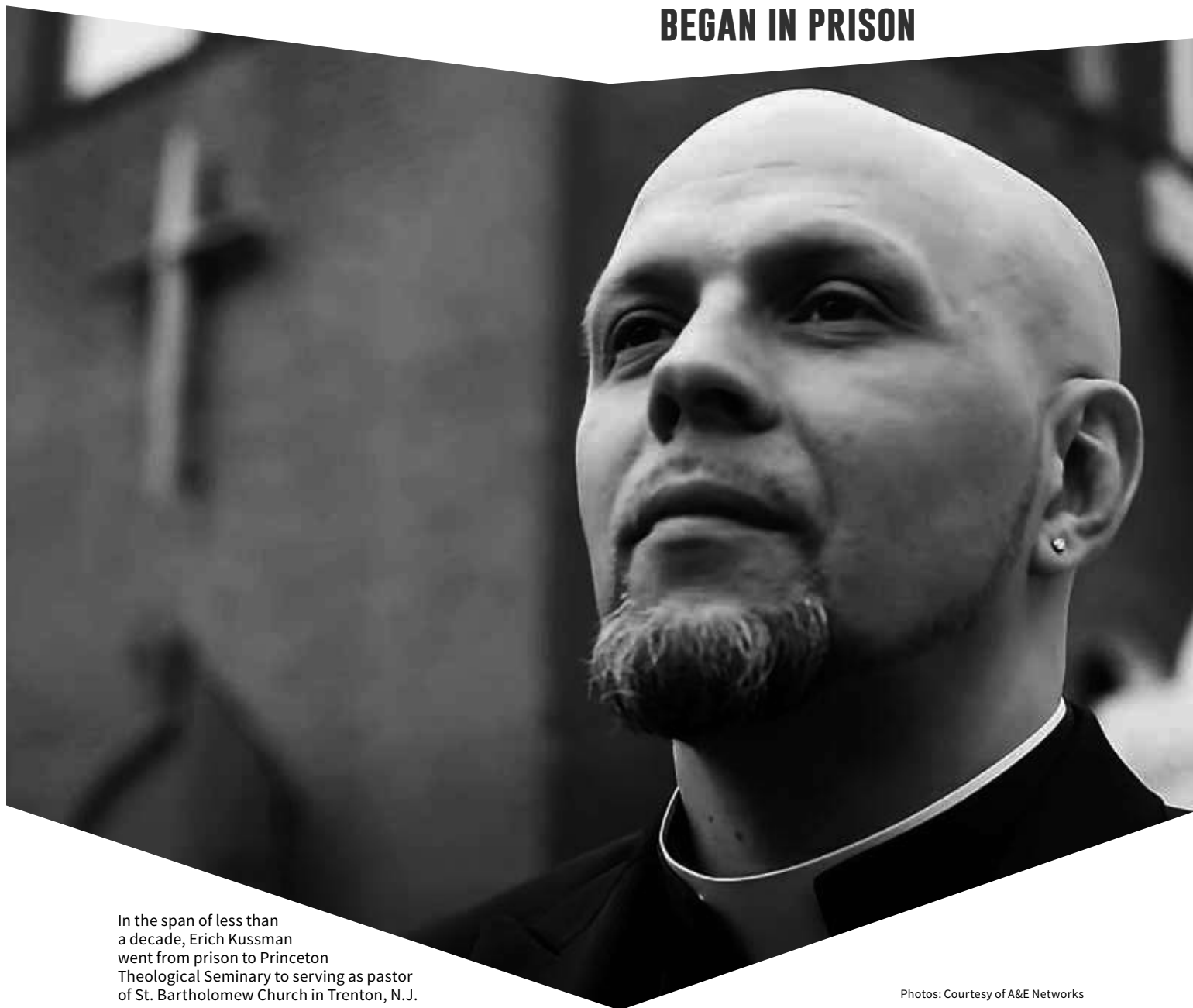
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Discuss which statement is more accurate: "Our culture values the incarcerated" or "Our culture devalues the incarcerated." Explain. What can Christians do about it?
- Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31) and to love and pray for even our enemies (Matthew 5:43). How do those teachings inform our attitude toward those who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated? How does it clarify our mission to serve inmates and returning citizens?

The Road to Redemption

By Jay Saunders

**ELCA PASTOR'S JOURNEY
BEGAN IN PRISON**



In the span of less than a decade, Erich Kussman went from prison to Princeton Theological Seminary to serving as pastor of St. Bartholomew Church in Trenton, N.J.

Photos: Courtesy of A&E Networks

From prison to Princeton to the pulpit.
That is the road less traveled taken by Erich Kussman, pastor of St. Bartholomew Lutheran Church in Trenton, N.J.

