

# Summary Report for *Lutheran Partners* Focus Groups

*ELCA Research and Evaluation*

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*(For an executive summary, see page 5.)*

## **Background**

Based on the March 2005 *Lutheran Partners* Survey report, *Lutheran Partners* of Vocation and Education determined a need for additional information regarding the content of the magazine, more specifically, how the magazine is read and suggestions for future authors, themes and formats.

Three focus groups were conducted in Chicago, Denver and Harrisburg.<sup>1</sup> The Chicago group was comprised of male clergy. Most participants in the group were Caucasian and one African. In the Denver group, there was a good mix of younger and older clergy with one AIM. The group in Harrisburg consisted mostly of male clergy, one female, with two younger pastors. At the conclusion of each focus group, participants were given a handout listing future topics for *Lutheran Partners*. Participants were asked to provide their ideas about the following: preaching, scripture and theology, Lutheran identity, evangelism, parish ministry models, Christian education, leadership and youth ministry (resources, confirmation programs, youth ministry in small congregations). These ideas have been included in the Appendix.

The summary of the focus groups follow. Overall responses are bolded, with detailed responses in the following paragraphs.

## **The Look of *Lutheran Partners***

**In general, most participants agreed that the cover of the magazine catches their attention. With that in mind, they suggested changing the cover of *Lutheran Partners*.**

Some participants in the groups suggested that *Lutheran Partners* change the cover to make it look more attractive, more professional. Most participants agreed that the current version of *Lutheran Partners* looks free. It needs to stand out from the rest of the publications they receive. Using bright colors on the outside yet keeping the inside the same was a suggestion from several participants. Others felt *Lutheran Partners* should not change the graphics, and liked the fact that it was a “humble yet confident” publication. They requested more text and substance rather than fancy graphics or glossy pages. Many participants would question the use of churchwide money if the magazine had a lot of glossy color photos. Others do not trust “slick” presentations.

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<sup>1</sup> Focus groups were conducted by Kenneth Inskeep, Rebecca Sims, and Jacqueline Skrypek.

## **How *Lutheran Partners* is Read**

**Overall, most participants go directly to Steve McKinley's column and skim the rest of the magazine. Others indicated that Letters and advertising pique their interest.**

When asked "How do you read *Lutheran Partners*?" most participants said they go directly to Steve McKinley's column, Pastor Loci, and then skim the rest of the magazine or read it when they get a chance. Participants reported liking McKinley's column because the column is well-written, enjoyable to read, comforting and has a certain charm. Others reported saying that the column is so interesting because he "gets inside your head" and writes about their experience in the parish. And yet, another participant dubbed him "a reflective practitioner." One younger pastor indicated his lack of interest in McKinley's column. Being relatively new to the roster, he could not relate to the stories and experiences discussed in the column. He indicated that McKinley spoke to those who had seen and experienced the changes in the church as he/McKinley did. Steve McKinley spoke to folks who had been in the parish for a while.

Participants also read Letters (to the editor) to better understand the scope of opinion in the church and to become more aware of different issues before the church. Letters were also read as a summary if the previous issue was not read. Several participants talked about the pile of mail that comes in and the fact that they do not have time to read everything. To these participants, *Lutheran Partners* was not a high priority.

There was some discussion about the advertising. Some participants read the ads for continuing education opportunities and for future books they can read. One participant was surprised that there were not more Augsburg Fortress ads in the magazine.

Additional sections that participants read were Partners Review, specifically the book reviews and Some Words About.

There was some discussion about the content of the articles. One participant commented that the strength of the articles has to do with their ability to target key issues in the church. Another participant indicated they "like when the magazine affects what's going on with me or the church."

## **Ideas for New Authors/How to Replace Steve McKinley**

**There was much disappointment within the groups when they were told of Steve McKinley's retirement. A few participants indicated that they would stop reading *Lutheran Partners*, but many provided ideas and suggestions for future columns.**

Most of the participants expressed regret at the retirement of Steve McKinley. Some discussion followed on how he might be replaced or who might replace him. One participant pointed out that for a publication that goes to 16,000 to 17,000 rostered leaders, there is no regular communication from the Presiding Bishop. Most participants agreed that some communication from the Presiding Bishop within *Lutheran Partners*

would be encouraging. One participant suggested the Presiding Bishop could invite folks into a thematic discussion. Participants were divided on whether there should be one consistent voice or have two pastors writing from different perspectives, i.e., young/old, male/female, traditional/non-traditional. Other participants suggested reading about experiences from a first call pastor in a solo setting and a first call pastor in a staff setting would be interesting. Others would like to hear from pastors serving in the inner city, the suburbs, or in prison ministries. Some participants indicated that *Lutheran Partners* should have a seminary voice. Other participants felt it would be helpful to get viewpoints outside of Lutheranism. They would like to see articles from different perspectives with contributions from different denominations.

