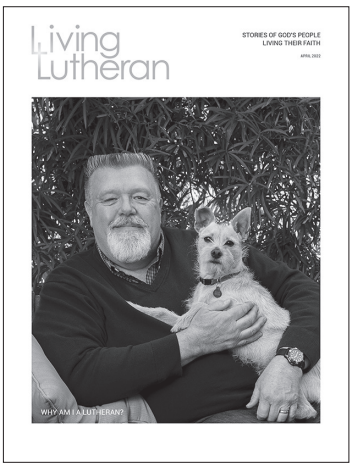

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(page 16)

Living Lutheran,
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Study guide

Freed to ask difficult questions

By Robert C. Blezard

Martin Luther believed in questions. If he had not questioned the prevailing theology of salvation back in the 16th century, we might be worshiping in a very different kind of church today. Moreover, questions are woven throughout his beloved Small Catechism. "What is this?" "What is baptism?" Are we, however, hesitant to ask big questions of our faith, our Bible, our church and ourselves? If so, what can we do about it?

Exercise 1: Faithful questions

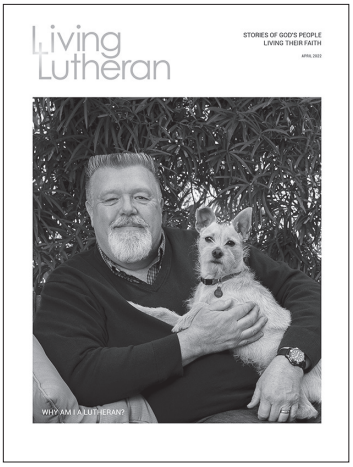
Some Christians believe (and some churches may even teach) that it is unfaithful to be uncertain, or to question or challenge the "official" teachings of a church or pastor.

- Have you known Christians or churches for whom doubt and questions are forbidden? Can you say more? How would you characterize their faith? How would you compare it to your own, or to what is experienced in ELCA congregations?
- In your own words, how would you describe faith? Is it the same thing as belief? Explain.
- Is "real" faith just believing without room for doubt and asking questions? Or is "real" faith believing while also having room for doubt and questions?
- What part have questions and doubt served in your walk of faith? Can you think of a specific time?
- Is God big enough for our questions? Why or why not?
- What big questions of faith have you grappled with? Have you "gone public" with them to people in your church, or even to church leaders? If not, why not? If so, how did things turn out?

Exercise 2: Not just "what" but "who"

Sometimes a question or challenge is dismissed not because of *what* is being challenged or *how*, but because of *who* is raising the issue. Those who are often marginalized—such as Black and Brown people, women, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants, people who don't speak English as a first language—may be dismissed by the dominant culture when they question or challenge a long-held belief. Discuss:

- When they speak the concerns of their heart, many members of marginalized communities feel they are ignored, not listened to or simply dismissed by the dominant church culture. Why does this happen? When have you witnessed, experienced or heard about this happening?



Study guide: **Freed to ask difficult questions** *continued*

- The ELCA has the dubious distinction of being the whitest denomination in America. How might that affect our church's ability to hear the viewpoints, questions or challenges from members of traditionally marginalized communities?
- How well are traditionally marginalized people represented in your congregation? Does that representation match that of your congregation's community? County? State? Can you explain why they are represented at this level?
- How does your congregation make sure that the voices and concerns of marginalized communities are listened to, deeply understood, respected and responded to? How could it do better?
- How can members of the dominant culture work to help ensure that people from marginalized communities are heard, understood, respected and responded to?

Exercise 3: Luther's questioning

In Martin Luther's time, there was essentially only one church in Western Europe, and it was hostile to questioning and reform. In 1517, Luther's 95 Theses publicly challenged the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of forgiveness and grace. Rejecting multiple calls to be silent and recant his ideas, Luther persisted in challenging the church, which ultimately got him excommunicated, or kicked out, in 1521. These events are credited with sparking the Protestant Reformation that eventually freed individuals and groups in Western Europe not only to question faith practices but also to gather with like-minded Christians to form their own churches.

