

## **BOOK OF FAITH: Open the Scriptures. Join the Conversation**

The vision for the Book of Faith initiative is this:

That the whole church become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, and empowered by the Word.

### **WHERE SHALL WE BEGIN?**

#### **An Assessment Resource for Use in Group Conversation**

This Assessment Resource was prepared by Norma Cook Everist in collaboration with professors of Christian Education at the eight seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the students and faculty of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. It was published in Diane Jacobson, Mark Allan Powell and Stan Olson, *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2008) 111-120. It has also been on the ELCA web site.

This assessment resource can be used for conversation about past and present practices as well as current needs. It can help the faith community envision an enrichment of engagement with the Bible in the future. Our primary place of encounter with Scripture is communal worship, and although that deserves ongoing conversation, it will not be the focus of this assessment. Because this assessment resource can be used in a variety of settings including congregations, schools, campus ministries, camps, etc, the term “Faith Community” is used to refer to any of these settings.

Responses are primarily for this faith community’s insight, wisdom and growth. An opportunity to share insights beyond this faith community is given at the end.

Use this assessment resource in connection with “Where Shall we Begin?” for Individuals” to gather a picture from the whole faith community. Discuss the individual responses and use this “Group Conversation” assessment resource in small groups, committees or council meetings. Be sure to specifically include people of all ages and of differing backgrounds, people new to the community and those here for many years, people deeply involved in activities and those on the edge. Reach out! This assessment resource is designed to be used in any and all groups in the faith community. It could be used all at once, or over a series of sessions, one or two sections at a time. Take time to listen to one another, to remember and affirm, to question and converse, and to dream of new possibilities.

#### **WE BEGIN BY REMEMBERING**

1. What opportunities to study the Bible together were offered in this faith community in past years? (Check all that apply)

- Sunday morning classes  for children  youth  adults  
 Vacation Bible School  
 Midweek classes  for children  youth  adults  
 Confirmation ministry and adult instruction using study of the Bible

- \_\_\_\_\_ Midweek gatherings of women and/or men
- \_\_\_\_\_ Long term Bible study series
- \_\_\_\_\_ Specific groups. What groups? \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Workplace study
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ecumenical groups
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other

(The following questions are for conversation. It would be helpful to record notes of your conversation on paper or electronically.)

2. As a faith community, share experiences of good Bible study, e.g. certain classes, teachers, confirmation ministry, at camp, on retreat, women and men's groups, prayer breakfasts:

3. Share with each other challenges or disappointments you have faced as individuals or as a faith community in past years in regard to study of the Bible:

4. Tell stories of how the Bible was used in times of transitions, crises or celebrations, and what that meant to you:

5. Thinking back over the years, what methods for studying the Bible were used in this faith community in years past? (Check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Teachers read the story as we listened.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pastors/teachers lead discussions about the Bible
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pastors/teachers gave lectures about the Bible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Lay leaders took turns leading the discussion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Few methods were used because we had very little Bible study at all.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Students filled in workbooks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Students memorized verses from the Bible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ People did dramatic readings and acted out Bible stories.
- \_\_\_\_\_ People used media (film, video, etc) to teach the Bible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other memories \_\_\_\_\_

6. Think of which of these experiences were unhelpful, boring, disruptive, or discouraging and which were helpful, engaging and transformative. **Why** were they this way?

7. Over the years what do you recall were the attitudes toward and impressions of the Bible in the life of this faith community?

## WHERE WE ARE NOW?

1. What various versions (including translations and paraphrases) of the Bible do people in your faith community use?

- New Revised Standard Version
- Revised Standard Version
- The Good News Bible
- King James Version
- New International Version
- The Jerusalem Bible
- The Message
- Electronic Version
- Other Versions: \_\_\_\_\_

Group activity and conversation: For a gathering of the whole or a committee, council, study group, etc, ask people to bring a Bible(s) they own. Put all the versions out on the table and explore the collection. Have people share how they use their Bible. Have them tell stories of when and how they acquired that particular Bible.

