

### Related article:

**Holy Rollers**  
(page 32)

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## Study guide

# Holy Rollers

*ELCA communities use tabletop games for ministry*

By Robert C. Blezard

Who would ever think that the popular roleplaying game of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)—steeped in themes of fantasy and magic, and featuring wizards, elves and other imaginary characters embarking on heroic quests and waging epic battles—could become a tool of ministry. Yet a growing number of Lutheran D&D enthusiasts have found fellowship, fun, and even outreach and evangelism for the cause of Christ through the tabletop game.

### EXERCISE 1: D&D CONTROVERSY

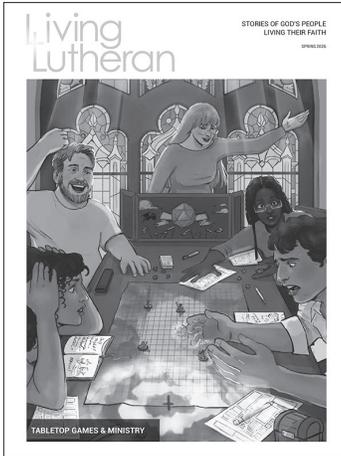
Over the years, D&D has been an issue of controversy in some Christian circles because it involves ideas of magic, the occult and the supernatural—all of which they see as inconsistent or opposed to a Christian worldview. (The same arguments have been made about the Harry Potter books and films.) Other Christians see D&D as simply a harmless game that touches on those themes, which are interesting and fun but not real.

- What do you think about D&D?
- Is D&D harmful or harmless? Explain.
- Would you and your congregation welcome a D&D group at the church? Why or why not?
- Would you put D&D in the same category as other entertainment that touched on themes of magic, such as Harry Potter, the 1960s TV show *Bewitched*, and movies featuring ghosts and vampires? Why or why not? Are those forms of entertainment harmful? Explain.

### EXERCISE 2: FAITH, FUN AND FELLOWSHIP

Since its beginning in the 1970s, D&D has grown in popularity among people who enjoy its imaginative roleplaying and creative storytelling. In a church context, it has brought together people of similar interests for fun and fellowship. Discuss:

- Whenever church people gather to enjoy a common interest, what are the benefits to the participants? To the community? To their faith and that of the community?
- Lutherans who gather to play D&D have more than the game in common. They also have faith. How might the game help them to bond together over their belief in God?



## Study guide: **Holy Rollers** *continued*

- What is the difference between church people gathering for D&D and their meeting around other interests and activities, such as quilting, chess, gardening, fishing, hiking, knitting, stamp collecting or playing cards?
- How might bringing a non-Christian into a Lutheran D&D group, especially one meeting in a church, help to kindle the spark of faith in that person?

### EXERCISE 3: IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

Players tout the way that D&D taps into the creativity and imagination of those who participate. First, players must use their imagination and creativity to create a character role for themselves that includes such details as species, abilities, outlook and backstory. The open-ended game proceeds according to the interactions the player's character has with others in the game, which involve not only imagination and creativity but also strategic thinking, logic, mathematics and insight.

- How would you compare the creativity and imagination required for playing D&D with that of other games? (For instance, being the “top hat” or “dog” in Monopoly?)
- It's said that imagination and creativity are like muscles: The more you use them, the stronger they get. How have you seen or experienced this truth?
- In an age of video games and movies, why is it especially important for people to exercise their imagination and creativity?
- D&D helps players develop skills and aptitude for imagination and creativity. What other games or activities can help participants grow in those areas?

### EXERCISE 4: BIBLICAL IMAGINATION

Like a game of D&D, reading the Bible often requires us to use our minds to imagine things not found in everyday life. Our God has given us a world where the divine supernatural fills us with ideas, stories, visions and experiences that have no grounding in our common reality. For instance, read:

- Ezekiel 37:1-10—the valley of the dry bones
- Daniel 3:1-26—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace
- 1 Samuel 17:1-51—David slays Goliath, the giant
- Acts 2:1-12—the Day of Pentecost

Discuss:

- Each of the stories involves a reality that is otherworldly. What are the themes and elements common to them all?
- Whereas D&D refers to the power of magic and sorcery, what power animates the stories of Scripture?
- Each story requires us to use our imagination to make sense of what is happening. How might participating in D&D help train us to use our imagination to better visualize the Bible's stories?

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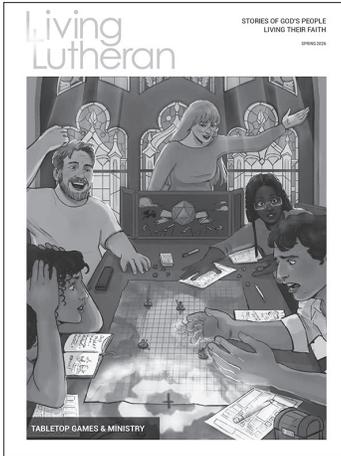
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## Study guide: **Holy Rollers** *continued*

- How can understanding the Bible's stories with greater imagination and insight help us to better recognize God's presence and miracles in the world around us?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is it always good for Christians to get together for fun and fellowship? Are there any downsides?
- Thinking of your congregation, what activities, pastimes, avocations and games bring members together now? Would a D&D group be a good fit?
- In the article, Bill Dohle, an ELCA pastor, suggested that D&D expands players' capacity for curiosity, empathy and imagination—traits he believes are vital in faith and spiritual life. "You have to imagine what happens when you read Scripture," he said. "If your imagination is limited, you're not going to get it." In what ways has your experience shown this to be true? What passages of Scripture particularly require a vivid spiritual imagination?