- Why was the church in Luther's day hostile to those who posed deep questions, challenges or efforts to reform?
- Where can hostility to questioning be seen today in the world's Christian denominations and congregations? (For instance, in Pope Francis' efforts to change the Catholic Church, or the struggle over LGBTQIA+ acceptance in the United Methodist Church and other groups.)
- In rebuffing questions and challenges, to what degree do churches and leaders evidence the human tendency to resist change? What part does power and control play? What other factors are present?
- Are all religious challenges, dissent and questions worthy of being accepted and adopted by an established church body? Explain.
- Are all religious challenges, dissent and questions worthy of being listened to and evaluated? Why or why not?
- What responsibility do church leaders have to maintain orthodoxy and good church order? How should they maintain this responsibility in the face of questions and challenges?
- In what ways do all institutions and organizations struggle with the tension between orthodoxy and status quo on one side, and challenges and reform on the other?

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8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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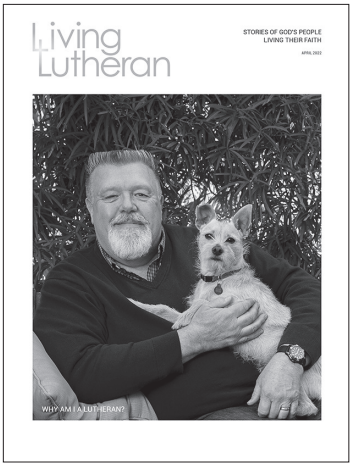

Study guide: **Freed to ask difficult questions** *continued*

- If the church had been successful in silencing Luther (as it had been with reformers before him), how might that have changed the course of religious history?
- Luther expressed frustration and anger that, while his superiors demanded that he be silent and recant, his ideas and challenges were never seriously weighed on their merits. What processes could a church put in place to make certain that dissent, questions and challenges are considered thoroughly and thoughtfully?
- Whose religious voices are being ignored or facing censure or silencing today? How should any church consider them?
- As spiritual descendants of Luther, in what ways do Lutherans show an openness to questions and reform? How can we do better?

Exercise 4: Ritualized questioning

Several of the liturgies found in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contain questioning, such as a wedding (p. 287), baptism (pp 228-229) and Affirmation of Baptism (pp., 235-237). Review these and discuss:

- What role do these ritualized questions play in the liturgy? What purpose do they serve?
- Why is it important that a groom and bride, as well as a baptismal candidate (or the candidate's parents) receive adequate instruction before being asked the questions in a service?
- How are the questions essential for helping us determine who we are as followers of Jesus?
- Using your imagination and insight, brainstorm a forum or context in which questions could be raised, honored, evaluated and discussed by Christians who are already married or baptized.

Exercise 5: Wrestling with God

Do you think you are the only one who wrestles with God? Genesis tells the story of how Jacob wrestled all night with a mysterious "man" that he later realizes was an angel or a manifestation of God. Read Genesis 32:22-32 and discuss:

- The story is kind of strange. Describe exactly what happens, as if you were telling a child.
- Jacob doesn't let go of the divine "man" but demands—and receives—a blessing. Why did he ask for this? What does it say about God that Jacob was blessed even as he was wrestling with the divine?
- Jacob not only receives a blessing, but also a name change. (Note: It is highly significant whenever a biblical character's name changes. It reveals a change of life direction, for instance, when Abram became Abraham.) What is the new name Jacob receives, and what does it mean?