The question of how *Lutheran Partners* solicits articles was raised in discussion. Each publication cycle could rotate to different seminaries, synods or regions. One participant thought articles from persons of color in ministry would be interesting. Another participant used the example of a synod publication, "Taking the Lead," which included articles submitted by different people in the synod. They like to have a personal connection and often look through *Lutheran Partners* to see if they know anyone who has written an article or letter. They suggested having one consistent voice (such as McKinley) and varying the others.

### ***Lutheran Partners On-Line***

**Most participants had not used the on-line version of *Lutheran Partners*. Those that did visit *Lutheran Partners* on-line requested a search function within the *Lutheran Partners* site to find articles in past issues.**

While most participants did not visit *Lutheran Partners* on-line, those participants that did visit the on-line version liked it; however, one participant thought it was fairly weak and passive, but good as an archive for looking up particular articles. One participant expressed a desire for the ability to download "hot" topic articles. As for articles about computer technology in the parish, some participants appreciated a list of resources in a previous issue. Another participant suggested an article on technology in worship and what it means from different points of view.

### **The Future of *Lutheran Partners***

**All participants agreed that *Lutheran Partners* is the only professional church workers' magazine in the ELCA and most of the participants would miss it if it were to disappear.**

While some participants think that *Lutheran Partners* is a "neat" magazine and would miss it if it did not arrive, others stated that they would not subscribe or would not miss the magazine. Still others felt that while *Lutheran Partners* is well-written, it should take a few more risks, be less constrained, and allow for more reaction from readers. They indicated that *Lutheran Partners* is not very edgy. They suggested cutting-edge topics on

ethics and social justice issues. Legal issues were another topic that most of the participants have had to confront in their ministry.

One participant did request that *Lutheran Partners* send a “welcome card” to those new in the ministry. Participants new to the ministry recalled first getting *Lutheran Partners* and not knowing why.

### **Additional Ideas for *Lutheran Partners* Magazine**

**Participants willingly gave suggestions for what kinds of topics or articles they would like to see in the magazine. Many participants desired articles on preaching. Others want to be stretched as a pastor, develop new ways of thinking and maintain their spiritual health. Still, other participants suggested having articles that relate to the advertising in the magazine. And, some requested more articles on personal experience and the demographics of the church.**

Many participants expressed an interest in preaching assistance from *Lutheran Partners*. Suggestions for articles include fresh ideas for preaching and an exegesis of a particular text with a full sermon. This would be especially useful for festivals when they have to preach on the same text year after year. Another suggestion was to provide an overview of the Gospel at the beginning of the church year. One individual suggested worship and music resources for planning a worship service, such as liturgical arts and hymn selection. Another participant requested a review of contemporary music. Some participants suggested a compendium of resources that listed good websites, AV resources, print resources, etc. This would help them manage the available resources.

Participants desired more articles on their own spiritual health. They also expressed a desire for articles with practical issues in parish ministry. For example, articles on how to take better care of people, how to deal with conflict, or how to minister to someone with a Down’s Syndrome child, infertility, or someone who just lost a job. Articles with a contextual learning component would also pique their interest.

One participant suggested having articles that relate to the advertising. One example was the number of chaplains in the ELCA or an article from a chaplain serving in Iraq, to go along with the ad for chaplaincy.

Another suggestion was to have information about other synods such as demographics or a snapshot of different areas of the church. These would be little tidbits you can take to an adult class as conversation starters.

Some participants suggested adding stories that give the “back room story,” such as how various translation decisions were made in *Renewing Worship* or content choices for the *Lutheran Handbook*.

One participant indicated that there is very little in *Lutheran Partners* relevant to his ministry setting (inner city). He felt there needs to be a sense of ownership, both at the top and at the grass roots level.