# HOLY ROLLERS

*By Caitlin Sellnow*



## ELCA COMMUNITIES USE TABLETOP GAMES FOR MINISTRY

*This story begins at a tavern table, as many do. It's been a long day at a gathering of people from across the windy plains that surround your home. Usually you're tucked in your own small village, busy with the daily joys and concerns of your neighbors there. This week though, you've traveled to this once-yearly assembly where you're meeting new people and seeing old friends for the first time in a while.*

*Tonight you're gathering in the dim light with a few colleagues who live in other, faraway villages. As you catch up, one friend mentions a game he's heard of—with quests and magic and epic battles. He'd like to try playing it, but he needs someone who knows how to set it up and guide him through it. As it happens, you used to play this game many years ago. You realize you might be the guide he's looking for.*

*What do you want to do next?*

This scene could be part of a game of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), a tabletop roleplaying game that blends collaborative storytelling with strategy and chance. If you were playing D&D and the dungeon master (DM) leading your campaign presented this scenario to you, you would decide your character's next action. For example, you might try to convince your friend to play the game with you right there. Your DM might then ask you to roll a 20-sided die to see how good your argument is. If you roll an 11 or above, you'll be persuasive. If you roll a 10 or below, not so much.

### **SHARING THE GAME WITH OTHER PEOPLE OF FAITH, AND USING IT FOR SPIRITUAL REFLECTION, MADE THE EXPERIENCE ESPECIALLY MEANINGFUL.**

This tavern scene also happens to be how Rory Philstrom, a pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minn., began his real-life journey toward becoming the “Dungeon Master Pastor.” Several years ago, he was serving a four-point parish in North Dakota when he met up with some other pastor friends at a synod assembly. One mentioned that he'd been listening to a podcast featuring comedians playing D&D. He wanted to find a way to play the game himself.

The game was first published by Wizards of the Coast in 1974. In the 2010s, TV series such as *Stranger Things*, as well as podcasts and web series where people play D&D for an audience,

started a new wave of interest. Philstrom himself hadn't played since he was in elementary school—when his grandmother gifted him a starter box—but he told his friend he could set it up.

Philstrom assembled a small group of pastors serving in rural areas. A new virtual tabletop system allowed them to connect online and play across the many miles between their homes.

The more he played and the more fulfillment he got from it, the closer his vocation as a pastor and his role as a DM drew together. Philstrom explains this by using the D&D term “bleed,” which describes how elements of life seep into the magic circle of gameplay and vice versa. When you play D&D, he said, “You find yourself there, even when you don't want to.”

### **Rolling for joy**

In 2018, Philstrom's first campaign was approaching its conclusion, and the players decided to meet for an in-person grand finale. Philstrom found a retreat space, but not everyone from the group could make it. When they decided to conclude their campaign another time, he pivoted, putting out announcements inviting others to join him at the already-reserved retreat space for a different D&D setting.

Thirteen people from across the country, almost all pastors, joined Philstrom for three days and nights. They interspersed times of play with rest and worship, and they talked about the many places where D&D and theology meet. Before the retreat was over, they started asking when they could do it again.

Philstrom has helped lead a “Holy Rollers” D&D retreat every year since then. The group has expanded to include more than just pastors, and Philstrom's D&D ministry has grown too. The retreats are now part of the larger Roll for Joy project ([roll4joy.org](http://roll4joy.org)), which hosts regional meetups, provides D&D ministry resources and more. Philstrom is also researching how D&D can be used as a tool for ministry discernment as he works toward a Doctor of Ministry degree.

Alex Smith, a pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls, S.D., had never played D&D when they first heard about the retreats. They had been curious about the game though, and the retreat seemed like a fun way to earn a continuing pastoral education credit. As soon as Smith started to play, they were hooked. Sharing the game with other people of faith, and using it for spiritual reflection, made the experience



**D&D GIVES HIS CONGREGATION A WAY TO INVITE PEOPLE IN WHO MIGHT NOT HAVE SEEN SPACE FOR THEMSELVES IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY BEFORE.**

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especially meaningful. “I loved the pairing with reflection on who you are, who God has made you to be,” they said.

Smith quickly felt called to lead games as a DM and eventually joined the Roll for Joy leadership team with the title “roleplay paladin.” In that role, Smith focuses on creating a safe and welcoming environment for everyone. “As a queer person who is also on the autism spectrum, there isn’t always a place for you to show up in the world as your full self,” they said.

Smith values the instant community formed around a D&D table, and they want to make sure that players can bring their complete, authentic selves there.

