

Making Christ Known

in the



Northern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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Called to Serve

Pr. Jeffrey Clements, assistant to Bishop Wollersheim

This is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.

Mark 10:45, The Message

I was in my first call as a young pastor. As we were finishing a noontime meal in the church basement, I did something that felt very natural to me. I got up, went to the kitchen, filled a thermal coffee carafe and began to make the rounds of the room offering to refill coffee cups. I had not gotten very far before one of the women at the table said, “Oh, Pastor, let me do that.” I countered, “No, I don’t mind.” It was a true statement. I didn’t mind. In fact, I really enjoy it. I know of no better way to greet almost everyone at an event than by carrying around a coffee pot.

The next comment, however, caught me off-guard.



Objecting to my pouring coffee, another woman said, “The pastor doesn’t serve!”

The pastor doesn’t serve! Here I thought I was trying to live a life of service. We all got a good chuckle out of how silly the statement sounded.

Of course, a pastor does serve. As a parish pastor, I have served alongside parishioners in lots of way. But, there is an extra challenge for pastors because our service to and with the congregation often looks like part of the “job.” So, many pastors I know also seek ways to serve outside of the congregation. I used to volunteer time at the local elementary school and with the Boy Scouts. These efforts never looked like I was doing them just because I was the pastor. (I could have been legitimately accused of doing these for fun.)

But, it isn’t just the pastor who has been called to serve. We are all called by God to a life of service. We are to serve God and serve our neighbor. In recent years, our church has placed a greater emphasis on the faith

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Service

This issue is the sixth in a series on the seven Faith Practices.

Find previous issues at nissynod.org/pubs/mck



Christ-centered service is often transformational. It can change both the life of the one who serves as well as the person who is served.

Service is a living witness to our faith that provides opportunities for us to invite others to learn more about Jesus. Through service, we encourage those who are struggling to go on and restore hope in their lives. As baptized believers, we are called to live our lives as servants of God. “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Scriptures frequently remind us that as Christians we are to serve others, work for justice, and live in community with our neighbors, even those whose race, class, culture, and religion are different from our own. This is the heart of social ministry.

Why is a life of service such a challenge? Why is it sometimes so difficult to respond to the call to serve? Just as in the parable of the great feast in Luke 14, the reasons are many: lack of time, choice of priorities, the availability of seemingly limited resources to use in response to long-standing problems, hopelessness, apathy, and fatigue. But the good news is that not only has God called us to live lives of Christian service, God has provided the gifts that are needed.

Holy and Sacred Work

Pr. Janet Lepp, St. John's, Mendota

Affirmation of Baptism

The young people in their white robes stand in front of the congregation. "You have made public profession of your faith," the Pastor announces, and then asks them, "Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism?" Then the five baptismal promises are spoken. These reflect what it means to live the Christian life of discipleship. Included is the intention to serve all people, following the example of Jesus.



Then one by one, each Confirmand responds, "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me."

The pastor turns to face the congregation. "People of God, do you promise to support these sisters and brothers and pray for them in their life in Christ?" If so, please respond, "We do, and we ask God to help and guide us."

So many promises are being made. The young people are making promises as an Affirmation of their Faith. The congregation is making promises of support to these young people as they continue their faith journey. Even God's promises are heard, offering repentance and forgiveness, new life and salvation through Jesus Christ. Finally a prayer is said, asking for the guidance of God's living and Holy Spirit to be a constant and loving presence in carrying out the promises which have been made.

Journey of Faith

In the days and weeks and months which follow, the congregation works to include the newly Confirmed members by inviting them into the life and mission of the congregation. Congregations keep their promises whenever they encourage the young people to live in ways which reflect their discipleship in Christ.

One way that a child of God grows in faith is through the faith practice of service. I think of the young people I know who have helped at the local food pantry, or worked at a Habitat for Humanity build site, or have gone on mission trips with other members of the congregation. As is always the case, when the group sets out to serve, the journey begins with a desire to help those who are being served and to relieve suffering in some way. That desire does indeed become fulfilled. The mystery is that in serving, the ones who serve are often those who report that they themselves are the ones who have gained the most. After a Mission Trip the participants will tell how they have

become more grateful for the blessings in their own life, more trusting of God, more patient, more generous, and much more appreciative of others who may be very different from themselves.

