



We Are Church, We Are Called

50•40•10

Proclaiming • Reforming • Celebrating

WOMEN'S ORDINATION ANNIVERSARIES BIBLE STUDIES



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

ELCA.org/50yearsfordainedwomen

SESSION 1 • LEADERSHIP

Introductory Leader Material:

*In 2020, we mark 50 years of ordaining women into ministry in the ELCA and its predecessor bodies. Part of this celebration includes reflecting in community on the Word that all are called to proclaim in the expressions of our church. This Bible Study will include several examples of women's leadership in the Word, centering around the themes of **proclaiming, reforming, and celebrating**. As we mark this anniversary of women in ordained ministry, we pray for the Holy Spirit's call to awaken us once more to God's goodness and grace in ourselves and in our world.*

In this first session, we will explore the concept of leadership within the three themes of proclamation, reform, and celebration. Importantly, leadership in the ELCA is not exclusively for the ordained. The health of the church depends on the active leadership of laypeople in every community of faith. And, it is often those not sanctioned by the institution who lead it toward needed reform. But the milestone of the ordination of women into ministry is important because it demonstrates the ELCA's willingness to welcome the leadership of women, signals the recognition of the value of women's institutional leadership for the whole church, and invites a broader engagement with the concept of leadership.

Study:

Opening Hymn: ELW #659 *Will You Let Me Be Your Servant*
Sing the hymn or read the first verse together:

Will you let me be your servant,
Let me be as Christ to you?
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant, too.

- What are qualities that you value in a leader?
- Do those qualities apply to every situation, or do different situations call for different types of leadership?

Read Ruth 3

In the book of Ruth, Naomi takes the lead in providing for herself and her daughter-in-law in ways that fit her situation. As a young bride Naomi and her husband had fled famine in Israel and settled in the land of Moab. Later, after her husband and their two sons died, Naomi returned home to Bethlehem in Israel. Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law, accompanied her. As single women in a patriarchal society, Ruth and Naomi needed to be adaptive and inventive in finding ways to provide for themselves.

- What do Naomi and Ruth ask Boaz to do?
- For a woman to show up at the threshing floor in the middle of the night would have been scandalous in Ruth and Naomi's patriarchal society. Think and/or share about a time in your own lifetime when a scandalous decision might have been the best way forward.

Boaz did, indeed, carry out the obligations of the next-of-kin and marry Ruth. Naomi and Ruth gained more certain lives. The family that they began together several generations later grew to include David, the great king of Israel.

For reflection or discussion:

- In what ways is Naomi a leader?
- What situations exist in your own community that might need inventive and adaptive responses?

Consider a time when you were called upon to lead. What were you able to accomplish? What limited you? What surprised you? Who helped you and what did you learn? How did you grow from the experience? There are many ideas of what makes a “good leader.” Voices from business, theology, the military, and the academy all have wrestled with this idea, in part because the future success of their groups depends on it.¹ Sometimes the focus has been on characteristics or traits of leaders themselves, claiming that leaders look or sound a certain way. At other times, the emphasis has been on behaviors; leaders didn’t all need to look alike, but they all acted in certain ways.

Recent work has emphasized the idea of “adaptive leaders” who are always learning and responding to their organization, identifying its challenges and opportunities, and working to remove obstacles and empower and motivate members so that the group advances. Rather than individuals conforming to fit a prescribed role, this understanding of leadership is local, flexible, focused on awareness, and recognized in its results. As we mark the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women, the ELCA is a rapidly changing church in a rapidly changing world. Recognizing the ways that God has faithfully reformed us, we explore together what good leadership means in this time and place.

- When have you experienced adaptive leadership? Or, can you think of a time when adaptive and flexible leadership would have been helpful?
- Who are the “learning leaders” in your local congregation or organization?

The themes of proclaiming, reforming, and celebrating invite us to consider an expansive understanding of leadership, exploring how these roles function as aspects of leadership in our church. In the next three sessions, we will take each of them in turn, exploring biblical examples of leadership that proclaims, reforms, and celebrates.

By way of introduction, we briefly summarize themes here.

PROCLAIMING

The people of God depended on the gift of God’s Word, delivered by those called to proclaim. Lutherans have strongly emphasized proclamation, often experienced in preaching that reveals our brokenness, reminds us of God’s promises, and raises us to new life. Proclamation also extends beyond preaching to liturgy, sacraments, and group reflection on the Word.