## **In Summary**

- Most participants agreed that the cover of the magazine catches their attention. With that in mind, they suggested changing the cover of *Lutheran Partners*.
- Overall, most participants go directly to Steve McKinley's column and skim the rest of the magazine. Others indicated that Letters and advertising pique their interest.
- There was much disappointment within the groups when they were told of Steve McKinley's retirement. A few participants indicated that they would stop reading *Lutheran Partners*, but many provided ideas and suggestions for future columns.
- Most participants had not used the on-line version of *Lutheran Partners*. Those that did visit *Lutheran Partners* on-line requested a search function within the *Lutheran Partners* site to find articles in past issues.
- All participants agreed that *Lutheran Partners* is the only professional church workers' magazine in the ELCA and most of the participants would miss it if it were to disappear.
- Participants willingly gave suggestions for what kinds of topics or articles they would like to see in the magazine. Many participants desired articles on preaching. Others want to be stretched as a pastor, develop new ways of thinking and maintain their spiritual health. Still, other participants suggested having articles that relate to the advertising in the magazine. And, some requested more articles on personal experience and the demographics of the church.

## Topics for Lutheran Partners

### Preaching

Preaching to a mix of old Lutherans as well as new! Preach the Old Testament.

Preaching always helpful – outside of the Lutheran world would be helpful.

Seminary preaching profs doing sermons for upcoming Sundays – or other exceptional preachers

Different preachers “method“ sample and good sermons.

Preaching for feasts, festivals, reoccurring texts from homiletics profs and noted ELCA pastors, ecumenical preachers.

Take a text used during an upcoming season exegete, then offer a sermon or sermon illustrations, stories that share the message.

Preaching on suicide, spousal abuse, AIDS

Format that has full sermon plus good quality exegesis

I'd like to see short examination of Bible text followed by several pertinent quotes, perhaps one longer illustration. It would be nice to see these done by our Lutheran Scholars (schools) as a shared duty. I'd also like to see something similar with worship music and lectionary.

Outlines and illustrations

Articles/insights from seminary homiletics profs., Barbara Brown Taylor, writings about close ties between preaching and liturgy; joint preacher/ liturgist submissions

One in depth exegesis by a New Testament professor and one sermon by homilician on the same text

Exegesis/word study/sermons

Preaching difficult sermons; in conflict/ suicide/ disaster/ economic-poverty issues

Lectionary support – seasonal services (Mullins column could be worked into this as a package.)

Specific helps for the assigned texts. Jump starters and not cookie cutters.

Story telling; the impact of multimedia on preaching, the main focus should be “Jesus Christ;” inviting people to Christ and church; relevance

Overview of the Gospel for the year; suggestions for church year seasonal observances

This would be a great area for expansion. Pick a lection or two, maybe three and give a commentary/exegesis from a scholar or experienced pastor. (as a regular piece)

Moving from manuscript to preaching with few notes; using illustrations effectively

Use of multimedia in preaching and worship; survey of congregational members covering their views on preaching

Preaching on special occasions – weddings, funerals, etc.

Preaching to folks who know little about Scripture; applying texts (biblical) to everyday life

How to preach to congregations . . . on the edge of rural/suburbia; God’s grace for the soccer mom/dad, etc.

## **Scripture and theology**

Exegesis on the parables and putting them into the present context

A variety of scholarly voices

Text studies on upcoming lectionary lessons

New scripture research, historical Jesus stuff; theology

Seminary folks, reflection on popular culture; takes on these topics and Lutheran responses

Yes, in a heart model to take the head information and discuss it through the heart

Specific texts, exegesis, bibliographies of movements; religious and public life

How Lutheranism is relevant for a world wasting non-denominational entertainment; what others are doing to be faithful in a world where choice is more important than grace

Word studies (downloadable). I'd like to see seminarians doing 2 or 3 part series on current theological "hot topics."

Exegesis of texts toward application to life issues; theological analysis of current events/topics

Word studies: Greek and Hebrew

On-line Bible studies; chat rooms

A survey of long-term Bible study materials

The big Lutheran debate right now is Third Use of the Law (our theological divide). I like A Generous Orthodoxy – Accent on strengths of divergent streams

The comments/interpretations on major events – help put in perspective and offset the bias of news media

Bible as the main source of theology; Emphasis: Salvation by Grace. Works of mercy are also important.

Perspectives on pericopes. Comparative theologies of O.T. and N.T.

(For all topics:) Build on topic of the issue; maybe a guest column each issue by a seminary professor (different professor each issue). This might also involve seminarians and recent graduates to look for their favorite professors – and be a tiny bit of continuing education for the rest of us.

Maybe a study piece for pastors – not for beginners, that would teach and inspire.  
Otherwise, timely “face to face” debates on theology from two opposing positions

Intelligent design; preaching/teaching the Psalms

Survey of congregation in understanding of scriptures and theology

Preaching and exegesis articles are always welcome.

Scripture and theology through the eyes of lay persons

## **Lutheran identity**

How is our identity changing: We are now drawing from a diverse background. How do we change?