Holy and Sacred Work

"To serve all people, following the example of Jesus" allows both those who are served AND those who serve to experience God's transforming power in a real way.

Our faith practice of service is holy and sacred work – for the sake of those we serve – for the sake of our own spirituality – for the sake of the community to which we belong – and for the sake of God's transforming reign in our world.

Starter list of ways to serve in your congregation and community

Education

- Establish a tutoring program
- Provide English as a Second Language classes
- Provide adult literacy tutoring
- Advocate and work for proper financing of schools
- Offer parenting classes or support groups
- Provide a certified preschool
- Organize a community technology center

Environment

- Plant trees
- Recycle office paper and bulletins
- Limit or eliminate polystyrene products
- Use ceramic mugs at congregational events
- Advocate for clean air or water legislation
- Investigate low-maintenance landscaping alternatives
- Hold recycling drives

Food

- Contribute to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal
- Donate to a local food pantry
- Provide food baskets for families in need
- Open a soup kitchen
- Deliver Meals on Wheels
- Take meals to families dealing with illness or to new mothers
- Study the complexities of world food distribution

Health Care

- Offer AIDS awareness and

prevention programs

- Provide teen pregnancy education and/or support
- Provide drug awareness education
- Begin twelve-step support groups
- Start a parish nurse program
- Study stress and offer programs on dealing with it
- Organize a health fair for the community
- Hold a blood drive
- Encourage people to register as organ donors
- Advocate for adequate health care for all people
- Provide used medical equipment for short-term needs
- Organize an exercise program

Homelessness

- Build homes with Habitat for Humanity
- Make sleeping bags for people who are homeless
- Establish a homeless ministry at your church
- Collect clothing, especially warm outerwear
- Put together kits of toiletries for homeless people
- Advocate for low-income housing

Men

- Start support groups for men
- Support batterer-recovery programs for men
- Advocate men's health care issues

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Service is at the heart of what we do as a church

The Rev. Dr. Denver Bitner, part-time assistant to the bishop and LSSI President Emeritus

Teacher, What is the greatest commandment in the law? And He said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.



Matthew 22: 34-40

In the teaching ministry of Jesus, faith and service were always found in relationship to one another. Whether it was teaching in parables or actually feeding thousands of people, Jesus affirmed the dependent relationship of faith and service. Faith is authenticated by the act of service to God and neighbor. When we worship, we call it a service, and when we show kindness to our neighbor, we call it service. Our service in our house of worship and our service in the community are both acts of worship.

For many years, Jack Johnson, an insurance agent, had been called on to serve the church in a variety of ways. He had served on the church council, as an usher at services, and as treasurer of the church. After his retirement he was asked to volunteer at the our church pantry. One day I stopped by the pantry where he was serving the many

families who came monthly for enough food to feed their children. I asked how it was going and he responded that this was the most spiritually rewarding experience he had shared in his many years as a volunteer in the church. He responded, “It connects my faith with what I have learned in church.” In service to others our faith comes alive. If you want to introduce your neighbor to God’s love, join them in service to others, for that is where Christ is found.

Mother Theresa put it this way; “Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service.” It is prayer that gives us strength to serve and it is service that gives us cause for thanksgiving. The word of God calls us to love our neighbor in real and tangible ways. We are to provide food for those who are hungry and comfort to those who suffer, especially those who are most vulnerable among us. The ministry of service is not an add-on to our faith life. It is essential to a vibrant faith experience. Most people don’t realize that the service ministries of the church are the most significant way that we connect with our communities. Last year one out of every 50 people in the country was served by a Lutheran Service Agency. Service is at the heart of what we do as a church.

It makes a difference not only to the one who is served but also to the one who is engaged in service. For it is the one who cares who experiences the joy that God gives to those who share of themselves. Service is not always recognized or even received with gratitude but we grow in faith and maturity as we respond to God’s call to love.

Cover story continued

practice of serving. We have been encouraged to connect our faith with our daily lives in new and intentional ways. A day of service has become an integral part of our ELCA Youth Gatherings. I have seen firsthand how this component of the gathering changes the lives of our young people. The stories our youth told after returning from the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit often focused on the people they had met. As one group cleared debris from an alley, a neighbor came out to work alongside of them. Another neighbor offered cold water on a hot day. Detroiters were grateful for the work that was done and our youth got their

hands dirty in service to God and neighbor.