- What role does proclamation play in your community? Who are your proclaiming leaders?

¹ For a history of the study of leadership, see Bernard M. Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 4th edition (New York: Free Press, 2008), 1-26.

REFORMING

As a Reformation church, the ELCA values change for the sake of the gospel and our neighbor. We trust that the Spirit is always reforming us, removing barriers among us, and creating new ways of embodying God's love in the world. This is not about perfection, but about faithfulness. Reforming leaders show us what we do not yet see, and call us to action.

- What important reforms have taken place in your congregation or organization?
How have leaders played a role in that reform?

CELEBRATING

The biblical texts are full of voices singing God's praises and telling stories of God's mighty acts. We echo many of these texts in weekly worship, recounting God's faithfulness and creativity, reminding one another of God's promises, and boldly celebrating God's promised future. Our celebrations of God's goodness are sung in the company of thousands, and whispered at bedsides. Our celebrations remind us of all that God has done, and teach us to look to the future with hope.

- What is there to celebrate in your community? Who are the leaders who remind you of God's amazing grace?

Listening to God and to one another, we will grow in our understanding of how God has led God's people. We do this work together in thanksgiving for 50 years of women being ordained in the ELCA, and in sure and certain hope for God's future.

Closing prayer:

Loving God, you equip your children for service in your church and the world. Strengthen us to lead in ways that are faithful and adaptive, and teach us to value the gifts of all. Amen.

SESSION 2 • PROCLAIMING: HARD WORDS, JOYFUL WORDS, FAITHFUL WITNESS

Introductory Leader Notes:

In this session we will look at two women whose proclamation can be hard to hear but for very different reasons. The prophet Huldah prophesies at the same time as Jeremiah and, much like her better known counterpart, has a word of judgment to proclaim. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene has the joyful task of being the first to proclaim the news of the risen Christ. However, throughout the centuries, some have tried to silence her voice. Both of these women participate in the joy and challenge of proclaiming as they speak and act both law and gospel. They challenge us to do the same.

Study:

Opening Hymn: ELW # 510 *Word of God, Come Down on Earth*

Sing the hymn or read the first verse together:

Word of God, come down on earth,
living rain from heav'n descending;
Touch our hearts and bring to birth
faith and hope and love unending.
Word almighty we revere you;
Word made flesh we long to hear you.

“That was a lot harder than I thought it would be,” the young person said. They had just preached their first sermon. It wasn't the public speaking that troubled them—they did that all the time—it was the weight of proclaiming. It was the weight of declaring and announcing something about God and for God. While the experience had been a joyful one, it was also one that weighed heavy on their shoulders.

Speaking about and for God nearly always includes these two different aspects. Sometimes the words themselves are heavy because they cut so close to our fragile human hearts or because they call us to account. Sometimes the words are heavy simply because of the enormity of the task. At the same time, it is also a joy to proclaim that in the face of our human brokenness and sinfulness, God is faithful.

For discussion or reflection:

- Is there a time when you have experienced God's word as something heavy or challenging? A time when you experienced it as joy filled?

According to 2 Kings, in the mid-7th century BCE King Josiah of Judah found himself in need of someone to speak for God, and he sought out the counsel of the prophet Huldah. Huldah found herself with a heavy word to speak.

Read 2 Kings 22:1-20

Huldah's task was to assure the temple officials and the king that the scroll they had found in the temple was the book of the Law, which likely contained the central parts of the biblical book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy emphasizes that Judah's God was the only God worthy of their worship and instructs the people to support all in their midst, including those who were pushed to the margins of society—the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner.

The problem was that this was not what Judah's worship life looked like. Huldah, in her role as a prophet, proclaimed that this was indeed the book of the law. King Josiah was correct to repent and lead the people in a different direction. What a joyful task to announce that the scroll contained instruction from God! What a heavy word to proclaim that this instruction showed that the people of Judah were not living up to their end of their relationship with God!

- What hard words is the church called to proclaim today?
- What joyful words is the church called to proclaim today?

Such words continue to be proclaimed in our own time and place. It remains a heavy task to proclaim that we continue to place our hearts and lives before things that are not God and that will not bring us life like money, achievement, or ambition. Likewise, we continue to marginalize others on the basis of race, gender, class, creed, and many other things. Yet it also remains a joy to proclaim a faithful God who continues to lead us and speak to and through us.

