



Story Matters:

Naming, Claiming and Living
Our Biblical Identity



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

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Introduction

The Faith Practices Initiative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) urges the members of this church to “put their faith into practice” by living out the promises contained in the liturgy for the Affirmation of Baptism. In that promise, we pledge as members of the body of Christ through baptism to:

*Live among God's faithful people
Hear God's Word and share in the Lord's Supper
Proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
Serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ
Strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 246)

Living into these commitments is not always easy, and the paths we should take are not always clear. Among the many challenges we face is the growing unfamiliarity folks have with Scripture that makes it difficult for congregations to root themselves in their biblical identity. Such rooting is foundational. Our biblical identities are the source of our missional identity and our commitments. Through the Scriptures we hear the depth of God's call and promise. Through Scripture we are called to lives of discipleship and mission.

To help Christians in the ELCA explore the Bible to better live into their baptismal covenant, staff of the churchwide organization's Faith Practices Team, in collaboration with staff of the Book of Faith Initiative, developed Story Matters. Story Matters, written by Dr. Diane Jacobson, director of the Book of Faith Initiative, is designed to help congregations discover and articulate, in a deep and biblically based conversation, their unique identity and mission.

Through Story Matters, congregations are invited to participate in a conversation that centers on the one biblical story that they identify for themselves as their defining story. Members of a congregation will discover and explore this story together over an extended period of time. Throughout the process of naming and exploring this story they will ask questions about their own stories as a congregation and a community. The hope is that extensive engagement with their chosen passage will help the congregation to form their identity as a missional community, to deepen their practice of faith, and to live out their specific vocation as a called and sent community of disciples.

The ELCA is committed to strengthening our congregations in their capacity to be a biblically rooted “Book of Faith” church, evangelically committed, and missionally engaged. We are committed to encouraging the discipleship of all our members to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to building communities of witness and service. We are committed to deepening our faith practices by fulfilling our baptismal promises. Many congregations have already committed themselves to strengthening their faith practices by writing mission statements, engaging in the Book of Faith Initiative, and many other creative efforts. Story Matters is yet another tool for congregations to deepen their practice of the faith. May it be so for you and your congregation.

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Overview of Story Matters: Naming, Claiming and Living Our Biblical Identity

Story Matters is a new ELCA resource designed by people involved with Faith Practices, the Book of Faith Initiative, and Mission Development.

Goal:

To help congregations discover and articulate, in a deep and biblically based conversation, their unique identity and mission so that that each congregation might:

- Discern their congregational story within the biblical story
- Use their biblical story to discover and engage together their congregational identity and mission

The proposal:

Congregations are invited to participate in a conversation that centers on the biblical story that they identify for themselves as their defining story. (A biblical story, broadly understood, might be any biblical passage – a parable, a psalm, a set of verses, a book, a narrated event, or any well-defined passage.)

Members of a congregation discover and explore this story together. Through the process of naming and exploring this story they will ask questions about their own stories as a congregation and a community. Extensive engagement with their chosen passage will help the congregation to form their identity as a missional community, to deepen their practice of faith, and to live out their specific vocation as a called and sent community of disciples.

Two defining invitations and questions will guide this conversation:

- **Invitation #1: Discover and name our biblical story**
Question #1: What biblical story best captures our own stories of who we are and who God is calling us to be?
- **Invitation #2: Live into and out of our biblical story**
Question #2: How might our biblical story gather us together and help to form us as a community of disciples called to mission in our community and world?

Step One: Discover and Name Our Biblical Story

Gather the community and claim a defining biblical story.

The purpose of this step is to help the gathered members of the congregation to identify and claim a story from the Bible that best expresses the identity and commitments of the congregation. That is, the purpose is to discover a biblical story that both tells your congregational story and informs your congregational commitments and calling.

Step Two: Learn, Live and Share Our Biblical Story

Gather around and live deeply into your defining biblical story. Discover the grace of dwelling richly in one story over time. Put your story at the center of your ongoing conversation, and explore ways to live out your story.

