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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



Dear friend in Christ,

As we try to figure out more effective ways of engaging people in stewardship, discipleship, church life and a life of faith, we need to make sure the big picture is, in fact, the big picture. When we think about master narratives, cosmology, metaphysics, means vs. ends and ultimate concerns, what is it that we are finally asking people to align their lives with and why?

Science tells us that God has been at work on God's creation project – God's dream – for almost 14 billion years, with human beings and even the church arriving remarkably late on the scene. **(See the [Cosmic Calendar](#) for perspective.)** From the very beginning, God has been energizing the unfolding of reality as we know it, infusing matter with spirit or making spirit known through the physical. God's creation project is not fundamentally corrupt and profane (Genesis says it is very good!) so that our only hope is to escape from it. Instead, all of creation is sacred, sacramental, created in God's image and a means of God's grace. Jesus referred to this evolving reality as God's kingdom, and Jesus taught us to believe that the kingdom had already begun, and we would come to know it fully on earth as it is in heaven.

It seems to me then that God invites us to align our lives with the life-giving energy (love, grace, mercy) that is at the core of God's creation project and our very DNA. It turns out we are not passive recipients of a created order from long ago, but we are co-creators with God of God's new, emerging and better reality. Our mission, both individually and through the church, with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, is to join ourselves to God's mission through creation, to be a conduit for God's love to make the world a better place. This orientation for our lives is not just a way to live but a better way to live and for many the way to the best-possible life. It is the way of Jesus, relational, full of meaning and purpose, that leads to abundant life and the life that truly is life.

We are a church that is energized by lively engagement in our faith and life. Thank you for doing God's work with a faithful, generous heart!

Faithfully,

Steve Oelschlager
Stewardship Program Coordinator
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

I'm interested in hearing your thoughts. [Let me know](#) what you are thinking.

What is God up to?

Rob Bell – "Everything is Spiritual"

For an inspiring and entertaining perspective on God's master story using science and evolutionary theology, watch what hipster pastor, writer and speaker Rob Bell has to say in his presentation "[Everything is Spiritual.](#)"



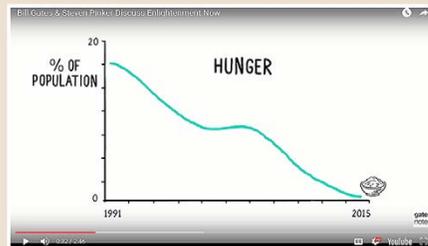
Bell goes back to the beginning of time and describes the unlikely progression of sub-atomic particles into matter and further into life and eventually human beings. Bell claims that the underlying energy of all creation has always been about attraction, relationship and connection (yes, love) for the purpose of forming something bigger and better, order out of chaos. Bell pulls in quotes from the early 20th-century Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin ("progress is the soul of the universe") as well as Martin Luther King Jr. ("the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice").

How might this all-encompassing perspective be a source of hope and inspiration for our stewardship and discipleship journeys? When we think about means vs. ends, how does this approach help us better see the difference between ourselves, the church and God's mission through creation?

The kingdom of God

How are things going?

How do you make sense of Jesus' pronouncement that the kingdom of God is near or at hand despite the abundance of problems in our world? Typically, we resolve this conundrum by explaining the kingdom has been inaugurated but not fulfilled or completed. Here is a different, and potentially more interesting, question: Is there reason to believe that things are moving in the right direction? Since Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, is there any noticeable improvement in our world?



In Steven Pinker's new book, "[Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress](#)," Pinker makes a compelling case that there never has been a better time to be alive as a human being. Pinker claims, among other things, the media's efficiency in feeding us negative news inclines us to not believe in the story of progress, what Pinker refers to as "the greatest story never told." The reality, Pinker writes, is that across a variety of measures, including life, health, sustenance, wealth, inequality, peace and safety, the world is dramatically changing for the better. For example, before 1800, over 90 percent of the world's population lived in extreme poverty (less than \$1.90/day) compared to less than 10 percent today.

You should know that Pinker writes the book as an atheist, always portraying religion and people of faith at their worst, with no room for God in the story. As a person of faith, I read the book as a testament to how God is at work in the world and how God uses people like you and me as stewards, disciples and leaders to transform the world. At their best, people of faith and religion do make a positive difference! Bill Gates, a voracious reader, has called this book his all-time favorite because of its hopeful message. [Watch Gates and Pinker discuss the book.](#)

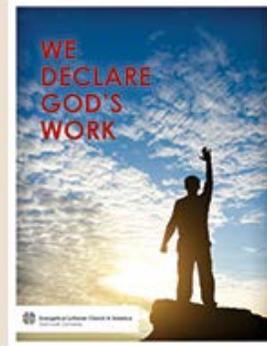
Telling stories about the reign of God

The ministry of mission interpretation

In a recent conversation with my family around the dinner table, I asked how they defined progress. I heard responses like, "continuing to improve," "getting there," "moving forward,"

“steps to achieve a goal,” “closer to completion” and “quality over quantity.” Progress.