Lutheran identity: too parochial – how about “the value/meaning of denominations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”

Lutheran identity: fine – would prefer “thought pieces”

Liturgy (new and old – more than the “Hymnal wars”) contextual liturgy resources, international Lutheran perspectives

Yes! What does this mean for us as called leaders, for our youth, for our single people, for our couples, for our aged, for our gays and lesbians, for our incarcerated???

Ecumenical dialogue

Distinctive Lutheran resources; uses of law/Gospel

What do we look like as the ELCA? Who are we? Statistics with explanation à la Alban Institute would really be interesting. Needs commentary on trends from prophetic voices not necessarily church but secular world

This is where humor would be good. I suggest the National Bishop write for us and also bring voices to “point counterpoint” current Lutheran issues.

What is the role and importance of Lutheran identity when many growing congregations receive people from non-Lutheran backgrounds?

Marks of the Church

When and how did we start aspiring to be mainline Protestants? Explore interconnectedness and mutual support (or lack thereof) among synods, institutions

Jesus was not into “brand names;” retain tradition but not with the obligation of perpetuation.

More emphasis on Lutheran teachings; partnerships between congregations

As has been mentioned, there are many publications directed at professionals. Are there any such publications targeted for ELCA professionals other than *Lutheran Partners*? Concentrate on this area.

Essentials of worship

Pictures, stories of “very” Lutheran activities, events, ministries from various facets of the church

Teaching the new Lutheran Handbook

1. How is Lutheran identity being impartial by prevalent culture . . . of Christianity
2. The shape of Lutheran identity, worship and witness in the present and future

I've recently become aware of several congregations that are struggling with their Lutheran identity. Help on how to interpret Lutheran identity would be welcome

Effects of the confessional/evangelical movements on ELCA

Why "Grace Lutheran" as opposed to "Grace Free" (no denominational indicator) on signs, ads, etc.

## **Evangelism**

Visitor welcome (ideas of best practices); new member classes (curriculum)

Exciting our members enough to invite their neighbors; how to become more invitational?

Link to social justice/ethics

Articles on how Lutherans “compete” with rapidly growing non-denominationalists that start with large buildings and staff

Evangelism on every scale, from people doing it at the ground level

Social justice? Marginalized?

Hospitality vs “welcoming”

What is it really?

What is evangelism today and why should we do it?

Reaching the Hispanic Community

Sharing the Gospel with non-believers; outreach ideas to growing communities

These folks found creative ways to make it happen

Series on promising approaches (like Natural Church Development)

It’s okay to call it (evangelism) something else – Has a market black mark(s) – it’s outreach and it’s bring the talk as we walk

Outreach strategies, multicultural/urban setting; mission statements and visions that are relevant and realistic

Models, resources, training

Who is doing it effectively? Where? How?

Stories from “growing” or evangelizing congregations what they are doing that is distinct

Effective advertising – is there such a thing?

Articles by pastors of growing churches and how they and their congregations “do” evangelism; this would include urban, suburban, rural churches.

Evangelism seems to be a struggle for many Lutherans. Our council seeks guidance – but I am not sure how sincere they are or is it just something they think they should be requesting.

Modifying programs that are working in other denominations

Helping folks to be mission oriented instead of just reacting to crisis situation loudly and around the world

Nuts and bolts of everyday witnessing around the block . . . at the coffee bar . . . and at work

## **Parish ministry models**

Team ministry; small groups (content/structure/facilitator training)

Moving from the old 12 member council to a smaller more visionary leadership

A variety of structural models would be good – including outside the Lutheran world.

Start with large buildings and staff; councils vs. small leadership committee with task forces

More content for solo pastors (there are a lot of us)

I serve a parish within the walls of a women's prison, so I would greatly appreciate models of parish prison ministry.

Homeless; mental illness; weddings and marriage

Struggles within the groups of people in the church; how to cope, skills and helps that really work

How about the “back room” stories about development of churchwide programs and resources, e.g. translation decisions in *Renewing Worship*, why the content choices in the *Lutheran Handbook*

Who to manage the subjective and gadget aspects and present only “the beef, no fat”?

Team leadership model vs. pastor oriented ministry create an environment that is inclusive and inviting

All of these items seem to get into this topic. Helping pastors and lay rostered live in and lead a congregation seems to be a goal that *Lutheran Partners* can meet

Stewardship, parish structure

Emergent Church (I just discovered it at Pennsylvania State Pastors' Conference)

This would be an interesting piece.

Effective models for doing ministry

Value at the small family church: too often we see/read articles that seem to say bigger is better but . . .