The purpose of this step is twofold:

1. to take some extended time to journey with your chosen story allowing it to seep into the congregation and deepen your practice of discipleship, both individually and as a congregation, and
2. to follow the call of your biblical story, allowing it to inform how you listen to, speak with, and act on behalf of the broader community, both near and far.

Story Matters:

Naming, Claiming and Living Our Biblical Identity

Stories matter. Each congregation has multiple stories. Each community in which we live has multiple stories. Each individual within our communities and congregations has multiple stories. We also have God's story in Scripture. When we are able to take all our various stories and center them in and interpret them through our biblical story, God often enters our lives and the lives of our congregations and communities in most surprising ways.

What is presented here is a leader's guide for a process of engagement with two extended steps. While having a process is clearly important, the process described in these pages is not intended to be used mechanically, in lock step. Each congregation should adapt the steps in ways that make sense in its own context. The underlying intention is to invite congregations into an extended and meaningful conversation with the Bible, with one another, and with their surrounding community.

Step one: discover and name our biblical story

Guiding question: What biblical story best captures our own stories of who we are and who God is calling us to be? What is our identity?

The goal of step one

The goal of this step is to help the gathered members of the congregation to identify and claim a story from the Bible that best expresses the identity and commitments of the congregation. That is, the goal is to discover a biblical story that both tells your congregational story and informs your congregational commitments and calling.

Four challenges

Challenge one: In order to discern which biblical story best fits your congregational identity and mission, you will need to work on telling, listening to, and bringing together the various stories of the community and the congregation.

Challenge two: In order to insure as representative a story as possible, you will want to involve and get input from as many individuals and groups within the congregation as possible.

Challenge three: Knowledge of the Bible will be very uneven within the congregation, and many people will have difficulty identifying and claiming a biblical story. You will want to calm the fears of those who are less comfortable with Scripture and set up a fun and inclusive process that helps to open up the Bible to all.

Challenge four: Choosing one biblical story that both reflects the identity of the congregation and challenges the congregation to fulfill its mission might be very difficult. You might wish to choose two stories that help keep the conversation lively.

Some possible ways to meet these challenges

How you meet these challenges depends entirely on the nature and make-up of your individual congregation. What follows are some suggestions.

Challenge one: In order to discern which biblical story best fits your congregational identity and mission, you will need to work on telling, listening to, and bringing together the various stories of the community and the congregation.

Often people do not know the history of their congregation, the stories of members, and some of the key issues of the surrounding communities. So setting up a process in which you engage one another with certain central questions such as the following can be helpful:

- Who are we, and how did we get here?
- Can we draw a timeline of crucial congregational moments?
- Which events on the timeline are essential to “telling the story” of our congregation?
- How do our individual stories fit with our congregational stories?
- What is the story of our surrounding community?
- Who from the community might we invite to come and tell us their stories? (e.g., the superintendent of schools, a farmer or business leader, someone from law enforcement, a child care worker)

How we tell our stories can be as crucial as what stories we tell. Part of the overall goal of Story Matters is to tell our stories in such a way that they connect to God’s story. One approach is to wonder aloud how we, as individuals and as a congregation, have lived out our baptismal promises:

- What is our baptismal story?
- What marks us as living among God’s faithful people?
- What events have led us to hear God’s word and to share in the Lord’s Supper?
- When have we, alone or collectively, proclaimed the good news to others, served others, or striven for justice and peace?

Finally you might ask certain concluding questions that help move the conversation forward:

- What opportunities and challenges are emerging from these stories?
- What themes are emerging about who we are as a congregation?
- What keeps coming up as an important aspect of who we have been or want to become?

Challenge two: In order to insure as representative a story as possible, you will want to involve and get input from as many individuals and groups within the congregation as possible.

How you meet this challenge depends entirely on the nature, size and inclination of your congregation. You know your own congregation best.

You might begin first with either the congregation council or some other designated committee. Help the group become familiar with the ideas of this proposal and settle on a strategy.

Identify different groups within your congregation and imagine who needs to be reached, how they might be reached, and where these conversations might happen. And then listen, listen, listen.