Read John 20:11-18

In this resurrection account, Jesus gives Mary Magdalene the task of proclaiming the good news. The first witness of the risen Jesus, she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." In her proclamation, she becomes the apostle to the apostles, the first to be sent to witness that Jesus lives. Here, proclamation is not a lengthy and complicated sermon, but a message delivered from one member of the community to another.

- Who first witnessed to you about the good news of Jesus? How have you passed this witness on to others?
- What are different ways that the church follows in Mary's footsteps in proclaiming the resurrection?

Mary's task and message are clear, but the outcome is complicated. Her first proclamation of the empty tomb in v. 2 is effective; it sends Peter and the other disciple running to see what has happened. However, after hearing Mary's proclamation in v. 18 that she has seen the Lord, the disciples are found locked away in fear when Jesus arrives. They hear Mary's proclamation, but it does not have the desired effect. Luke's account is more direct; in Luke 24:11, the disciples dismiss the women's words about Jesus as "an idle tale."

The call to proclaim the good news is challenging, and the results are often mixed. Even when we are clear in our message, its reception is not under our control. We are often disappointed and frustrated by the ways we are misinterpreted or misrepresented.

History and tradition have not focused primarily on Mary's preaching. Rather, the emphasis has been on Mary's supposed sinful "past," a characterization that relies on a conflation of depictions of women in the Gospels, namely the Gospel of Luke. Mary, identified in Luke 8:1-3 as a follower of Jesus of whom seven demons had gone out, is understood to be the sinful woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7:36-50. This interpretation does not withstand biblical scrutiny, but it has remained strong in popular imagination, overshadowing John's depiction of Mary as first witness to the resurrection. In iconography, Mary Magdalene is often pictured with a red egg, a symbol of her proclamation of the resurrection. Our practice of dyeing eggs bright colors at Easter echoes this tradition. Despite the noise that surrounds Mary Magdalene in history and church tradition, the egg she prominently displays continues to proclaim that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is risen. Our task is the same. Faithfulness to the Word, rather than concern for the outcome, is the focus of our efforts to proclaim.

- What obstacles and distractions have you faced in proclaiming the good news?

Eventually, the disciples passed on what they learned from Mary, proclaiming the good news down through the generations. We are the current stewards of this proclamation, responsible for passing it to those who come after us.

Closing prayer:

Risen Savior, you have given us words to speak. Some of these words are heavy. Some are joyful. All of them point to you, the one who rose from the grave to give us new life. Give us confidence to share this good news. Amen.

Session 3 • Reforming: Holy Interruptions and Being Counted

Introductory Leader Material:

The ELCA traces its lineage to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, a time of great change within the Christian church and the broader society. Because so much changed so quickly during the Reformation, we sometimes think of reform movements as attempting such complete and radical change. In this session we explore interruptions and exceptions that also lead to reform and change. In the book of Numbers, five sisters ask for an exception to the inheritance laws so that their family will not lose their land. The exception is granted for them and for other women in similar situations. In the Gospel of Matthew a woman interrupts a dinner party to anoint Jesus with expensive ointment. In so doing, she calls those gathered to reform their hearts and to refocus on what is most important—Jesus and his life poured out for all.

Study:

Hymn: ELW #723 *Canticle of the Turning*

Sing together or read the first verse together:

My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great,
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight, and my weakness you did not spurn,
So from east to west shall my name be blest.
Could the world be about to turn?

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

- Is there a time in your life when you felt like you weren't fully seen or your gifts and abilities were discounted? What did that feel like? What was your response?

Read Numbers 27:1-11

In Israelite inheritance practice, property was handed down from father to son upon the father's death. However, in the Zelophehad family, there are no sons, and the family stands to lose their land. So Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah make a request. When the women ask to inherit land, they think that they are asking for an exception to regular practice in which only sons could inherit land. They actually ask for something much bigger. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah ask to be counted. In a society where only men are counted when it comes to property and inheritance, these women ask to be numbered and counted—if only for a generation.

Much of the book of Numbers is about numbering people. At the beginning all the people are numbered in a census and then struggle—often without succeeding—to live according to God's instructions and commands. In chapter 26 the first generation has died out, and a new census is undertaken to number the next, more faithful, generation. The story of these five sisters occurs in this second part of the book.