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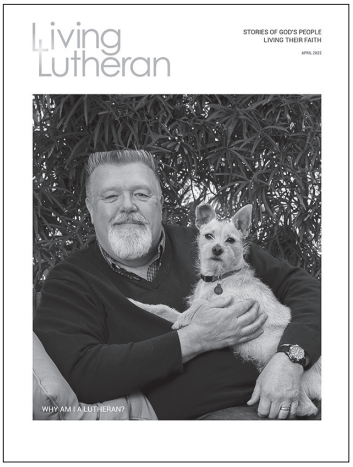

Study guide: **Freed to ask difficult questions** *continued*

- Jacob struggled with God. What was the result?
- Why isn't God angry that Jacob wrestled with the divine and did not give up? In fact, what did God do for Jacob?
- What does this reveal about the nature of God? Is God angry with people who struggle with the divine? Is God ready and eager to punish those who wrestle with the divine?
- What are your faith struggles? How are you wrestling with God?
- Why can you expect a blessing for wrestling honestly?

Exercise 6: Jesus' questions

Jesus was a teacher par-excellence, and throughout the Gospels he asked dozens of tough questions. Here are just two from each Gospel. Opening your Bible, *explore them in their context* and then discuss, following the prompts that follow:

- **Matthew 6:25b:** "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"
- **Matthew 16:26:** "For what will it profit [people] if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"
- **Mark 4:21:** "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?"
- **Mark 8:17-18:** "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?"
- **Luke 6:46:** "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?"
- **Luke 16:11-12:** "If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"
- **John 3:10:** "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"
- **John 14:9:** "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

For each, discuss:

- Who is Jesus addressing and why?
- What's going on? What is the heart of the matter? How does Jesus' question cut right to it?
- How do Jesus' questions help reframe, reshape, sharpen or correct their hearers' understandings of God and themselves?
- In what ways are Jesus' questions extremely hard?

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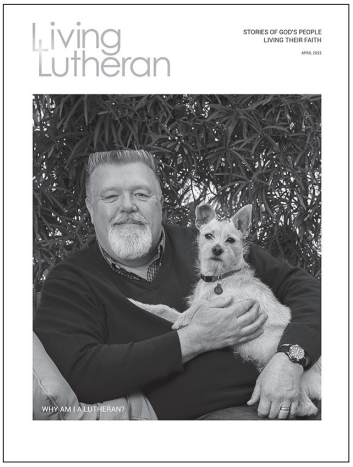

About the study guide author:

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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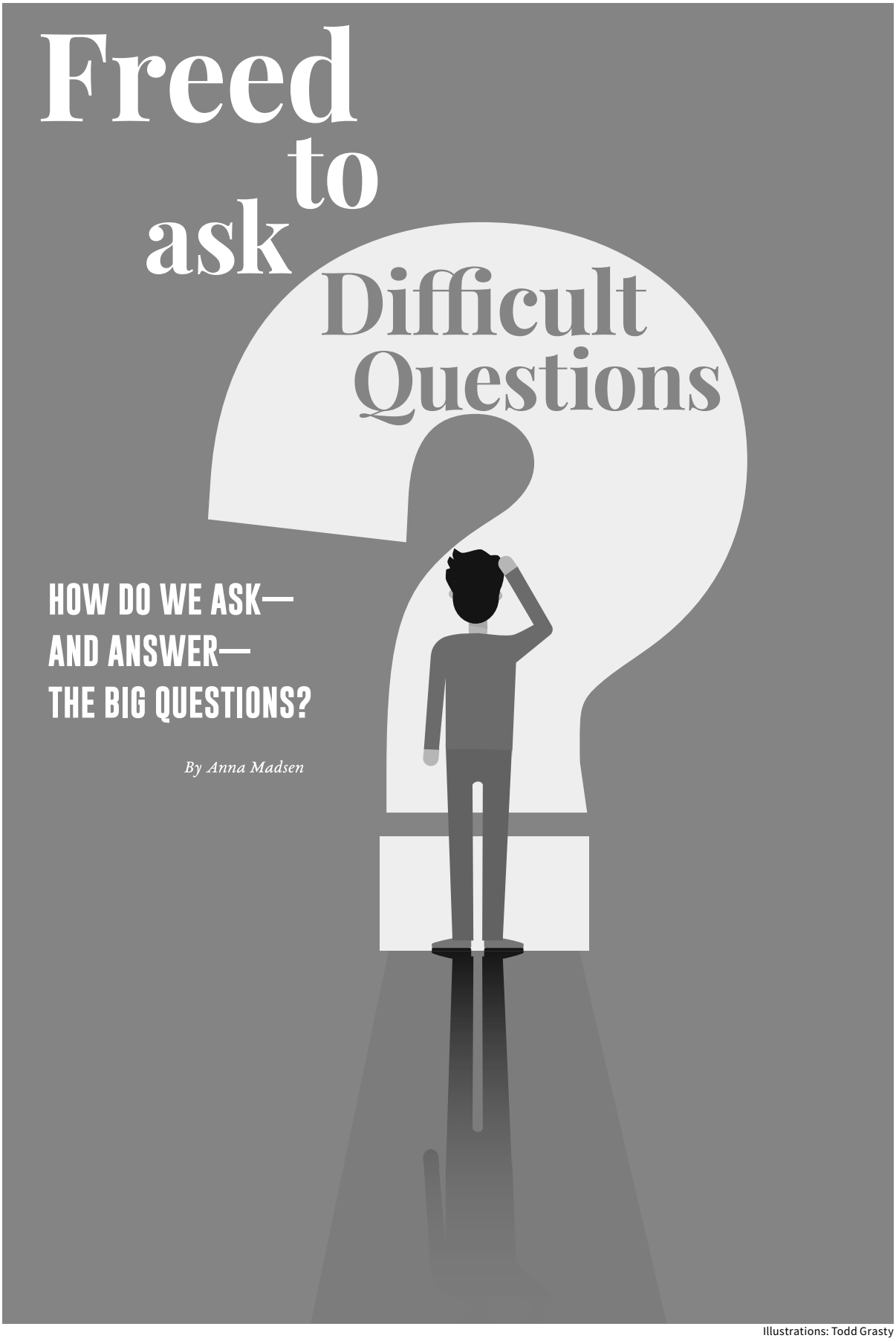
Study guide: **Freed to ask difficult questions** *continued*

- Jesus asks questions, but why doesn't he give answers? How is that an effective teaching tool?
- How and why are Jesus' questions timeless inquiries for disciples of every time and culture? Why are they for you? Your congregation?

Discussion questions:

- When you have a question about faith, Lutheranism or the Bible, where do go for answers? Why? Do you get answers to your satisfaction? Why or why not?
- Are you reluctant to ask questions about your faith because you are embarrassed to admit you don't know the answers? Do you think others know more than you do? Do you know whether they actually do?
- What faithful questions have you wrestled with or are you now wrestling with in your faith journey? What effect does your questioning have on your faith? In what ways does your questioning draw you closer to God? In what ways does your questioning draw you farther from God? Would you say your questioning is generally positive or negative?
- There's an old saying, "The only 'dumb' question is one you fail to ask." What do you think? What's true about this statement? How does it apply to your faith?
- Is questioning something about God, the Bible or our faith tradition the same thing as rejecting it? How can questioning be understood as an act of faith itself?
- Who are the voices in our denomination raising questions of faith? What are their concerns? How are their concerns being handled? Are they being listened to? How do you know?

Freed to ask Difficult Questions



HOW DO WE ASK— AND ANSWER— THE BIG QUESTIONS?

By Anna Madsen

Illustrations: Todd Grasty

Several years ago I was having an over-the-fence conversation with my neighbor. My garden lay at the edge of my property line, and her children's play set stood at the edge of hers, so we'd exchange chitchat now and again as neighbors do.

On this afternoon, she peeked over the pickets and said somewhat breathlessly, "Anna, today I had to take my daughter out of our Baptist day care and put her in the Lutheran one."

This was clearly a big deal for her. "My goodness!" I exclaimed. "Why?"

"Well," she said, "I was cleaning out her pockets and discovered a note stuck in her jeans that announced that they had been teaching her yoga."