2. What opportunities for Bible reading and study does this faith community now offer?

- Sunday morning classes \_\_\_\_\_ for children \_\_\_\_\_ youth \_\_\_\_\_ adults
- Vacation Bible School
- Midweek classes \_\_\_\_\_ for children \_\_\_\_\_ youth \_\_\_\_\_ adults
- Confirmation ministry and adult instruction using study of the Bible
- Midweek gatherings of women and/or men
- Long term Bible study series
- Classes for specific groups What groups? \_\_\_\_\_
- Church Library with bible study resources
- Study with the Bible using the Internet
- "Lay School of Religion" model in the local area, conference, or synod
- Ecumenical groups
- Neighborhood or workplace Bible Study outreach
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. In addition to the reading of Scripture lessons and the proclamation of the Word in worship, what other methods of engagement with the Bible does your faith community currently use ? (Check all that apply)

- Presentation of the Bible through story, lecture, film, PowerPoint etc.
- Discussion of the meaning of Scripture in small groups.
- Forums that begin with global issues and topics from daily life and move into Scripture study
- The telling of Bible stories
- Study of Scripture in choir or worship planning groups.
- Memorization
- Use of art, crafts, music
- Dramatization of Bible stories

- Bible Study through e-mail, blog or website
- Spiritual direction and praying the Scriptures
- Family group Bible reading and devotions
- Pastoral care and peer support groups reading Scripture together
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. What sources from the world around (including “secular” and “Christian”) influence the way people in this faith community think about and interpret the Bible?

- Popular Books Examples: \_\_\_\_\_
- Radio broadcasts Examples: \_\_\_\_\_
- Friends, family and co-workers
- Television, movies and DVDs, Examples: \_\_\_\_\_
- Internet/Worldwide web
- Other? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What educational opportunities is this faith community currently offering those who are already teaching or who are preparing to teach the Bible?

- Growth in understanding and interpreting the Bible as a Book of Faith
- Growth in Lutheran Theology to open
- Growth in understanding stages of faith development through the life cycle
- Growth in skill in the use of a variety of bible study methods
- Growth in how to help people connect the Bible with their ministry in daily life
- Growth in sharing scriptures with people new to the faith
- Growth in how to help people connect Scripture with issues of justice
- Growth in use of the Bible in youth and adult catechism classes

6. What is the range of biblical interpretations and beliefs about the Bible that are present in this faith community? (Check all that are represented.)

- The Bible is inerrant and is to be read as literal truth.
- The Bible is the Word of God.
- The Bible’s historical accuracy is questionable in many places.
- The Bible is a guide book for moral living.
- The Bible tells us interesting and important stories about ancient people.
- The Bible is open to multiple interpretations and even contains ambiguities.
- The Bible is about the human predicament and God’s unconditional love.
- The Bible is mostly a book of simply interesting stories.
- Justification by grace through faith focuses engagement with the Bible.
- The Bible is the book of faith of the community, not simply for private use.
- Engagement with the Bible through study, prayer and conversation meets a deep spiritual hunger and a need for meaning in people’s lives.
- The Bible can help us be a faith community and the Body of Christ in the world.
- Engagement with the Scriptures helps the baptized carry out their vocations in daily life.
- Belief in the Bible leads to a prosperous life.
- Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection are central to engagement with the Scriptures

- The pastor alone determines the Bible truths.
  - Scripture interprets Scripture.
  - People of all ages and backgrounds, including children, can engage the Bible.
  - The Bible speaks directly about moral issues today.
  - The Bible predicts current events or events in the future.
  - The community hears the Bible as law and Gospel.
  - Studying the Bible as a book of faith equips people for discipleship.
  - Other interpretations and beliefs about the Bible present in this faith community: \_\_\_\_\_
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7. The following obstacles to engage with the Bible are found in this faith community: (Check all that apply.)