Possible groups to join the conversation:

Adult forum, youth group, Sunday school, post-confirmation youth, singles or couples groups, men's or women's groups, intergenerational gatherings, coffee hour gatherings, work affinity groups (healthcare workers, educators, laborers, etc.), theology-on-tap groups, people gathering in homes, church retreat, congregation council listening posts.

For many congregations connecting with the congregation at worship is crucial since worship is where the largest portion of the congregation comes together. Perhaps take time for "ministry moments" structured in a way that meets the needs and habits of your congregation.

Challenge three: Knowledge of the Bible will be very uneven within the congregation, and many people will have difficulty identifying and claiming a biblical story. You will want to calm the fears of those who are less comfortable with Scripture and set up a fun and inclusive process that helps to open up the Bible to all.

The goal of the biblical conversation is to help the congregation identify some biblical stories that carry aspects of the themes and challenges that have arisen from the stories of the congregation and community without shaming folks about what they do not know. The tone should be fun and invitational. Here are some ideas:

- Identify people in the community who have been studying the Bible longer or more in-depth than others. These people might want to take the lead in identifying stories.
- The pastoral leaders might wish to take the lead and suggest four or more stories as likely candidates.
- Challenge family groups to pick up the conversations in their homes.
- Invite people to submit ideas of some verses or stories or general themes that seem to fit the congregation's story.
- Consider symbols or metaphors that stand at your center and then work on stories that help you live into these.
- Consider passages already important for some reason to people in the congregation:
 - Favorite passages people bring to the table
 - Passages linked to the name of the congregation
 - Passages linked to church windows or art
- Perhaps you might wish to work with a pre-determined list of popular biblical stories such as one found on the Book of Faith website** at www.bookoffaith.org

Discovering your one defining biblical story together might happen in a number of different ways. As a community, you might hear someone tell a story from the Bible as you have never heard it before. You might find yourself with a number of passages that people bring to the table.

Challenge four: Choosing one biblical story that both reflects the identity of the congregation and challenges the congregation to fulfill its mission might be very difficult. You might wish to choose two stories that help keep the conversation lively.

At some point in the process, you will have narrowed down the stories to a limited number. You might want to consider the criteria for deciding which passage might best be your defining biblical story. You might invite people to talk about these stories with one another asking the following questions:

- How is each story like or unlike your congregational story?
- Does this story identify you, challenge you, or both?
- In what ways might this story capture the imagination of the community?

At this point you have another option. Here the nature of the Bible and how it works to bring God's word to us comes into play. Individual stories or passages within the Bible often work on us in multiple ways, both encouraging and challenging, as both gospel and law. So sticking with one multi-dimensional, defining passage is often the best option.

Still, one of the gifts of how the Bible speaks to us is that we have four Gospels, rather than one; we are given multiple epistles, numerous laws, and both prophetic demands and promises. Often the Bible speaks to us most persuasively when we hear two passages in conversation with one another. We might find one story comforting and another discomfiting. One might speak to us of who we are, our current reality while another speaks a prophetic word to us, calling us to who we want to be.

Proceeding in either way brings its own gifts and challenges. This decision will have some effect on how you would design the following steps. For the sake of simplicity, the next steps are written with the first option in mind.

Step two: learn, live and share our biblical story

Guiding question: How might our biblical story gather us together and help to form us as a community of disciples called to mission in our community and world?

1. How does our story help us to hear God's call to us as individuals and as a congregation?
2. How does our story help us to deepen the practices of our faith?
3. What is God calling us to do through our story in our community and world?

The goal of step two

The goal of this step is to take extended time, as much as a year, to gather around and live deeply into your defining story. Journey with your chosen story allowing it to seep into the congregation and deepen your practice of discipleship, both individually and as a congregation. Follow the call of your biblical story, allowing it to inform how you listen to, speak with, and act on behalf of the broader community, both near and far.