I kept waiting for a punchline like "... in the middle of a busy street!" But it never came. Yoga, it turns out, *was* the punchline.

She waited for my response. The best I had to offer was a confused expression. Then she said, "Don't they realize that an open mind is just an open door to the devil?"

In that moment, I couldn't help but think of the beloved Lutheran poet and theologian Gerhard Frost. I imagined him with his arms draped over the fence next to me, gently reciting from his poem "The Goal":

> **In parenting and teaching,**
> **let this be our aim:**
> **not to make every idea**
> **safe for children, but**
> **every child safe for ideas.**

When you get down to it, though, many of us are like my neighbor in that moment: we know what we know, we don't know what we don't, and we aren't particularly motivated to move beyond that stasis.

Those of us who identify as Christians can sometimes feel extra-emboldened—compelled, even—to be *certain*. Lutherans are not exempt from this bent.

For starters, we belong to a credal church—a body of Christians who confess the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, these statements of certainty. We are used to asserting unequivocally that we believe something—it's expected of us. Even we Lutherans—for whom grace is so foundational and Paul's reassurance that nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8) is central—can be uncomfortable asking questions.

A hermeneutic of hospitality

There are a handful of reasons why Christians hesitate to ask questions.

First, questions might indicate doubt. If we doubt, we might disbelieve. And if we disbelieve, well

Those of us who identify as Christians can sometimes feel compelled to be *certain*.

... then what? How, we wonder, will God feel about that, about us, who once believed but are no longer as certain?

Second, we might worry that asking questions borders on disrespect. Can there be things about which God does not want us to wonder? Is asking questions an act of audacity and pride in the face of a mysterious, ineffable, powerful God?

Third, asking questions in public betrays that you can't grasp something that perhaps you ought to. Admitting that you don't know, you don't understand or you're not sure makes you vulnerable. It's safer to pretend we have it all down pat.

And fourth, raising a question can change present and reigning realities. Asking a question can be risky because it can upend the way things are and always have been.

One way of thinking about questions is through our Christian commitment to hospitality. No virtue, no habit, no representation nor manifestation of God's essence and identity is more valued in Scripture than hospitality. Welcoming the stranger is God's modus operandi—and therefore ours as well.

Might we consider being hospitable not only to people but to questions as well?

In *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), feminist theologian Letty M. Russell writes: "In facing the challenge of a world of abundant difference and more than abundant experiences of exclusion and


"How can we equip our people
to question and learn new things?"

By engaging the margins, we engage the possibility and promise that God can bring about something new.

suffering, often rooted in a disdain for the 'other,' a feminist hermeneutics of hospitality can make it clear that in God's sight no one is 'other' .....

"[A] hermeneutic of hospitality can (1) pay attention to the power quotient involved in what is said and who is saying it, (2) give priority to the *perspective of the outsider,* and (3) rejoice in *God's unfolding promise."*

In Russell's articulation, we must recognize God in that hospitality-informed questioning because, though God's promise is for all people, God is particularly concerned with people on the margins.

In one fell swoop Russell calms any fears we might have about asking questions in a faith context. God is always working at the margins, even the margins of our knowledge and imagination. By engaging those margins, we engage the possibility and promise that God—the God who brings peace out of fear and life out of death—can bring about something new.

New ways of thinking and being

Those who hold power can be the most averse to questions, a fact well known by people who traditionally lack it (people of color, women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants). Womanist theology, which centers the experiences of Black women, has been at the forefront of posing this fundamental question (a favorite of theologian Delores S. Williams): "Whose voice is not being heard?"

Considering questions from the perspective of hospitality may prompt not only new wondering but new welcomes and ways of being.

"I became Lutheran because you can question," said DaMisha McFarland-Pollock, a student at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. "That has been very freeing to know that you can question Scripture, you can even challenge Scripture, because of grace. But I've been struck by how little we've articulated this truth within our congregations."

