
Life of Faith Initiative and ELCA Faith Practices Ministry: Partnering to Live Out Faith in Daily Life in New Ways

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In my role as program director for Faith Practices and the Book of Faith Initiative of the ELCA, I am responsible for coordinating our denomination's Faith Practices Ministry; our Book of Faith Initiative that encourages us to "Open Scripture-Join the Conversation," and a Renewal/Prayer/Revival Team that travels around the country to offer revival services, prayer services, healing services, and other renewal ministries to groups, congregations, synods, seminaries, and other faith communities. In this article I will connect my ministries to the Life of Faith Initiative and will present my adorable great nephew as the connection between my ministries and that initiative.

I have a 5-year old great nephew who is also my godson. He is considered great because of our familial connection, but he is great because he is a child who is extremely loving, caring, and joyful. My godson started school on September 4, 2018. The Sunday prior to his going to school for the first time, his congregation gave to each of the children a tag to put on their backpacks that said, "God's got my back." When my niece was driving him to school, she quietly asked him: "Are you a little scared about starting school?" His reply? "No, Mommy. God's got my back." As a follower of Christ, I agree with my great nephew, Ian. God has his back, and I know God has and will always have my back. I came into the Lutheran faith after experiencing a divorce and the sudden death of my father. I was seeking to know if there really was a God because, if there was a God, why were all these negative things happening to me? I found in the Lutheran Church a theology of the cross that helped me to understand that there is nothing I can do to earn God's love. God loves us just as we are. It is in the times of my deepest pain that God is there to offer me hope and peace. My growth in faith has been a lifelong process. I am not what I used to be, but I am certainly not all I can be if I continue to follow the teachings of Christ. My precious niece and her wonderful husband have begun that lifelong teaching of the faith so that Ian can continue to grow in faith, love, and obedience to God, but they cannot do it alone. As his godmother, I cannot do it alone. There must be some intentional things done for and with him if we truly want Ian to grow reflecting with authenticity that he is a follower of Christ.

I believe that we Lutherans are blessed because beginning at baptism we make a covenant or agreement to do the following as we live out our faith in daily life: 1) *Live among God's faithful*

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people; 2) Hear the Word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; 3) Proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed; 4) Serve all people following the example of Jesus; 5) Strive for justice and peace in all the earth. In my Faith Practices Ministry, we call these commitments the Five Gifts of Discipleship. These are not activities we *must do* to earn God's love. As presented above, God loves us unconditionally. We see these activities, these specific practices, as ways we can concretely demonstrate our faith. These gifts offer us a framework for how we can constantly and consistently grow in our faith.

What do each of these gifts mean? "*Live Among God's Faithful People*" means that we are intentional about being part of a faith community where we can come together and worship Christ together as fellow believers in Christ. A Christian faith community offers us the opportunity to learn how to love, forgive, offer hope, pray for each other, and serve our neighbor together. "*Hear the Word of God and share in the Lord's Supper*" suggests that we seek ways to hear the scripture so that we can learn more about our book of our faith, the Bible, and how the teachings presented there are to guide our lives. We listen to the sermon so that we can hear insights into the teachings of the scripture that give us hope and peace, and that challenge us to advocate for the least of these. "*Proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed*" is one gift that is lifted up when discussions about mission arise. Many of the people who now come into our faith communities know very little about the joy of following Christ because they have never been in a Christian faith community for any length of time. When these people come into our Christian ministry settings, they want to know how Christ has made a difference in our lives. Are we able to share with others how Christ has transformed us?

The second part of this gift speaks to proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through our deeds. Some of us might remember years ago when there was a great emphasis on "Doing

Acts of Random Kindness.” People began paying for the groceries of the person ahead of them in line or paying a highway toll for someone who unfortunately, like them, had not taken the time to get an electronic pass in order to pay a toll. When I go out to speak on these “Five Gifts of Discipleship,” I often ask, “When you hear that someone is a Christian or see someone wearing a huge cross or notice they have a cross hanging in their car, what characteristics do you expect to see in that person? Some characteristics include: kindness, loving, faithful, caring, forgiving, honesty, and integrity. A few times I have gotten the word, hypocrite. The point is that because we say we are Christian, there are expectations of us. I am not putting a value judgement on these expectations, but they are there. I suggest that there should be something different about us as Christians—not perfect, but different. These Five Gifts provide a guide for how we can be different, not perfect.

