

A person in a dark coat stands in a church doorway, looking towards a brightly lit interior. The scene is framed by a large, arched doorway. In the background, there are two tall, narrow stained glass windows and a smaller circular stained glass window above them. The light from the windows creates a strong glow on the floor and the person's coat. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

WHY CHURCH?

A Discussion Series for Congregations

LENT 2024

A Production of the Congregational Ministries Committee

WHY CHURCH: A LENTEN SERIES

Introduction

This series is designed to be used during Lent. The first Sunday in Lent 2024 is February 18, and it runs through Palm Sunday on March 24.

This season invites us to slow down and reflect both as individuals and as congregations. The Congregational Ministry Committee of the Rocky Mountain Synod created this Lenten series to help your congregation reflect on **why** the world needs **your** church today and into the future.

This resource is divided into weeks. Each week includes:

- ▶ Material from the “Why Church” resource* that engages participants in wondering about the church as it continues to evolve
- ▶ A message sketch highlighting points that may be used in a sermon or other presentation
- ▶ Small group discussion questions providing conversation starters to engage people in groups around tables or in classrooms
- ▶ Large group debrief questions
- ▶ A closing prayer suggesting ways to conclude your conversation and offer it to God while also acknowledging God’s presence throughout the process and asking for God’s guidance with next steps

This material could be used for a Sunday sermon series or a midweek sermon series. It can also be used for a soup/supper discussion. Others might send it out as a weekly devotional via email or newsletter. We've tried to create something that is easily adaptable for use during Lent in a variety of contexts

May this material be a blessing to you and your congregation.

In peace,

Congregational Ministry Committee of the Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA

**This resource draws upon "Why Church" which is a larger resource presently being developed for congregations by the Congregational Ministries Committee of the Rocky Mountain Synod. It is built upon and continues the conversation initiated in the "Church Becoming" material.*

Thank you for using this Lenten Series. Please let us know about your experience by emailing us at Linda@BlueVeilMinistries.com.

Why Church Material

Our Lutheran witness to the gospel remains the basis for building a community of faith. Central to that witness are key theological core values, such as the following:

- ▶ God's unconditional love and grace
- ▶ A theology of the cross that proclaims that **Christ is present and at work** in the world's pain and suffering
- ▶ A commitment to life as a paradox, being God's both/and and people in an either/or world

Church Becoming takes these and other essential building blocks that represent the best of our gifts as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and from it constructs a community of faith around shared values, inviting people of all cultures and backgrounds to be church together, so that every ELCA congregation reflects its local context.

Oftentimes we participate in church without actually asking why we gather and share in ministry. This topic is a good opportunity to explore the foundational question of Why Church?

Message Sketch based on Hebrews 10:19 – 25

- ▶ Our church is founded on Jesus and his work on the cross.
- ▶ The cross reveals God's unconditional love and grace.
- ▶ Lent is a time to return to our foundations.
- ▶ Our foundation in Grace and the Cross propels us to acts of love and good deeds.
- ▶ Explore how your congregation has acted in love in the past based on the Lutheran foundation.
- ▶ Wonder with the congregation the new ways the Spirit is leading the congregation to enact her mission.

Small Group Questions: Break the group into tables of four to six people and give them these questions for discussion. The group doesn't have to answer every question; encourage them to choose the one that most appeals to them and stay where the energy is. Have each group choose a scribe who will be responsible for sharing a debrief of the conversation with the large group.

- ▶ Where did you learn what church was about?
- ▶ Why do you attend and participate in church?
- ▶ What's the purpose of church?
- ▶ In your view, what does God intend for us?
- ▶ How would you describe your values, mission, vision as a congregation?
- ▶ How do you understand the distinctiveness of our ELCA witness to the gospel?

Large Group Debrief: Invite the scribe from each group to share one or two main thoughts that emerged from their conversation. Then invite the group to comment on what they are hearing emerge as a common theme from all the groups.

- ▶ What are we learning in this moment?
- ▶ What is surprising us?
- ▶ Is the Spirit saying something to us?

Thoughts

Closing Prayer: In your prayer bring the conversation to the Lord. Name the shared values, the gift of the church as we've received it and acknowledge the ways the Spirit seems to be leading your particular congregation.

