

STUDY GUIDE FOR “WE MUST PLANT THE CHURCH” (AMERICAN LUTHERAN HISTORY SERIES)

This study guide is written to help participants make connections between the events of history and the dynamics of today’s church. In order to facilitate reflection and dialogue among the participants here are some processes to use:

- The facilitator should view the session in advance to prepare for the discussion.
- Double check the equipment the day of the study to make sure that everything is working. Technical difficulties derail even the most enthusiastic group.
- During the viewing make sure that everyone can see the screen. After the viewing, if at all possible, rearrange the seating to a semi-circle or a circle so that participants can see each other to better facilitate conversation.
- Provide nametags and/or have participants introduce themselves before beginning the discussion. Remember that a newcomer is less likely to return if they are not made to feel welcome through some form of introduction or inclusion. Whether a church is large or small, not knowing ‘how things are done here’ can make a participant feel uncomfortable. The more the facilitator can be clear about the process and hospitality, the more comfortable people will feel.
- Use the opening and closing prayers provided, or create your own.
- Set ground rules for discussion. If you have a stable group that meets weekly you may only have to mention these the first session. If people move in and out of the group you will have to make these reminders at each session. Many people have the impression that church history is dry and dusty but participants may discover there are some lively issues that still impact us today—and there may be differences of opinion.
- It is OK and welcome to have differences of opinion—history shows that it’s what we do with those differences that matter.
- If anything personal happens to be shared that information stays in the room unless the person who spoke gives permission to speak outside the group.
- Look over the discussion questions and highlight the ones that you want to make sure to cover. Depending on how lively the discussion is you may have to cut down the number of questions you cover.
- If you have more than 12 people in the class you may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion purposes and then pull the class back together before the end of the session to glean themes from each group.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to move the discussion on to a new question if the group is stuck and/or to keep any one person from dominating the discussion. One technique in the latter situation is to insert yourself with something like, “That is very interesting. What do some of the rest of you think about this issue?”.

BACKGROUND FOR THE LEADER:

This series on the history of the Lutheran Church in America will transport the learners through four centuries of the planting of the Lutheran Church in this new land. Henry Muhlenberg provides the title for this series. His motto was “Ecclesia Plantanda” or “We must plant the church”.

This story is characterized by the tension between honoring the European roots of the church and adapting to the new realities of American life. The Lutheran church, from its earliest days, faced religious pluralism, intolerance, lack of state support and diversity of languages and traditions. It wasn’t easy then, and it isn’t easy now.

This series will help the learners understand some “family of origin” issues. Congregations that have a pietist background will behave and think differently than congregations that grew out of a state church background. Issues around congregational polity, worship styles, the role of the pastor and theological orientation all grow out of these earlier struggles. As in marriages, where couples contend with different understandings of roles and expectations, congregations that have their origins in various strains of Lutheran traditions will find that they may operate from a different orientation than others.

Watch and listen for where current struggles have their genesis in old debates. Becoming an authentically American church is an ongoing challenge. This is the story that unfolds in this series.

PREPARATION :

The facilitator should provide for the class some historical information on your own congregation. If you are not aware of the history, ask your pastor to give or direct you to some history of the congregation. Older congregations often have histories that have been put together for special anniversary celebrations. Was your congregation founded by immigrants? From what country? What language was worship first held in? If the language spoken was not originally English, when did the switch to English happen? Or maybe you belong to a current immigrant church and currently worship in another language besides English. Younger churches will have been started by American church bodies and sometimes a larger church plants a new start. What church body founded your congregation? What Lutheran church bodies has you're your congregation belonged to over its' history? Provide a short verbal or written synopsis for your class about the congregation's origin and history.

SESSION ONE: ON NEW SOIL: THE COLONIAL LUTHERANS

WELCOME:

This study on the history of the Lutheran Church in this country is marked by many of the same challenges that churches today face, namely adapting to the current realities of the day. The earliest Lutherans were faced with a world much different than the one they immigrated from. Listen for how these new arrivals attempted to plant the church on new soil.

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, help us honor those pioneers of the faith in this new land by being faithful to serving God in our time and place. In Jesus name,
Amen

OPENING CONVERSATION:

(If the group is 12 or smaller do this process as 1 group. If the class is larger divide into groups of 6 – 8 people.) Introduce yourself and name the denomination(s) you grew up in. How many congregations have you belonged to in your lifetime?