One obvious way we proclaim the good news in deed is by stewarding all that God has given us. We take time to serve in our communities and the world. We offer our unique gifts and talents as ministry to the world so that lives, institutions, and situations are positively influenced by our presence. Finally, we offer our financial resources to be used to serve the kingdom of God here on earth.

The next gift, “*Serve all people following the example of Jesus,*” is one that is self-explanatory and truly makes a difference in the world. Think of the ways that faith communities reach out to their neighbors, not only to those in their local ministry setting but also globally. The tagline for the ELCA is “God’s work. Our hands.” This tagline reminds us that we are transforming the world through our ministries as we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, pray with the hopeless, as well as countless other ways of service.

The last gift, “*Strive for justice and peace in all the earth,*” challenges us to go out and advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. We provide a witness to those who have given up on the idea that institutions or people will ever demonstrate that they truly believe that all of us are made in the image of God. Every human being has worth and value. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls upon us to be peacemakers. As this gift suggests, peace should happen not just in our faith communities or in monasteries. We mobilize as Christians and model what peace in all the earth looks like. We constantly must ask ourselves: “How do we use these Five Gifts of Discipleship to open eyes and change hearts?”

The second ministry that I coordinate, along with my colleague, the Rev. Dwight DuBois, is the Book of Faith Initiative. *Currents in Theology and Mission* has highlighted the Book of Faith Initiative, offering insights into the history of the initiative as well as the goals and resources developed as it evolved.¹ Diane Jacobson, Professor Emerita of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, was the former director of the Book of Faith Initiative. Through her leadership this grassroots movement encouraged members of the ELCA to enhance their biblical literacy and fluency, offered

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new excitement about reading scripture, and applied it to our daily lives. The initiative offered four lenses for reading scripture:

- 1) The Devotional Lens: “What scares, confuses, or challenges you in this passage?”
- 2) The Historical Lens: “Who wrote this passage and why?”
- 3) The Literary Lens: “What is the plot and who are the characters?”
- 4) The Theological Lens: “How does this passage lead you to Christ?”

Through the Hein-Fry Book of Faith Challenge the Book of Faith Initiative has promoted the development of innovative Bible studies that foster excitement about opening scripture and joining a conversation about scripture. In this innovative program, seminarians develop Bible studies that can be used in congregations to foster learning about the abundance of life lessons and insights found in scripture. This challenge was begun during Jacobson’s tenure as program director and has resulted in a host of relevant Bible studies. The ELCA seminaries, under the direction of Javier Goitia, Program Director for the Seminaries at the ELCA Churchwide Office, and Dwight DuBois, ELCA staff for the Book of Faith Initiative, host the presentation of these Bible studies held at our seminaries on a rotating basis.

The last ministry that I coordinate is the Renewal/Prayer/Revival team. This team offers healing and hope to those who are hurting through its ministry of revivals, prayer services, healing services, workshops, and other strategies. The team provided morning prayer at the 2016 Churchwide Assembly and offered a prayer chapel at that event. In 2014 the team hosted a prayer service on the southside of Chicago, where the Conference of Bishops of the ELCA came and prayed with the community amid the violence happening in the community and the community in turn prayed for the bishops. At most of the team’s events, individualized prayer is offered to participants. If I had to offer an alternate name for the team it would be “Balm in Gilead Ministry.” We offer hope to the wounded souls in our world. As I coordinate these three ministries, my prayer is always that these ministries are helping people grow in their faith.

Recently a new initiative was introduced into the ELCA called the Life of Faith Initiative. I realized immediately that here was an aspect of faith formation that was truly connected to my ministry

1. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 41 (June 2014).

with which I needed to partner. I have noticed over the years when people speak about their faith, they tend to speak about what they do as faithful followers of Jesus only with reference to the day that they go to be with their faith community. For most people that is Sunday, but faith communities are becoming more intentional about meeting the needs of their parishioners by also offering worship services on Saturday or other days of the week.