There are many stories in our church that tell of the progress we make moving forward with God’s mission in the world, the steps we take together to improve our world. Stories that tell of enabling 357 congregations to renew their ministries and reach out to their surrounding communities. Stories of 230 missionaries in over 48 countries. Stories of our Young Adults in Global Mission serving in 11 countries. Stories of growing and supporting leaders in our seven seminaries and 26 colleges and universities. And stories about our social ministry organizations, such as Lutheran Services in America, that affect the lives of 1 in 50 Americans. Stories of the positive transformation of lives.



Mission interpreters regularly share the stories of this progress with their congregations. These are the stories that help bring people in our pews into relationship with those we accompany in mission. The stories that share the impact our work together, as the church, has around the globe. The stories that speak to God’s goodness as God works with us and through us to make our world a better place for all. If you’d like more information on the ELCA Mission Interpretation ministry, please contact [Denise Ballou](#).

Other items of interest

Resources, learning opportunities and more

- StewardCast 2018 features presentations on stewardship learnings about congregational vitality and leadership. The event was live streamed in March, but you can [watch a recording](#).
- The ELCA has reached a preferred vendor agreement with Tithe.ly, a company that offers mobile and online tools to enhance financial giving to ELCA congregations and ministries.

In response to inquiries and requests from congregations, the ELCA churchwide organization has sought new working relationships with companies that serve ELCA congregations. Preferred vendor agreements with a few select companies are being pursued to enhance operating efficiency, leadership effectiveness, congregational vitality and financial sustainability. Special pricing, communications and promotions will accompany each agreement.

As a national organization working with many congregations and denominations, Tithe.ly offers a cost-effective way to increase congregational giving. Congregations that sign-up with Tithe.ly will save more than 25 percent off the vendor’s regular processing fees. [Read more](#).

- The latest issue of Giving Magazine, the annual publication of the Ecumenical Stewardship Center, is now available. In the front half of the magazine, you’ll find essays that provide thoughtful reflections about courageous generosity. The back half contains articles with practical applications for various types of giving and across generations. New this year are Bright Spot stories meant to provide sparks of inspiration. The stewardship emphasis in the center section invites you to talk with the members of your faith community about their commitments to generosity. [Download the free issue](#).
- Currents in Theology and Mission is an online theological journal of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary. The April issue is all about stewardship and what stewardship looks like through fresh lenses. [Read this issue of Currents](#).
- [Watch](#) Scott Harrison, founder and CEO of charity: water, give the 2018 Thomas H. Lake Lecture at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Harrison asks: How effective is our charitable giving? Is it efficient? Does it even make a difference anymore?

During the lecture, Harrison shares his story of rediscovering his lost faith that brought him face-to-face with the global water crisis. He tells how he leveraged technology and innovation to reinvent

charity and build America's largest private funder of international water programming and along the way transformed the traditional form of charity.

Sayings, quotes, thoughts

Franklin D. Roosevelt

"The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Biblical foundations

Jeremiah 1:5-10 (translation from The Message)

"Before I shaped you in the womb,
I knew all about you.
Before you saw the light of day,
I had holy plans for you:
A prophet to the nations—
that's what I had in mind for you."

But I said, "Hold it, Master God! Look at me.
I don't know anything. I'm only a boy!"

God told me, "Don't say, 'I'm only a boy.'
I'll tell you where to go and you'll go there.
I'll tell you what to say and you'll say it.
Don't be afraid of a soul.
I'll be right there, looking after you."
God's Decree.

God reached out, touched my mouth, and said,
"Look! I've just put my words in your mouth—hand-delivered!
See what I've done? I've given you a job to do
among nations and governments—a red-letter day!
Your job is to pull up and tear down,
take apart and demolish,
And then start over,
building and planting."

Upcoming events (watch the [calendar file](#) for details)

May 17

stewardTalk

3 p.m. Central at 877-820-7831 and participant code 6314685#

June 27 – July 1

Houston, Texas

ELCA Youth Gathering

July 25-27

Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

Rethinking Stewardship

Aug. 16-19

Chicago, Ill.

Mission Interpreter Coordinator Conference

Sept. 24-26
St. Louis, Mo.
Stewardship Kaleidoscope

[Full calendar](#) | Subscribe to [Our Calendar File](#)

Find ELCA stewardship resources online



We'd love to hear from you! Have a link or idea you want to share in our next issue? Email stewardnet@elca.org.

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