So many of our stories—be they the stories of faith within the pages of Scripture or the stories of our families and our nations—are about being counted. When God said yes to the sisters, allowing them to inherit land in place of sons who did not exist, God was engaged in some holy counting. The sisters became people who were counted, and more than that they became people who, themselves, counted. They became people who were fully seen in the community, able to exercise the rights and privileges therein.

- Who in our world is not counted or fully seen? Who in your community is not counted or fully seen? Who in the church is not counted or fully seen?
- What prevents these people from being counted or fully seen?

The counting of the five sisters is a holy numbering, a statement of worth and belonging. The exception granted them may seem like table scraps today, when we might expect a clear statement about gender equity, but counting of these women interrupted a long-standing practice and marked the beginning of reform.

Read Matthew 26:6-13

In this story of the woman who anoints Jesus, the dinner scene is interrupted by her dramatic act. In this Gospel, she is not identified by name or motivation; she simply appears. She interrupts social protocols and, perhaps, important business, changing the focus. Her interruption, while irritating to the disciples, is seen by Jesus as holy work. It is so holy that Jesus says in v. 31 that her act will be recounted every time the good news is proclaimed.

- What uncomfortable interruptions have you experienced? What truths have they told?

Despite Jesus' words, this unnamed woman's actions have not been a dominant part of the proclamation of the gospel. She has remained a holy interruption, pointing to the painful inevitability that Jesus will die. Her acknowledgment of his impending crucifixion tells the truth about what lies ahead, not just for Jesus, but for all who follow him. Our story of God is not one of glory, comfortable with social convention, but a disruptive story that drives to the cross.

This is not disruption for the sake of disruption. It is holy interruption, born of love and grief, for the sake of the truth. It is compassion and kindness in the face of suffering. It is done to remind those in attendance, and we who read now, of the cost of God's love for the world in Jesus, and our call to live differently as a result.

- How can the church be a holy interruption in a world distracted by power and convention?

Reform movements often start with a question, a small request, or the desire for an exception to be made. Movements toward reform often interrupt well-established rules and accepted behaviors. They create uncomfortable silences as people pause to revisit their assumptions, face difficult truths, and undergo change. They make space for the good news to be proclaimed, for the holy acts of the unnamed to be remembered, and for new voices to be counted.

Closing prayer:

Living God, you formed us from the dust of the earth. Reform our hearts, reform our lives, reform our communities so that we may reflect your love and your justice in the world. Amen.

SESSION 4 • CELEBRATING: MOURNING AND DANCING, TELLING THE STORY

Introductory Leader Material:

Fifty years of ordaining women in the ELCA and its predecessor bodies is surely a cause for celebration. In this session we look at celebration in several ways. The Old Testament section begins with a look at celebrants who lead in times of sorrow. It may seem strange to begin a session on celebration by considering mourners, but God calls servants to lead the worshiping community in all circumstances. We honor those who lead the community in prayer during times of joy and sadness, those who baptize and preside at the table, and those who speak God's promises at the time of death. In the New Testament, we find two women who celebrate by telling the story of God's saving acts in Jesus. These women call all of us to join in celebrating God's work in the world as we participate in it.

Opening Hymn: ELW #689 *Praise and Thanksgiving*

Sing the hymn or read the first two verses together:

Praise and thanksgiving, God, we would offer
for all things living, you have made good;
harvest of sown fields, fruits of the orchard,
hay from the mown fields, blossom and wood.

God bless the labor we bring to serve you,
that with our neighbor we may be fed.
Sowing or tilling, we would work with you,
harvesting, milling for daily bread.

Question for Discussion or Reflection:

- When and what have you mourned with others in your congregation? When and what have you celebrated?

In Psalm 30 we read the prayer, “[Oh LORD], you have turned my mourning into dancing!” Within each of our lives are seasons of both sorrow and joy. Likewise, the people of Christ gather together in all these times—to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. The person who leads such gatherings can be called a celebrant.

In ancient Israel the celebrants who led public mourning were groups of women. They would weep, wail, and sing laments as they guided the people in expressing grief and despair as part of their mourning process. In the book of Jeremiah such women are called “wise” or “skilled.” They knew the songs and the actions of mourning and were able to adapt them for each new situation.