### **Rolling for discipleship**

Ben Loven, who serves as pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church in Rochester, Minn., and as “steward of lore” on the Roll for Joy leadership team, also counts Philstrom as his first DM. Loven played D&D for the first time when he was invited to be part of the campaign among rural pastors. He soon became a DM, too, and began using D&D in his ministry. Loven now regularly leads games among adults and youth at Our

Savior. During Sunday school, he gives students the opportunity to play through Bible stories as D&D games.

Last year, Loven and other rostered ministers in his synod began producing a D&D real-play podcast, with Loven as the DM, called *The Lore of Jesus: Roll for Discipleship*. The podcast campaign began with four Lutheran congregation council members getting sucked through a portal into a fantasy world where no one had heard of Jesus. The podcast asked, “What does it mean to follow Jesus when you can’t go to church?” Every few episodes, the players took a break from the game to reflect on the connections between D&D, their spirituality and ministry. These episodes were some of Loven’s favorites.

Loven’s players often surprised him, in a good way. As he prepared for a battle in a mysterious lighthouse, he said, “I had a plan for if they won, I had a plan for if they lost.” But he didn’t have a plan for if they sat down and surrendered—which is what they did. And in the end, it made the story work in an unexpected way that was true to their characters.

As a pastor and a DM, Loven loves creating stories with others. In both roles, he said, he



Photo: iStock.com/yamp

has some extra knowledge and tools that allow him to serve as a guide but, “at the end of the day, I’m just one of the people involved in telling this story.”

### **Expanding outreach and imagination**

Across the country, other ministry leaders like Philstrom who played D&D as kids are finding deeper meaning in the game as adults.

Bill Dohle, pastor of King of Kings Lutheran Church in Pueblo, Colo., played when he was growing up in the '80s and '90s, an era when some saw the game’s fantasy themes as dark and immoral.

Dohle didn’t believe the game was dangerous, but he had mentally walled it off from church and his calling as a pastor. Then he attended a workshop at a Rostered Ministers Gathering on using D&D in ministry. Crucially, the workshop gave him the chance to play again, and it opened the door between D&D and his faith life.

After the gathering, Dohle started a game with some members of his congregation. One of those players, Michelle Ramos, was inspired to become a DM herself and helped grow the

ministry. She recruited new players and hosted a one-time outreach event through King of Kings to give people the chance to try the game before jumping into a long campaign. People came from the congregation and beyond. Now, 15 people

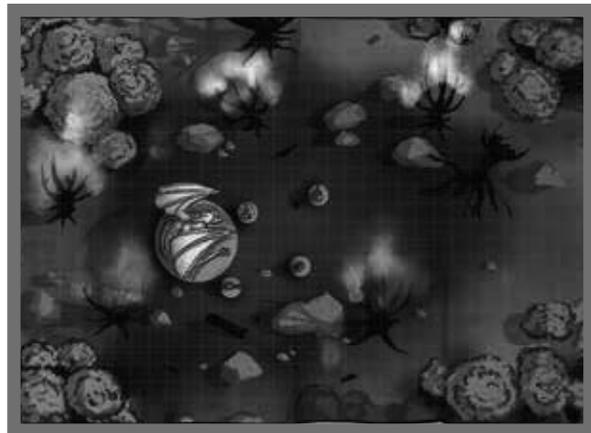


Illustration: Lauren Cox

**ACROSS THE COUNTRY, OTHER MINISTRY LEADERS LIKE PHILSTROM WHO PLAYED D&D AS KIDS ARE FINDING DEEPER MEANING IN THE GAME AS ADULTS.**



regularly play two games led by Dohle and Ramos. The players range widely in experience and age. There are three parent-child pairs, including Dohle and his son.

The games aren't overtly biblical or religious—Dohle doesn't think they have to be to enrich the players' faith lives. But D&D gives his congregation a way to invite people in who might not have seen space for themselves in the church community before.

It also expands the players' capacity for curiosity, empathy and imagination—traits he believes are vital in faith and spiritual life too. "You have to imagine what happens when you read Scripture," he said. "If your imagination is limited, you're not going to get it."

### Telling the story

For all these ministers, D&D is a holy experience, whether they're playing as Bible characters, orcs, elves or congregation council members. They find many elements of the game—exploring identity, empathy through imagination, building community and sharing joy—to be sacred.

Philstrom sees parallels between D&D and Jesus' ministry. Jesus gathered people around tables where he "inspired people through stories

**IT ALSO EXPANDS THE PLAYERS' CAPACITY FOR CURIOSITY, EMPATHY AND IMAGINATION—TRAITS DOHLE BELIEVES ARE VITAL IN FAITH AND SPIRITUAL LIFE TOO. "YOU HAVE TO IMAGINE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU READ SCRIPTURE," HE SAID.**

to dream about a different world," he said. At the D&D table, too, people come together to imagine that a better way is possible. He believes simply telling a story with a happy ending is a way to preach the gospel of resurrection.

Recently he began hosting "Adventuring League" meetups in Burnsville, where people gather for gameplay and fellowship. Most are members of nearby ELCA congregations, but some have come from out of state after finding the events on Facebook.

The players sit at tables, often in new combinations, and settle into easy conversation. After each game, there's the hopeful promise of another adventure: As long as you keep coming back to the table, the story goes on. †

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