People are willing to talk readily about the roles they have in their church setting, such as congregation council president, usher, Sunday school teacher, or counter of the offering, but they do not seem to connect all the other roles in their lives with living out their faith. Prior to being a pastor, I was a pediatric nurse. There were many times when I had to comfort a grieving family or convince a screaming toddler that the shot I was about to give them would hurt for a moment, but they would feel better soon. I did not connect my role as a pediatric nurse with living my faith in daily life. I saw it as my job, my vocation. The Life of Faith Initiative has reinforced to me that my vocation is being a child of God. The roles I have in my life and my relationships are the ways I live out my faith in daily life. Martin Luther spoke of “the priesthood of all believers.” This suggests that all the baptized are equal in status before God. What if we really lived that out as we live out our faith journey? What if we used all four of these ministries as a guide and support as we live our faith in daily life? Let us consider my great nephew and godson, Ian, as a model for what could happen.

First, from the Faith Practices Ministry, the gift of discipleship: “*Live Among God’s Faithful People.*” What if Ian is taught that, yes, it is important to worship with fellow Christians, but this is not the only time during the week when he is living out his faith. When he helps his little sister get up after she has fallen, he is living his faith in daily life. Worshiping with fellow believers offers some skills in being a Christian, such as Sunday school. But then he takes those learnings out into the world to show by his words and deeds that he is a follower of Christ. When he says that “God’s got my back,” he is proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through his words. As he gets older and goes to college, he might share with his roommate how God has blessed his life. He may be patient and understanding with his roommate in their differences, because that is living out his faith in daily life as a roommate. When he gets a job as a scientist studying the planets (because he loves astronomy) and a female co-worker shares how she is being sexually harassed, he accompanies her to the Human Relations Office. He not only is striving for justice, but he is living his faith in daily life as friend and co-worker.

The Renewal/Prayer/Revival Team focuses on healing and reviving people and situations. Suppose a tsunami happens in Indonesia when Ian is in high school and he mobilizes his fellow classmates to pray for the healing of the people and supports the relief efforts by spearheading a collection for those who have survived the devastation. He is doing what is highlighted in the Renewal/Prayer/Revival Team. He is offering hope to wounded souls. He also is following the example of Jesus and living his faith

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in daily life as a concerned student.

When Ian picks up his Children’s Study Bible and begins to read the Bible stories, he becomes increasingly fluent and literate about what he is reading, which the Book of Faith Initiative advocates. As he grows, he takes those stories and applies them to his everyday life. For example, the Story of the Prodigal Son teaches us that God has unconditional love for us, no matter how sinful we are. As Ian reads that story and applies it to his life, he seeks to forgive those who treat him differently because of the color of his skin. He reflects the fact that God loves him unconditionally and therefore, as a child of God, he needs to love others unconditionally. He is living out his faith as a citizen in a world where people may not see the light of Christ in individuals who are different from themselves, but he models this love so others can learn.

I am awestruck when I think about the potential for revival we have for our own faith journeys and for faith formation in the ELCA if we take these four ministries and implement them as strategies for changing the prevailing mindset that we are living out our faith only when we are gathered with other people of faith. Imagine using the “*Five Gifts of Discipleship*” as a guide as we strive to embody these gifts in our discipleship based on the promises we make at baptism. Imagine reading our Bibles to gain literacy and fluency, in order to apply our study of the Bible in how we live our faith in daily life. Imagine the vibrancy of Bible conversations we could have. What if we saw prayer as foundational to healing and reviving people who are struggling, so that God might mend situations that need faith-filled interventions? What if we took the Life of Faith Initiative seriously with its emphasis on concrete actions to show that the priesthood of all believers is real? We all have equal status in God’s eyes and are called to serve our neighbor and live our faith in daily life.

These suggestions are already happening in the ELCA to a certain degree. But what if they were strengthened, highlighted, and practiced with regularity? The potential is awesome! As my godson says, “God’s got my back!” God has his back and God has all of our backs. We can trust that and have no fear. Mark 5:36 offers us strength when we experience fear as we go forth in love, peace, and hope to live out our faith in daily life: “But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’” Trust and believe that living your faith in daily life brings the kingdom of God on earth to fruition. May your faith journey be one of joy, peace, hope, forgiveness, and love!