Read Jeremiah 9:17-22

The people of Jerusalem have walked away from God and justice, and disaster looms. God has given the prophet Jeremiah a word of judgment to speak against the people, so Jeremiah calls the

celebrants to lead what is essentially a funeral for the city of Jerusalem. As with most funerals, there are many stories to be shared, stories of good times long remembered, and of failure and regret. As celebrants, the wailing women gather all these stories together. Earlier in chapter 9, Jeremiah weeps for the people as well (Jeremiah 9:1-3). Old Testament scholar L. Juliana Claassens has suggested that because the prophet Jeremiah prophesies in the name of God, we might understand God to be weeping in these verses as well.² God's dear people have wandered away and are in trouble. With tears full of love, God weeps. God will act, but first God weeps. So, these celebrants—these wise, wailing women—join their tears with God's tears.

- For what in our world do you think God weeps?
- Who are the wise women in your life who weep God's tears and lead God's people in public mourning?

Read Exodus 15:20-21

As the word suggests, celebrants lead not only in times of sorrow but also, of course, in times of celebration as well. In this passage, Miriam's voice joins that of her brother Moses. Although her song is shorter and less detailed, Miriam's voice rings out. She emphasizes what they are celebrating: God has saved them! The voices of Miriam and Moses are stronger together, as voices always are. Our celebrations are more joyful when their leaders include all the unique and varied people whom God has made.

People in the 1970s and even 1980s must have been startled to see women as celebrants in Lutheran congregations—leading mourning at funerals, celebrating at weddings and festivals, presiding at the table. We can look back at 50 years of women faithfully serving as pastors and see the gifts that these celebrants have brought to our communities. Even as we look backward, we also look forward, knowing that, sadly, some people are still surprised to see a woman as celebrant. In some parts of the Lutheran communion women are still unable to answer the call to preside at the table. We know, too, that the same surprise and resistance continues for other servant leaders in our midst. When we expect or insist that the voices or gender identity or sexuality or political views or race of the celebrants in our midst be like our own—or like those whom we have known in the past—we miss out on the many “Miriams” God calls to lead in our celebration.

- Who are the “Miriams” missing from the church today?

In the New Testament, we encounter two more “Miriams.” One of these women is of advanced age; the other, we presume, is young. Neither of these extremes tends to coincide with worldly power. Both of these women celebrate God's actions in the promise and presence of the infant Jesus. Their celebrations point us to the nature of God's work in the world, and the ways we benefit and participate.

² L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Mother, Mourner, Midwife: Reimagining God's Delivering Presence in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 30-31.

Read Luke 1:46-55

Mary's lengthy song is recorded first. Celebrating with Elizabeth both of their pregnancies, Mary "magnifies" the Lord, increasing the esteem of God's name through recounting God's actions. Part of celebrating is telling the stories of what God has done. We do this in the eucharistic prayer during the communion celebration, recounting God's saving acts throughout history. Celebrating these deeds amplifies God's presence and activity, bringing them to the forefront.

- What acts of God need to be "magnified" or celebrated in your life or your community?

Read Luke 2:36-38

After Jesus is born, he is presented in the temple in Jerusalem. Anna the prophet is there, having spent many of her 84 years focused on God. Like Moses' and Miriam's voices, Anna's and Simeon's voices join in celebration of what God is doing in Jesus. In her older age, with little to distract her, Anna has time and energy to devote to celebrating God's action, telling everyone she encounters.

- Whose voices of celebration lead your families and communities?
- These voices call us to consider what we celebrate about God. It's not the shiny, the new, the expensive, or the successful. What Mary and Anna celebrate about God is meeting the needs of others, providing a hopeful future, recognizing the labor of those who are humble, and keeping promises. Mary, in particular, not only praises this consistent behavior of God throughout the generations, but also celebrates her own role in this work. God invites her, and us, to participate in God making all things new. Celebrating reminds us of this calling and inspires our continued participation.
- How is the church called in this time and place to participate in God's work (meeting the needs of others, recognizing the labor of those who are humble)?
- How can your community celebrate God in a way that empowers others?

Closing Prayer:

Holy Servant, you have called us to lead and serve in many ways. Teach us to celebrate your work in our lives and in our world, and empower our leadership and service to others. Amen.

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