For the past three years, many of our congregations, both in our synod and churchwide, have engaged in a day of service under the “God’s work. Our hands.” banner. Relationships are being formed and strengthened within congregations as new relationships are being built between congregations and the communities they seek to serve. Last September, Rockford Area Lutheran Ministries engaged a number of our congregations in an all-day food packing event in the center court of Cherry Vale Mall. As

meals were packaged for Tanzania, a gold-shirted witness was made to the community.

I really appreciate the church’s emphasis on all of the faith practices: pray, study, worship, invite, encourage, serve, give. They are all important as we strive to become better disciples. But, I believe if the church is to make a positive and lasting impact in the world today, service must be prominent. We used to sing “They’ll know we are Christians by our love....” Today, the world will know we are Christians by our love through our service to our God and to our neighbor.

The Faith Practice of Service

Pr. Mark Oehlert, St. John's, Sterling

Serve. Serving. Tennis anyone? Seconds at thanksgiving dinner? Well not exactly, at least in this communication. This message has to do with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and how serving is at the core of Jesus teaching. Many biblical parables speak profoundly of Jesus call to serve and care for others: from foot washing to the feeding of the five thousand, from being in relationship with tax collectors and sinners (people) of all kinds to being intentional in caring for children. In all of these ways and more, Jesus makes his command quite clear: love God, love neighbor. Serve!



Serving is active, participatory and alive. In seminary when studying the Hebrew bible, I was struck by our class discovery that there is little language for the words "I" or "me" or "mine" in the language. In the Hebrew bible, which presents the culture Jesus grew up in, most instances of relationship and interaction between people reference only community, family, neighbor and not the individual. We on earth are created to be in relationship

with one another. Serving, as part of the seven faith practices, is meant to be as natural as eating and sleeping. Our ELCA website page referencing the faith practice of serving includes a quote from Martin Luther that is quite relevant to today's message. "Our faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing." Serving is alive and is done in relationship.

To serve means that we enter into life in the fullness of all of it wherever we may find ourselves. That can mean being present in times and places that are messy or unpleasant. The kenotic (self-emptying) example of Jesus life is clear. Our inherent response to Jesus giving of faith includes walking with the least of these in this our day and time. Places like prisons, disaster sites, soup kitchens and various other locations of difficulty and challenge are a few of just such places. In reality, family or close neighbor relationships can be challenging places as well. While initially, entering into these types of places may not seem desirable and perhaps could even go against our instincts, if you have reservations about entering in, ask someone who has served in such places. Here faith is alive! Here faith is lived! Here faith blooms! Truly, when serving others in these places and more, Jesus tells us that in such relationships we are defined by serving and giving away ourselves. We will find joy and the joy will be experienced in many ways. Serving is a faith practice meant to be a blessing for the wholeness of community.

More Service Ideas:

Parenting

- Provide parenting support groups
- Provide child care for parents at job interviews
- Establish a Parents-Day-Out group

Peace and Justice

- Advocate reducing gun-related crimes
- Study the effects of militarism on global living
- Support after-prison care programs
- Provide transportation to prisons for family visits.
- Participate in, support, or start a prison ministry
- Write letters to legislators advocating for peace

People with Disabilities

- Study the accessibility of congregational facilities
- Provide hearing-enhancement equipment in worship
- Support the Americans with Disabilities Acts
- Provide large-print or Braille materials

Poverty

- Hold a rummage sale for maternity and infant clothing
- Make quilts or kits for Lutheran World Relief
- Help settle a refugee family
- Study local and global root causes of poverty
- Begin vocational training or job placement programs
- Support or start a transitional housing program

Seniors

- Provide senior care in the congregation's facility
- Research the special needs of older adults
- Establish an adopt-a-grandparent program
- Provide secretarial (bill-paying, correspondence) services
- Advocate for better transportation, housing, etc.

Women

- Support a shelter for battered women
- Advocate anti-stalking laws
- Establish a rape or crisis hot line
- Offer self-defense or personal safety classes
- Provide transportation to and child care for women attending prenatal classes

Youth

- Open a coffee house/youth drop-in center
- Sponsor a community sports program for youth
- Begin before- and after-school programs
- Organize activities for school vacation days
- Provide certified day care
- Establish a youth hot line or drop-in counseling center
- Promote Big Brother and Big Sister programs
- Support those seeking to be adoptive or foster parents

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