Some people, she said, reserve the right to question only to church leaders. "When a pastor begins to teach that it's possible to question and to imagine, that can be very disorienting to people in the pews."

McFarland-Pollock wondered why she didn't learn about certain kinds of question-asking until she was in seminary. "I thought, 'Why? Why do I learn that in *seminary*?' God is big enough to handle our questions. We don't need to protect, we don't need to safeguard God. How can we equip our people to question and learn new things?"

She also wonders whether the ELCA has the capacity and courage to consider new ways of thinking and being. In her experience, most theological frameworks, liturgical traditions, preaching styles and cultural reference points stem from a white—especially white male—framework. "As a Black woman, when will the ELCA allow leaders of color to be our authentic selves instead of having to morph into a white man in our theology and in our articulation of our theology?" she asked.

In other words, how does grace—the cornerstone tradition Lutherans offer to the broader church—affect our understanding of not only God's *ultimate* welcome to all people but also the collateral *Christian* welcome to all people, and consequent new self-understandings of the people of God?

Our baptismal identity

Lutheran philosopher Tom Christenson loved questions such as these. He sought to cultivate a culture of questions, especially in the church and at Lutheran liberal arts colleges. (Christenson and my father were colleagues at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn.)

In 1980, Christenson preached a chapel sermon at Concordia titled "A Place for Honest Questioning."

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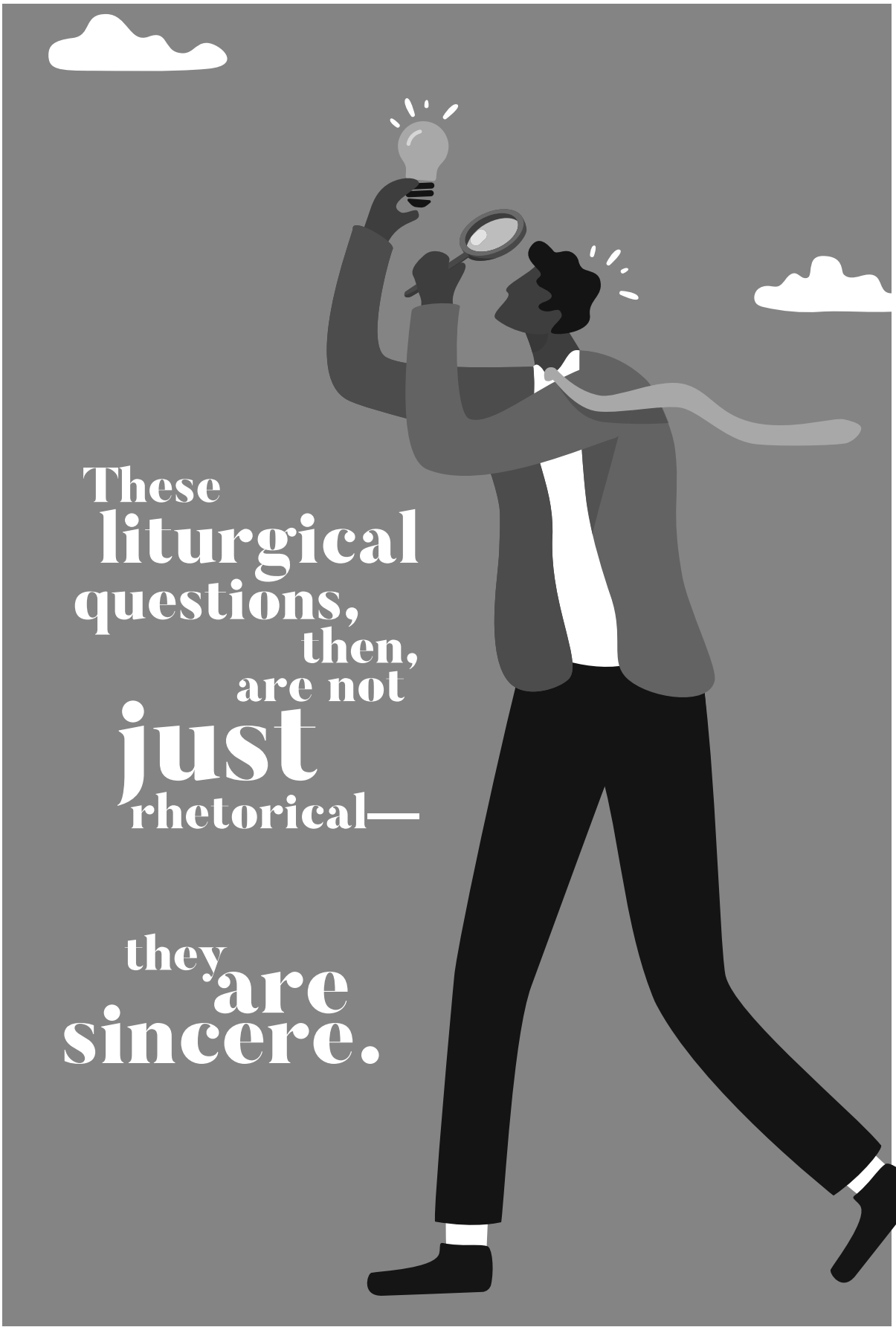
These liturgical questions, then, are not just rhetorical—
they are sincere.