- Scripture is often taught and read in ways that are confusing or moralistic or simply boring.
- People, especially youth and young adults, have very few positive role models for significant engagement with Scripture.
- Bible study opportunity is offered but people simply won't come.
- Reading itself is a challenge for some people.
- People who are fundamentalists and literalists seem to be dominating how the Bible is interpreted and how Bible reading is seen in our society.
- People think that the Bible is an ancient text that really has nothing to say to people's real lives today.
- People are suspicious of and/or resistant to invitations to join Bible study.
- People hear theological language that they don't understand.
- People are just too busy to study the Bible.
- All the violence in the Bible is problematic.
- People see inconsistencies in the Bible and would like the Bible to give them simply answers to complex problems.

8. What Bible studies has the pastor(s) led in the past two years?

9. What Bible studies have other rostered leaders led in the past two years?

10. What Bible studies have lay people led in the past two years?

11. What does this faith community know about Biblical interpretation in other Christian denominations? How do other churches use the Bible? Are ecumenical studies offered in this community?

For group conversation:

Invite Christians of various denominations to gather to talk about the ways they use the Bible. Talk about differences or similarities in biblical interpretation within your faith

community and among the various church bodies and where such diversity of interpretations come from.

12. For further exploration if possible:

What do people in this faith community know about the sacred texts of other faiths, e.g. the Koran?

For possible conversation:

Invite people of varying religious faiths to gather to share central themes of their sacred texts. Discuss basic texts that are the center of faith with one another.

### **WHAT NEEDS DO WE HAVE?**

1. Is there a safe environment for people to talk about their varied, challenging, even contradictory views about what the Bible means? How could it be a place where people are able to be open and honest in asking questions and sharing doubts? What are these places? What is still needed? How can leaders help create such trustworthy places?

2. Are people able to use the Bible as a book of faith to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with members of their families? Their friends? People with whom they spend their week? With a stranger? What would further equip people to be able to do this?

3. Have people in this faith community experienced any of the following in regard to Bible reading and study? (Check any that apply.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Shyness or discomfort speaking using images, stories and themes from the Bible to speak about their faith

\_\_\_\_\_ Feelings of guilt or shame for past inability to read, understand or study the Bible.

\_\_\_\_\_ Inability or unwillingness to make reading and studying the Bible a priority in their lives.

What would help them move beyond these feelings?

4. Are people able to study the Bible in such a way that that they are able to relate it to their daily lives and daily ministries? What methods and resources would help them?

5. On a continuum, is this faith community basically energetic or apathetic about their engagement with the Bible?

Apathetic \_\_\_\_\_ Energetic

What would help this faith community become more excited about reading and studying the Bible?

6. Are people able to engage the Bible in ways that help them really be inside the texts, to hear, see, smell, and taste what is going on with God and God's people? What would help them engage the texts more fully?

7. Are people studying the Bible together in ways that strengthen and equip them for carrying out God's mission? What is needed to help them do so?

Group conversation: Create an open opportunity to talk in depth about what people believe is the calling of your faith community for mission in the world.

Some may express the need to share God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Some may talk about concern for the earth.

Some may emphasis care for the poor.

Some may want to be equipped more fully for working for justice and peace.

How does their study of Scripture foster these things and more? What is needed?

7. What is needed so that people in this faith community become more fully equipped to be teachers of the Bible?

\_\_\_\_\_ We have enough teachers now and they have sufficient teacher training.

\_\_\_\_\_ We have more teachers than we have people wanting to come to classes.

\_\_\_\_\_ We need more teachers for

\_\_\_\_\_ young children

\_\_\_\_\_ youth

\_\_\_\_\_ young adults

\_\_\_\_\_ middle and older adults

\_\_\_\_\_ Other groupings. What are they? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Our teachers need ongoing study in Bible and biblical interpretation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Our teachers need basic education in how to design a class and use various methods of engaging the Bible at various stages of faith formation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Parents, baptismal sponsors and grandparents need to be better equipped to share the Bible as a book of faith. .