(Show Session One video)

SYNOPSIS:

- Early Lutherans came from the Netherlands and Sweden
- Blacks and Indians are a part of this story from the beginning
- There are early Caribbean Lutherans thanks to the Danes
- Salzburger, from what is now Austria, arrive in the South
- Muhlenberg leads the German Lutherans and establishes churches and provides structure
- Lutherans are conflicted by the Revolutionary war

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Were you surprised by anything in this part of the Lutheran story? If so what was that? Why was it surprising?
- How did the American church have to adapt to its new setting?
- How do you think you would respond to finding such a vast open land? How would that influence the way you might shape a new church in a new land?
- Did you identify with any ethnic groups in this session? If so, does some of their story have meaning for you in your current faith journey?
- Does the early history of Lutherans in America sound like a description of Lutherans today? (“Frozen Chosen”)
- Why was religious pluralism necessary in Colonial America? What elements of that are still useful today?
- How are the challenges faced by Muhlenberg, and other colonial era pastors, similar to the challenges facing the church today?
- War often divides families and/or congregations. How have the various wars impacted your own family and/or congregation? Are there other events that have impacted you in a similar way?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear God, thank you for those brave pioneers who were committed to bring the Gospel to this wild new country. Give us courage for our calling to serve you in changing and challenging times. Amen

SESSION TWO: IN TIMES OF TRIAL: ARRIVING IN WAVES

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION:

This session introduces us to the challenges faced by the new immigrants in forming a church that is better suited to the uniquely American realities. These immigrants bring their language and culture with them and attempt to create structures that function well for them. That means that there is a proliferation of Lutheran denominations. These new American Lutherans also confront the evils of slavery.

OPENING PRAYER:

God of history, help us to see your hand in bringing truth and freedom to an imperfect world through imperfect individuals. In Jesus name, Amen.

OPENING CONVERSATION:

Divide into small groups of 2-4 people, preferably with people you don't know well. Take a few minutes and introduce yourself and share with each other whether there are immigrant stories in your family lore.

(Show Session Two video)

SYNOPSIS:

- The second wave of immigration takes Lutherans farther west
- The new American Lutherans were mostly pietists with a missionary impulse
- Schmucker attempts to be more ecumenical and more American and causes a backlash
- Slavery was the great moral question of the day and Lutherans were split

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Pietism is an uncomplimentary term for some. What is your understanding of pietism?
- How does pietism effect the development of the Lutheran Church?
- Does your congregation have a pietist heritage? Are there ways that that can still be noticed in the culture of your congregation?
- The words 'spirituality' and 'spiritual disciplines' are currently more in vogue to talk about the impulse to bring the awareness and practices of faith into daily life. Does your congregation have specific ways that it seeks to address the concerns of piety or spirituality?
- Schmucker wanted to compromise in order to connect with other American churches. How much compromise is possible?
- If slavery was the moral question of the day, how will the church be judged in the future about its stance on current moral issues?
- In this session we saw how the church adapted as it expanded geographically. Into what areas, such as social media, is your congregation expanding today? Have you experienced any resistance to these changes?
- What may have been happening in Western Europe in 1840-1920s that is similar to what is happening in America today? Are our reactions similar?
- What do you think of Schmucker's ideas and actions? How do those ideas/actions look today?
- What do you think of CFW Walther's ideas and actions? How do those ideas/actions look through today's eyes?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord, we can see your hand in the planting of the church in this country and in confronting the evils of slavery. Help us to confront the moral questions of our day with courage. In Jesus name, Amen.

SESSION THREE: TO MEET HUMAN NEED: BUILDING INSTITUTIONS

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION:

This session will help us understand why we have had so many Lutheran denominations. We will also hear about how the churches organized to serve human need and provide education for their young people.

OPENING PRAYER:

Dear God, we honor those who came before, as they sought to be faithful in serving you and your people. In Jesus name, Amen.

OPENING CONVERSATION:

In groups of 2-4 introduce yourselves and share with each other what, if any, knowledge and/or experience you have with Lutheran institutions besides churches (social service agencies, schools, hospitals, nursing homes, camps, etc.).

