

Opening Scripture together

Book of Faith initiative is changing ELCA

With this column, we end the 18-month series exploring Book of Faith insights from ELCA theologians and pastors. But we are far from the end of our commitment to opening Scripture together and inviting the Spirit, as on that first day of Pentecost, to fill us and work through us. Pentecost is a season of hearing, understanding and speaking.

As a church our native tongue is the language of the Bible. When we commit ourselves to listening to, struggling with, exploring, learning, and receiving the words, stories, songs, letters, laws and promises of the Bible, we become open to hearing God's word speaking to us and through us ever anew.

Since the Book of Faith initiative was adopted by the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, such renewed commitment has taken root. As director of the initiative, I see the growth. More families are reading the Bible at home, learning how to read devotionally in ways that engage all ages. I love the story of one boy in the Southwest who, having become deeply engaged with the Esther story, now says to folks who aren't acting well, "You Haman!"

Pennsylvania teens traveled across their synod with homemade Book of Faith badges, interviewing adults about their experiences with the Bible and then reporting their findings to the synod council.

A pastor in Wisconsin brought together active and lapsed members of her congregation to study lectionary texts and to reflect together on her sermon. She reports that the lapsed members have become active again. An entire congregation in California listened to the Gospel of Mark on MP3 players during Lent.

The Minneapolis Area Synod invited pastors to listen to a panel of people who have no interest in the Bible to discover what keeps such folks away. In Washington, D.C., one congregation held Lenten services that explored different ways of reading the Bible.

More than 3,000 people are conversing with each other on the Book of Faith social networking site (bookoffaith.ning.com). The Oregon Synod has a lively Book of Faith discussion going on Facebook.

What is most exciting about these and other stories are the creative ways people are finding to reach those who often haven't been part of a previous in-depth engagement with the Bible.

The temptation for many is to think the Book of Faith initiative is one more worthwhile church program that we can do once and complete. It's not. It offers a vision we are each called upon to embrace wherever we live, work and pray.

Living into this vision will take time. Mark N. Wilhelm of ELCA Vocation and Education observes that in the middle of the last century folks

throughout the church noticed that though we claimed to be a community dedicated to word and sacrament, we had drifted from our sacramental roots. So during the last 50 years people have dedicated themselves to renewal of our sacramental life, with results that have been powerful.

In a similar way, Wilhelm said, we have been drifting away from our rootedness in the word. So now is the time to rededicate ourselves to engagement with Scripture, proclamation and the living Word of Christ in our midst.

New opportunities for such experiences are being created by the Book of Faith team, including travel seminars to Turkey, the Holy Land and Germany with ELCA theologians. I'll be accompanying the group to the Holy Land in Lent 2011. For information, visit www.crossingborders.com/JoinATour.html or contact Linda Staats at lstaats@rmselca.org.

I tend always to return to Psalm 1 and the image of those who delight in Scripture being like trees rooted in God's living stream, growing verdant and strong. This psalm provides language for my prayer for the church: May we delight in the Scripture. May our faith be rooted in the word. Through us may God provide shade for the weary and bear fruit for the healing of the nations. □



www.bookoffaith.org

... is where you can learn more about the Book of Faith initiative, be informed of new offerings and also have access to all the "Our faith" columns since *The Lutheran* began the series in January 2009.

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