It was on that road that Kussman found God, found the man he calls his father, and found himself featured on the A&E network series *The Redeemed*.

“God uses the foolish things in this world to make the wise,” he said. “I’m the fool. If you look at this story as a whole, you’d probably say it doesn’t make sense.”

For Kussman, the story began in Plainfield, N.J. Growing up, he didn’t know his father, and his

Kussman turned down multiple plea deals and faced a long prison sentence. He knew he “wasn’t going anywhere,” he said, but then things started to happen that changed his life—even though he thought his path wasn’t leading him anywhere but inside a jail cell.

The cell Kussman occupied in Somerset County jail had been used as a makeshift chapel by the other inmates, who would meet there early in the morning for Bible study. For months, he would ignore the gatherings and go back to sleep. But one day he had what he calls his “God moment,” after hearing Psalm 34:6: “This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.”



**“I wanted
him to
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and focus
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tomorrows.”**

The next day, something exceptionally unusual happened: Kussman was mistakenly released from jail—no explanation, no details. Then, as he stepped outside and walked free, the next domino fell.

“I started walking down the street and saw a man and asked him if he was lost,” Kussman said. “He pointed his finger straight at me and said, ‘No, you’re lost, and you need Jesus.’”

After nearly two days of unearned freedom, Kussman was once again surrounded by police cars and brought back to jail, sentenced to prison for 12 years, with a 10-year minimum. But, having realized something had changed in him, Kussman was ready to learn.

Fighting for others

After being transferred to state prison, Kussman got a job in the chaplain’s office. There he met Emmanuel Bourjolly, a chaplain who worked with

mother was addicted to drugs.
He and his siblings found themselves
breaking into homes to steal food.

“We were hustling and bustling just to get by,” he said. “Living the street life was my world. It was what I knew.”

That life led to Kussman selling drugs. One night in 2002, he found himself on a drug deal that turned into a fight. He ultimately stabbed another man with a box cutter, and everyone fled. Two weeks later he was in handcuffs and on his way to jail.

inmates and led Bible studies with them. He and Kussman quickly formed a relationship.

“He impressed me every day,” Bourjolly said. “He came to me and asked for my guidance. I wanted him to cut off his yesterdays and focus on his tomorrows.”

And those tomorrows included a promise, of sorts, from Bourjolly to Kussman.

“[Bourjolly] told me I was going to go to the same place he went,” Kussman said. “He meant Princeton Theological Seminary. I had never laughed so hard in my life. I said, ‘Are you nuts, old man?’”

He sees his role in ministry as walking alongside people on their own journeys.

As the years went on behind bars, Kussman continued to work and study with Bourjolly. When Kussman was released into a halfway house, Bourjolly helped him earn his General Educational Development degree and apply to college. Four years later Kussman earned a degree in biblical studies—and got a surprise on graduation day.

“I don’t know how he found me, but that man showed up at my graduation,” he said of Bourjolly. “He said, ‘My son, are you ready?’ The next day I had an interview with Princeton.”

When looking for a home congregation, Kussman joined Holy Cross Lutheran in Springfield, N.J., where he would serve as vicar. Kussman said he found the ELCA congregation to be “the only welcoming church, after visiting a half-dozen beforehand.”

In 2019, Kussman earned a Master of Divinity degree with a Lutheran studies concentration



At St. Bartholomew, Kussman strives to use all of his hard-won life lessons to serve the community. He even holds office hours on the sidewalk.

from Princeton. In July of that year, he began his call as acting pastor of St. Bartholomew. In the span of less than a decade, he had gone from a prison cell to pastoring.

“Erich has completely changed,” said Bourjolly, whom Kussman identifies as his father figure. “He is still a fighter, but [now] he is fighting for others.”

At St. Bartholomew, Kussman strives to use all his hard-won life lessons to serve the community. He holds office hours on the sidewalk. He helped create a food pantry that serves nearly 200 families per week and has expanded to a meal distribution program during COVID-19. He sees his role in ministry as walking alongside people on their own journeys.

“This world needs a little love,” he said. “People may see [St. Bartholomew] and it’s the only Christ they see. Everyone needs a meeting spot, but it’s the people inside it who make it real. My dream is for the community to know we’re here.”

Last year, his story reached more people when he was featured in an episode of A&E’s digital-exclusive documentary series *The Redeemed*, on Facebook Watch. The true honor for Kussman, though, came when he was ordained and became an ELCA rostered minister in October. The service was the first time in his life, Kussman said, that he was “speechless.”

“It was a fulfillment,” he said. “Now let’s see what God has for me next.” †

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