(Show Session Three video)

SYNOPSIS:

- Many denominations are formed, divided by language, theology and geography
- Without government support, the churches become self-supporting
- Lutherans respond to human need by building serving organizations and schools

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Can you trace the origins of your congregation to these earlier denominations?
- Describe your worship style preference. Does it lean more toward pietism or orthodoxy? Are you comfortable with both?
- What is your version of “Pastor Johnson’s Real Lutheran” idea? Does it still matter? Do Lutherans still need to fight amongst themselves to know who is the most Lutheran, Lutheran?
- How does the separation of church and state create a uniquely American church?
- What do you think are the advantages or disadvantages of being an independent rather than a state church? (Lutheranism is a state church still in Germany and Norway.)
- What was the impetus for Lutherans to create so many institutions? Are they still necessary? Why? What connection do you or your congregation have to Lutheran service, education or camp institutions? What is your sense of the impact of those institutions
- How do you feel about this statement: “The church is not the church unless it is helping its neighbor?” Are you, or is your congregation, doing anything to live into this belief?
- What roles, previously performed by the churches, are now handled by the state/federal government? Do you think that affects the separation of church and state? Would you like to change things now, and if so, how?
- How do you think funding the ministry of congregations and/or church bodies should be done? Why do you think it is so difficult for leaders to talk about funding of important ministries? What motivates you to support ministry beyond your own community?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear God of history, forgive our short-sightedness and our judgmentalism. Help us to trust that in spite of our failings, you continue to bring your kingdom on earth. In Jesus name, Amen.

SESSION FOUR: WORKING TOGETHER: LUTHERANS UNITING

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION:

In this session we will hear about the various kinds of Lutherans and why they formed their own denominations. Lutherans care deeply about their theology and church structures, so mergers didn't come easily. We will hear that story in this session.

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, we honor you as the God of history. Give us eyes to see you acting to bring your kingdom through the feeble efforts of frail human beings. In Jesus name, Amen.

OPENING CONVERSATION:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Have you had an experience of finding something is easier to do cooperatively than alone? What was the task?

(Show Session Four video)

SYNOPSIS:

- Several ways to be Lutheran: state church vs free church
- Lutherans are suspicious of other Lutherans
- WWI forces cooperation and moves Lutherans closer together and mergers begin
- Missouri Synod on a different path
- Lutherans are concerned about their youth

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Why do Lutherans care so much about right doctrine?
- What do you think about the idea of "Open Questions?" What might some of them be for you today?
- How would you explain the proliferation of Lutherans denominations?
- Which ethnic traditions are still being valued and/or practiced in your congregation? How important do you think it is to maintain them? Are they foundational or nostalgic?
- Lutherans in the early 1900s were worried about their children's faith, how is it different or the same today?
- Lutherans changed languages to English in order to keep their youth from leaving. What changes need to be made now, to keep youth from leaving?
- How important is it to you that the roughly 50% of Americans who are un-churched experience/observe a cooperative spirit among Lutherans and our ecumenical partners? Does each denomination going its separate way help us reach out in service to our neighbors? What has been your experience?
- In light of the changes made by the early 20th century Lutherans, how does that shape your understanding of the key story in Acts when Peter learned that Gentiles could be included into the early Christian church?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord, forgive us when we cling to our own understandings and have a difficult time honoring the experience and understandings of others. In Jesus name, Amen.

SESSION FIVE: IN MODERN TIMES: BECOMING AN AMERICAN CHURCH

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION:

This session will include events that have profoundly affected the church we know. We will witness the impact of external forces on the church and witness the continuing struggle to be an American church. This series has focused on the larger movements and challenges of the Lutheran Church. However, the experience of the individual member is likely to be much different. Ordinary people, through the ages, have experienced the church as a local congregation where they were baptized, taught, confirmed married and buried. They heard the Word preached and they gathered around the Lord's Table for sustenance and forgiveness. Most individuals were mostly unconcerned about the major battles and controversies. They experienced the church close to home. Acknowledging that reality, this series has attempted to explain why the Lutheran Church looks and acts the way it does today.

OPENING PRAYER:

Dear God, we thank you for your faithfulness to be present in every age and time. Give eyes to see your activity in the world and the courage to join you. In Jesus name, Amen.

OPENING CONVERSATION:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Have civil rights issues ever impacted you? If so, has there been conversation about that issue in congregations you have belonged to? Are there other social issues that are important to you? Do you think congregations could be places to have conversation about those issues?