Who is needed to teach the teachers? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other needs: \_\_\_\_\_

8. How might the pastor(s) role in teaching the Bible be enhanced?

9. What roles can other rostered leaders play in teaching the Bible?

10. How might a conference or cluster of congregations offer ongoing teaching education?

## **WHAT DO WE ENVISION?**

Group conversation: Give each person time to sit quietly and either write or think about dreams they have for the future:

What would this faith community look like if all members were reading the Bible daily and each person was part of a group Bible study on a regular basis?

Envision a faith community in which each person had numerous opportunities for Bible study at his or her life stage.

Take time to share those dreams with the group.

1. What would it take to have some of those dreams become reality? Discuss:

Why do we want to be engaged with the Bible?

Who will be involved? Who will be leaders?

What gifts do we have among us in this faith community?

What Bible study opportunities do we now have that we should affirm and support?

What new opportunities should we plan to start?

When should we start them?

Right away?

After some exploration and planning?

When and where should they be?

How will we do this?

How can we build on the gifts we now have among us in this faith community?

What educating and equipping will be necessary?

2. What difficulties do you envision?

\_\_\_\_\_ People will not take the time to come.

\_\_\_\_\_ People will disagree.

\_\_\_\_\_ People will say they will come and start and then will not continue.

\_\_\_\_\_ People will not trust each other enough to be able to acknowledge and discuss differences.

\_\_\_\_\_ People will become more divided over social issues based on different interpretations of the Bible.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Some ideas to respond to challenges and to put your visions into practice: (Be bold!)

A. "There are not enough people coming to our Sunday morning Bible study now"

Then, start two more. People may need a variety of methods, times, places.

B. "People don't find the Bible relevant to their daily lives."

Then, go to the places of daily ministry where people are. Walk with them, and listen to them express themselves in the "languages" of their workplace, e.g. "business," "engineering," "coffee shop," "medicine." Start with the questions people ask in the midst of their daily lives.

C. "We need to emphasize evangelism more than education"

Then, begin a Bible study in the neighborhood. Perhaps work together with ecumenical partners. Reach out to share the Good News and share the Scriptures to help people grow in that Good News.

D. "People would rather spend their time in leisure activities."

Then, use television, movies, novels, the internet as opportunities for discussion and engagement with biblical themes.

E. "People are so divided over social issues and it all ends up in disagreement over how we interpret Scripture."

Then, begin a class on various ways to interpret Scripture. Listen well to each other.



E. "We need Bible study for our youth more than we need it for adults."

Then, start classes for adults. Youth need to see adults questioning, studying and growing in their own faith, digging deeply into Scripture, and becoming strong in their ability to speak about God. Use these growing adults as mentors and guides and teachers of children and youth.

Role play your own worries and statements of resistance. Role play your own bold visions of what to do and where to start.

4. Envision specifically some areas on which to concentrate. Check the ones which would be helpful in your faith community. You may want to number them to prioritize your list

- Neighborhood and workplace
- Family settings
- Small groups
- Faith forums on ethical and justice issues
- Specific groups, e.g. church council, grief groups, Women of the ELCA, men's breakfast, marriage preparation.....
- Worship planning to become more aware of Scripture in the liturgy
- All meetings in the faith community (as a regular part of those meetings)
- Artistic forms of encountering Scripture (art, music, drama....)
- Congregational or inter-congregation Bible study through e-mail, blog or website
- Continuing education for more advanced study of scripture
- Synod, conference or cluster events
- Congregational or multi-congregational teacher education events
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. Graced by the Spirit, envision how this faith community might be described five years from now:

- People loving Scripture and hungry to hear and read more
- A consistency and faithfulness in continuing study
- People not debilitated but energized for mission and ministry
- People enriched and equipped for leadership
- Individuals using the Bible more regularly for personal prayer
- People sharing the Bible as book of faith across generations
- A safe environment where people are not fearful but open to various meanings in a scriptural text
- People able to use their biblical knowledge to question, learn, and teach
- A community able to claim and use their Lutheran theology
- A community able to fluently speak about its faith in Jesus Christ
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

It is hoped that this survey study has been helpful to your faith community. In order for the conversation to continue, you may post a summary of your work together on the website by doing the following.....