Once you have chosen your defining Bible passage, post it, enter into it, study and engage it as a whole congregation. There is grace to be discovered in dwelling richly with one text over time. We do not often give ourselves the opportunity to have this experience. Part of the joy of this adventure into Scripture is engaging your passage deeply, faithfully, from a variety of perspectives, and in various contexts. Put your story at the center of your ongoing conversations. Be of good courage. Be playful and unleash your collective biblical imaginations. As a bonus you will discover new ways to engage other biblical texts in the future.

Challenges and possibilities

As with step one, certain challenges come to the fore in this step:

- One strong temptation in any engagement with the Bible is to allow the encounter to remain an internal congregational exercise in intellectual or spiritual enrichment (not bad things) without consideration of how the encounter impacts one's relationship with God's wider world. This step is intended to help the congregation discover its vocation outside the walls of the congregation and then act on that vocation.
- Another challenge is to put the call to speak and act in the proper context. When we act as instruments of God's mission, we inevitably discover God's presence and action precedes us.

- We are challenged to remember the importance of the balance of listening and speaking, giving and receiving. You might return to some of the first steps of listening to the community. Then ask such questions as, “How does our story help us to hear other people’s stories?” “How do the stories of the neighborhood sound when heard alongside of our biblical story?” “In seeking our own vocation do we learn about the gifts and assets already present in the community?”
- Finally we might be tempted into thinking the whole process described here as being two steps is really that lock/step. Avoiding thinking this is an exercise in “two steps to becoming a missional congregation” on the one hand while still pushing the missional significance of our scriptural engagement is an art, not a science. The practical question is how you can develop a creative plan that will let the congregation’s biblical challenge bear real fruit.

The final goal is about community relationship, biblical imagination, and the free reign of God in our lives.

Some ideas about how to study and engage your biblical story

- Have people design their own Bible study using a variety of devotional, historical, literary and theological questions. See the Book of Faith website for an extended description of each of these ways of asking questions: www.bookoffaith.org/biblemethods.html. These four methods can provide the structure for your extended congregational discussion.
- One way you can ask devotional questions is to return to the question of faith practices. Consider how your story interacts with each of the faith practices of living among God’s faithful people, hearing God’s word and sharing in the Lord’s Supper, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serving all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and striving for justice and peace in all the earth.
- One way you can ask historical questions is to set up a contest in which people find out as much as they can about when and where their story was written, who wrote it, and why it might have been written.
- One way you can ask literary questions is to ask a local English teacher to lead you in discovering not just what the story says but also how it says it.
- Another approach might be to learn from biblical story tellers how to memorize or act out the story. You might have different groups in the congregation do skits involving the story. You might ask how you would tell this story to a friend, to a child, to a person from a culture that is different than your own.
- One way you can ask theological questions is to have the pastoral leaders bring in issues of law and gospel, justification, vocation and other central Lutheran ideas as they relate to your story.
- Collect music (hymns and popular songs), film and art that express your story.
- Have people from different cultures give their take on the story.

- Design intergenerational events. Have older generations read the story to younger generations using children's Bibles.
- Have a youth retreat about the story and let the youth lead the congregation with their own set of questions.
- Sponsor small group meetings in homes, the church fellowship hall or other settings.
- Look at the story in work affinity groups such as those who work in education, health, food production or preparation, etc. Ask how the story is relevant to their vocations.
- Write your own congregational liturgy using your biblical story.
- Engage the full variety of gifts present in your midst.
- Make certain your biblical story leads to doing and interacting with your community.

Some questions to ask along the way

- Are we deepening our engagement with Scripture?
- Are we deepening our engagement with one another?
- Are we deepening our spiritual practices and being changed in the process?
- Are we better understanding and acting on our calling?
- Has our engagement with our biblical story compelled us to better serve our communities?
- Have we shared our faith motivation with the larger community?

A congregation should consider stretching the involvement with their biblical story longer than they might initially think – nine months to a year would not be too long. Some congregations carry their identification with a particular passage far into the future. Leave room for the Spirit and let the story claim you and form you into a community shaped by the word.

Helpful websites

- www.ELCA.org/FaithPractices
- www.bookoffaith.org/

For more information
Email faithpractices@elca.org