Example: Holy God, we thank you for the gift of today and these conversations. We are grateful for this church and the way you have used it in our lives to welcome us into your life. Help us to learn and cling tightly to the foundation you have given us and propel us into new ways of being church. We want to share your life with others, guide us by your Spirit to do that well in the place you have called us to serve. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

LENT 2: FEBRUARY 25 – MARCH 2

Story

Key Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:3 – 7

Why Church Material

The story of a congregation is the foundation on which congregations are built. At least for Lutherans, many congregations have been created as gathering places for generational Lutherans – those who already identify as part of the church, often because of family or heritage. This foundation is how many of the congregations in our synod were established. As Lutherans from the East and Midwest moved west, congregations were started to meet their needs. Congregations were built on the expectation of gathering people who were already part of the Lutheran church, and many of those people were of northern European descent.

Message Sketch based on 2 Timothy 1:3 – 7

- ▶ We are grateful for our congregation's founders and the values they gave us. Share examples.
- ▶ They-our Loises and Eunices- gave us a gift that can be rekindled time and time again.
- ▶ Are there ways we have been cowardly in our ministry for which we can repent?
- ▶ What does it look like for our congregation to live into a spirit of power, love and self-discipline?
- ▶ What is the key gift that God has given this congregation that is meant to be a blessing to our community?
- ▶ As Paul encouraged Timothy, use this message to encourage your congregation. Name their gifts. Call them to rekindle the gift and act with God's power.

Large Group Activity: Construct a congregational timeline. Using a large piece of newsprint or a long white board or chalk board, draw a timeline of the congregation's history. Write down the dates of the foundation and the pastors along the timeline. Then have the group name key events of the congregation's history. Are there ministries that were started, new services or classes? Major deaths? Major celebrations? Building campaigns or Stewardship efforts? Leave the timeline up for use by the small groups.

Note: If you want a full description of how to do this, check out chapter four in Roy Oswald's book *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*.

Small Group Questions: Break the group into tables of four to six people and give them these questions for discussion. The group doesn't have to answer every question; encourage them to choose the one that most appeals to them and stay where the energy is. Have each group choose a scribe who will be responsible for sharing a debrief of the conversation with the large group.

- ▶ Your congregation's story – Why was it established/ why was it founded?
- ▶ What stands out to you when you look at the timeline?
- ▶ Is anything missing that surprises you from the timeline?
- ▶ Is the congregation still serving its original purpose? Or, has it discovered a new purpose?
- ▶ What is the story your community would tell about your congregation? What's the story you want to convey?

Large Group Debrief: Invite the scribe from each group to share one or two main thoughts that emerged from their conversation. Then invite the group to comment on what they are hearing emerge as a common theme from all the groups.

- ▶ What are we learning in this moment?
- ▶ What is surprising us?
- ▶ Is the Spirit saying something to us?

Thoughts

Closing Prayer: Use your prayer to give thanks to God for the story God has been writing in your congregation. Name some of the key events that have been lifted up and the common themes that have emerged.

Example: Holy God, you have been with this congregation from the beginning. We thank you for our founding mothers and fathers who gave us this congregation and the gift of hospitality and outreach. Rekindle in us those gifts and guide us to the purpose you would have us fulfill while we are stewards of this ministry. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Why Church Material

Many congregations operate from a set of prescribed expectations – things it is believed are necessary to be a “successful congregation.” These “required” attributes include things like confirmed members, a council with officers, committees for just about everything, a choir, Sunday School, youth group, Bible study groups, women’s ministry, you name it. When any of these components is missing or floundering, the congregation’s self-perception takes a hit, and the assumption is that we are somehow failing with respect to what we SHOULD be. These expectations often come from a place of nostalgia, or looking back to what people might consider the “glory days,” rather than focusing on our context now. When we cling to any particular aspect of our congregation’s life as part of our identity, critique of that component becomes particularly painful and hard to accept, let alone change.

Church Becoming may indeed value one or all of these classic components of church life but the expectations of the congregation are organic, not prescribed. That is to say, the situation of the congregation and its particular moment in time determines what is needed for a shared life of faith and ministry. This may mean that things will come and go with the ebb and flow of the congregation – there may or may not be a Sunday School or a choir or a certain committee if the moment doesn’t call for it. Rather than operating from a place of scarcity or nostalgia, i.e., focusing on what we used to have, there is flexibility and fluidity for “what is” rather than “what should be.”

Message Sketch based on Luke 5:33 – 38

- ▶ The practice of the disciples offended the Pharisees because of their traditions around fasting.
- ▶ We get offended by change too, because our traditions are valuable to us and are close to our identity.
- ▶ Jesus gives parables for change. Old cloth and new cloth, new wine and old wineskins.
- ▶ Jesus likens the Pharisees to those who like the old wine and don't appreciate new wine.
- ▶ We get attached to our traditions just like the Pharisees did. We can become “snobbish” about our traditions. Everyone knows old wine is better. 😊
- ▶ Are there new things the Spirit is doing around us that require us to let go of some things in order to fully receive? What is the new wine?
- ▶ How does Jesus invite change when we are so committed to our patterns and traditions?