"I became Lutheran because you can question."

Based on Psalm 77—itself a litany of questions—the sermon began, "It is unfortunate that we do not have a place in our liturgy for the asking of questions. We confess our sin, proclaim God's grace, preach God's word; we praise, witness, affirm and so on. But we have no sacred occasion for questions, no rite of puzzlement."

What would this look like, this opportunity for a communal holy acknowledgement that we are out of our depth? That we are curious about countless things? That, on an average day and more often than not, we can feel like a dog with its head cocked to the side?

Of course, there are liturgical rites for asking questions in the ELCA: the Service of Baptism and the Affirmation of Baptism.

The questions posed in these moments of worship may appear rhetorical. But one hopes that, prior to baptismal and confirmation services, candidates or their sponsors have been allowed to ask questions, learn, challenge and then come to a conclusion or two, not least about what a baptismal identity means.

These worship services provide an occasion for us to affirm, "Yes, I'll throw my lot in with that. This understanding of God and faith and life and community and myself makes sense to me, resonates with me, claims me, calls me."

These liturgical questions, then, are not just rhetorical—they are sincere because embedded within them are claims and a framework for determining who we are and how we live. Among the questions:

As you bring *your children* to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities:
to live with *them* among God's faithful people,
bring *them* to the word of God and the holy supper,
teach *them* the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,
place in *their* hands the holy scriptures,
and nurture *them* in faith and prayer,
so that *your children* may learn to trust God,
proclaim Christ through word and deed,
care for others and the world God made,
and work for justice and peace.

Do you promise to help *your children* grow in the Christian faith and life?
Response: I do ....

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
Response: I renounce them.

Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
Response: I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?
Response: I renounce them.
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 228-29)

A specific framework

Everyone asks questions from their own perspective, but the more one recognizes that perspective, the more one realizes how it changes both the question and how the answer is interpreted.

Baptized and engaged Christians have a specific framework, which is summed up in the litany above. Communally we believe that Jesus lived among us, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, forgiving the wicked and extolling the faithful. He ate and drank with gusto, taught, and was taught and welcomed. He was killed—partly for asking questions that roiled people in power—and we believe that he was raised from the dead. That resurrection assures us that nothing—not even the most dangerous questions—can separate us from God.

That assurance frees us not only from fear, sin and death but from our hesitancy to ask hard questions, uncertain questions, audacious questions, questions born of grief, wonder and humility. So, too, are we freed to welcome not only those questions but also the answers and their implications.

In this way we can confidently say, "This is what I believe—and maybe there's more to it than that."

When we do so, we open ourselves not to the devil but to the possibility of God bringing about something new. ✝

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