(Show Session Five video)

SYNOPSIS:

- Lutheran global missions proliferate and many are supported by women
- Mergers accelerate
- The Depression and WWII have a strong effect on the church
- The heyday of the church in the 40s and 50s- ecumenical activity
- Post-Christendom and civil rights and women's movement
- Missouri Synod and ELCA move farther apart

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- How did the external circumstances of war and depression shape the church?
- The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl days forced churches to figure out how to do mission with less resources. Are we facing a similar challenge today? If so, how is your congregation adapting?
- To what do you attribute growth of the church in the 40s and 50s? Do these growth factors still impact your congregation today? If not, what might?
- Do you think that the issues swirling around the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s – 1960s were a repeat of the slavery issue during the Civil War? Can we learn anything about how to deal with issues the church is facing today, by looking at how Lutherans responded to these societal upheavals?
- What caused the demise of Christendom? How has its demise opened the door for different kinds of ministry in your community? What do you wish still held true?
- How have the civil rights and women's movement changed the church? What impact has been felt in your congregation? What other groups need the voice of you and your congregation to have

their own rights upheld?

- How would you describe the divide between the ELCA and Missouri Synod?
- If you were to write a “Book of Acts” for the church today, what would it sound like?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear God, we have our hope in you. As we seek to be a church that looks like America, help us let go of all that is a barrier to that mission. In Jesus name, Amen.

BONUS SESSION SIX: THE FUTURE OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

NOTE TO THE LEADER:

This bonus session can be used at the closing of the course in order to give the learners a sense of hope and encouragement about the church's future. This session contains a short interview with Mark Hanson, former Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and former President of Lutheran World Federation.

OPENING PRAYER:

God you are the Lord of all history. We ask you to show us the way to sharing the Good News as we look to the future, Amen.

OPENING CONVERSATION:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: What are your hopes and concerns for the future of the church and/or your congregation?

SYNOPSIS:

- ELCA is committed to being a church with diversity raising up leaders from their own communities
- There are signs of hope among young adults
- Nostalgia is a barrier to present mission
- Our hope is in God who holds the future

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What will it take to be a truly inclusive and diverse church?
- Does your church suffer from nostalgia?
- What are some of your own concerns for the ELCA today?
- What are some of the things you see that give you hope for the future of the ELCA?
- How do your "hopes" address your "concerns" and how may they be put together for change?

THIS IS THE CLOSING NARRATION FOR THE SERIES AND IS A HELPFUL SUMMATION:

"The main theme? Lutherans attempting to be faithful to the Gospel, struggling to adapt to this new land and new culture; sometimes successfully, and many times not. All-too-human leaders get involved in petty fights, and sometimes gigantic theological questions. But they have left us with a wonderful legacy of Lutheran congregations, and institutions of service and learning. They demonstrate that it is possible to adapt to new cultural realities without compromising the Gospel. They argue over questions of authority, of governance, of right reading of scripture and adherence to the Confessions. But in the end, Lutherans acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and that God's grace is sufficient for all."

CLOSING PRAYER:

Oh God, our hope in ages past, continue to lead us in hope into the future. Amen.

Apostolic Lutheran Congregation
Association of Free Lutheran Congregations
American Association of Lutheran Churches
Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches
Anglo-Lutheran Catholic Church
Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches
Church of the Lutheran Bretheren
Conservative Lutheran Association
Concordia Lutheran Conference
Danish Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Danish Lutheran Church of North America
Danish Lutheran Church Association
Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod of North America
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Eilsen Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church
Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa
Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Finnish American National Evangelical Lutheran Church
General Council
General Synod
German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Missouri, Ohio and other states
Hauge Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church
Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod in North America
Illinois Lutheran Conference
Joint Synod of Ohio and other states
Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan
Laestadian Lutheran Church

Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Lutheran Synod of Buffalo

Lutheran Free Church

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

Lutheran Church Wisconsin Synod

Lutheran Churches of the Reformation

Lutheran Church in America

Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ

North American Lutheran Church

Orthodox Lutheran Confessional Conference

Orthodox Lutheran Conference

Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession

Suomi Synod

Synod for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches

Texas Synod

The Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church of America

The American Lutheran Church

The Lutheran Confessional Synod

The Lutheran Evangelical Protestant Church

The Lutheran Ministerium and Synod - USA

United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church

United Lutheran Mission Association

United Norwegian Lutheran Church

United Synod South

World Confessional Lutheran Association