Small Group Questions: Break the group into tables of four to six people and give them these questions for discussion. The group doesn't have to answer every question; encourage them to choose the one that most appeals to them and stay where the energy is. Have each group choose a scribe who will be responsible for sharing a debrief of the conversation with the large group.

- ▶ How has your congregation changed in the past 10 years?
 - ※ What's new?
 - ※ What has ended?
 - ※ What has started?

- ▶ What are some key parts of your identity that don't seem to be "working" anymore?
- ▶ What gifts do you have now? What are your congregation's strongest assets for ministry, in terms of people and material resources?
- ▶ Who are you being called to serve at this time?
- ▶ How is the Spirit leading you to serve the community with what you have now?

Large Group Debrief: Invite the scribe from each group to share one or two main thoughts that emerged from their conversation. Then invite the group to comment on what they are hearing emerge as a common theme from all the groups.

- ▶ What common themes emerged from our small groups?
- ▶ Is there an experiment we'd like to try as a congregation?

Thoughts

Closing Prayer: Use your closing prayer to name the gifts the congregation has that might be used differently in the future. Acknowledge the difficulty and pain of change and also invite the Spirit to change you as God wills.

Example: *Holy God, you are new every morning, always inviting us to be fully present in a constantly changing world. Forgive us for clinging to things that bring us comfort but no longer serve your people. Challenge us to grow and change for the sake of the gospel. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

LENT 4: MARCH 10 – 16

Abundance & Scarcity

Key Scripture: Luke 9:10 – 17

Why Church material

Congregations focused on survival invariably operate from a scarcity mindset. They often look at what they think they are missing to be a “successful” congregation and focus time and energy there. This often does not work.

Congregations focused on thriving in ministry are already rooted in God’s abundance. They look at the gifts and passions of the members of the congregation as well as their existing resources and build ministry opportunities around these.

Congregations embracing a spirit of *Church Becoming* learn to celebrate the gifts that are already present, realizing they are sufficient to be Christ’s Church here and now. God’s abundance is trustworthy. The spirit and attitude of such congregations reflect gratitude for all that **is**, rather than anxiety and worry about what **isn’t**.

Scripture reminds us that God’s abundance is rooted in God’s promise to provide what is needed. This is why we pray as Jesus taught us: *give us today our daily bread*. Trusting God to give us our daily bread is foundational to *Church Becoming*.

Message Sketch based on Luke 9:10 – 17

- ▶ In the parable, the disciples feel scarce on time and resources. It’s getting late and they don’t have food to feed people.
- ▶ Name the scarcity our congregation feels.

- ▶ Jesus puts the responsibility on the disciples to determine what they think they can do. Share an example when you've felt overwhelmed or under equipped.
- ▶ The disciples bring what they've found to Jesus. This is a key shift toward an attitude of abundance. Rather than see what they have as not enough, they entrust what they have to Jesus and see what he does with it.
- ▶ In Holy Communion, we bring a little - some bread and wine - and Jesus turns it into body and blood for our salvation.
- ▶ What does it look like for us to believe that God will provide abundantly for us?
- ▶ Abundance is God providing what we need and more than is needed. In the story there are 12 baskets left over. Abundance breaks us out of our molds and makes us wonder who else we are called to feed.

Small Group Questions: Break the group into tables of four to six people and give them these questions for discussion. The group doesn't have to answer every question; encourage them to choose the one that most appeals to them and stay where the energy is. Have each group choose a scribe who will be responsible for sharing a debrief of the conversation with the large group.

- ▶ Do members of your congregation ever say: "if we only had more..."? In what areas? Why are you wanting more of that? What's the motivation?
- ▶ In what areas does your congregation have an abundance? Interior space? A certain age group? Land? What else? What might you do to use those resources to grow Christ's church?
- ▶ Is your congregation focused on surviving or thriving in ministry?

- ▶ What factors inform your attitude towards abundance and scarcity?
- ▶ What does a thriving ministry look like for you? For your congregation?

Large Group Debrief: Invite the scribe from each group to share one or two main thoughts that emerged from their conversation. Then invite the group to comment on what they are hearing emerge as a common theme from all the groups.

- ▶ What is our common fear of scarcity?
- ▶ Where do we see signs of abundance?
- ▶ Where do we see the Spirit encouraging us?

Thoughts

Closing Prayer: Use your closing prayer to confess and repent of fears of scarcity. Affirm your congregation's desire to trust God for provision and even abundance. Pray that the Spirit would increase generosity among the members and the congregation.

Example: *Holy God, you have supplied our every need and yet we continue to be afraid of running out. Forgive us and renew us that we might fully trust you for our future. Create in us spirits of generosity that we might follow your lead to supply the needs of others in ways that astound and surprise. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

LENT 5: MARCH 17 – 24

The Holy Spirit's Key Scripture: John 14:25 – 31 *Guidance*

Why Church material

We've sometimes become so accustomed to our familiar habits and ways of working, that we've failed to ask how the Holy Spirit may be inviting us to think and act in new ways. *Church Becoming* asks a congregation to intentionally engage with God by listening for where the Holy Spirit is calling and thinking about the differences between our view and what the Holy Spirit sees. When we talk about discernment in the church, we mean moving from our perspective to God's perspective.

It's important to remember that the Holy Spirit invites us to take ourselves out of our comfort zone. And it's okay to feel like we've failed or fallen short in our efforts! Sometimes, what seems like failure is actually the Holy Spirit's way of planting seeds that will later come to fruition, inviting us to reconsider what is meant by success in ministry.

Message Sketch based on John 14:25 – 31

- ▶ Jesus promises the Holy Spirit as an advocate to teach and remind us of what he taught.
- ▶ Jesus is heading to the cross, which will be his ultimate teaching, not in words but in deeds. The Holy Spirit will remind and teach us what the cross means.
- ▶ This passage points to the Holy Trinity and the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each person of the trinity works in concert with the other members.

- ▶ Our congregation is led by the Holy Spirit to listen to the Father, ground ourselves in the teaching of the Son and be propelled into a new mission by the Spirit.
- ▶ How do we discern what the Spirit is saying? We turn to scripture, we turn to prayer and we turn to community.
- ▶ Just as Jesus' mission of love led him to the cross, we should not be surprised when the Holy Spirit leads us to places of sacrifice and even suffering; but also to resurrection and new power and new life.
- ▶ Name some of the ways the congregation has heard and obeyed the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the past.
- ▶ Wonder aloud the opportunities that the Holy Spirit may be laying in front of our congregation.

Small Group Questions: Break the group into tables of four to six people and give them these questions for discussion. The group doesn't have to answer every question; encourage them to choose the one that most appeals to them and stay where the energy is. Have each group choose a scribe who will be responsible for sharing a debrief of the conversation with the large group.

- ▶ When has your congregation listened (discerned) for the Holy Spirit calling in the past? Or, what would it look like for your congregation to listen (discern) now for where the Holy Spirit is calling?
- ▶ Name a time when something didn't work as expected in your congregation. What did you learn? How did the Spirit guide you into seeing something new?
- ▶ Where does the Holy Spirit seem particularly active in your congregation? What are the bright spots? How might you embrace that work?
- ▶ How does your congregation pray together for God's guidance?

- ▶ If someone felt inspired by the Spirit to suggest a direction for the congregation, how would that be shared with leadership?
- ▶ How does study of scripture shape congregational mission? Is there a Bible story or verse that serves as a touchstone for the congregation? (Andrew Root has named these as “Watchword.” What is your congregation’s Watchword? Some examples: “The Lord will make a way where there is no way,” “God can change anyone,” “Break the chains,” “He bandaged the wounds”)
- ▶ What allows you to trust or take risks?

Large Group Debrief: Invite the scribe from each group to share one or two main thoughts that emerged from their conversation. Then invite the group to comment on what they are hearing emerge as a common theme from all the groups.

- ▶ Where does it seem the Spirit is leading us next?
- ▶ If we were to choose one story of scripture, or a way that God has led us recently, and put it into a catch phrase, what might it be? What’s our watchword?
- ▶ What have we learned during this Lenten series that we want to continue to work on?

Thoughts

Closing Prayer: Use your closing prayer to bring the whole series to mind. God has helped us remember our foundations and our story, called us to change, reminded us of God's abundance and encouraged us to listen to the Spirit as we answer the question 'why church.'

Example: *Holy God, send your Spirit to speak to us again. You have founded us in the work of Jesus on the cross and given us the gift of salvation. You have led this congregation from its beginning, and you continue to call us to serve your purposes. Provide all that we need and tune our ears to hear your Spirit as we follow your call into the future you have prepared for us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Summary Thoughts



Rocky Mountain Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.