Examples of how particular ministries are carried out in average size congregations – rather than those with multiple staff members

## **Christian Education**

Advance directives, health care and spiritual care. Working with mental health issues in the parish – what’s typical, what families go through, what they need to do for “success” (i.e., legal, social)

What is available for educating those with no tradition and no religious upbringing

A Christian/Spiritual formation – larger meaning of “discipleship” – programs that work

Adult education ideas

New models beyond Sunday School

As a strong voice of Lutheran theology in Christian Ed – the “other” voice of raising up biblical scholarship

Reviews and bibliographies

What is it?

How do you raise biblical literacy in a biblically illiterate church?

Contact Norma Cook Everist, Wartburg Seminary, curriculum reviews from people who have used the materials - what was helpful/what was not and why?

Adult study ideas for various types of study (biblical, social, etc.)

Teaching prayer

Focus on the pastoral concerns, please. For example, teaching to life cycle events, preparation for adult baptism, membership, confirmation, marriage

Greatly needed – needs a “do-over” members are embarrassingly ignorant as a result of clergy failure and their focus on easy membership numbers

Small Bible study groups; understanding the nature of the church

Adult education; reading young adults

Any new models? Any examples of thriving Sunday Schools other than large congregations?

Articles on empowering educators and committees and new resources/trends

Effectiveness of notation style Sunday School (especially K-6 all together)  
Dialog between “traditional methods” and some of the more recent models/ideas for Christian education; place of the Sunday school in modern parish light

Getting away from the book, using other criteria and experiences

Mentoring programs for confirmation; new member programs; catechumenate

## **Leadership**

Training pew sitters to be leaders; curriculum (ideas)

Building staff and volunteers – using principles that aren't working out – like considering past behavior/leadership instead of cutesy personality types

Administrative helps for moving from a small church to a program

Yes, but do more in-depth articles and bring a variety of voices, use data

Again, the solo pastor (we seem to hear a lot about/from large staff folks)

All the various models: senior, solo, first call, adjunct staff, team ministry . . . How to be a spiritual leader in today's society?

Domestic violence in the parsonage; depression and other mental illness among clergy

Family of origin; family system

What is it? What are the models?

Invite submissions from: first call pastors, rural ministry, urban ministry, hospital chaplaincy, prison ministry, army/reserves chaplaincy and variety of other contexts

Working relationship of pastor and congregational president

Empowering laity; small group ministry ideas; discipleship making

How congregations call and raise up leaders

How about getting less generic and talking about management issues, too. Bible and historical studies on leaders – build a foundation instead of chasing fads

Separate initiative – it is lacking at the parish level – the pastors don't lead – they act like brokers or jugglers. Cover elsewhere!

Leadership development workshops at the ELCA, synod and parish levels

Articles that can help the parish leader grow (i.e. book reviews)

Training lay leaders; what's going on in our seminaries

Two replacements for McKinley or rotate; or add an additional page each month and you call a pastor to contribute or call a bishop to call a pastor.

A regular piece on what it means to be a pastor and a leader – topics and trends in that sense. A lot of pastors need help being a faithful servant leader that isn't controlling or overly unhealthy.

Ideas for Council retreats; how much input/influence should a pastor have in Council or Committee decisions; getting treasurers to give up control of “their” money

Developing effective lay leadership

Pastor interacting with/training committee chairs, council, etc.

Investing in congregational leaders

## **Youth ministry (resources, confirmation programs, youth ministry in small congregations)**

Spiritual formation resources; using the arts in ministry; Christian/Jewish/Muslim conversations in local churches

Resources are very helpful; more resources to assist in ministry of all types

Incorporate articles from outdoor ministry site; directors, chaplains, program coordinators

More confirmation helps

How do you go from fun and games to kids who own their faith

Reach deeper than programs – help us understand the aspirations, fears and concerns; help us probe kids' hearts and minds

Specialized – cover elsewhere with links from Partners to these resources

Include youth in ministry, leadership, representation

Confirmation ministry models and ideas; audio-visual resources for lay leaders of youth ministry; what's going on in youth ministry in ELCA

Youth ministry in small congregations; confirmation programs still a challenge for many pastors

Yes, a regular integrating piece of all of these would be great

Yes to all.

How to integrate certain facets of youth ministry into the overall parish: given the difference in worship at the National Youth Gatherings and most parishes – how can we help youth integrate both forms? And, how to integrate youth into the existing structures of the church?

More! Just more articles no matter what the topic!

## **Other comments**

Why does your topic list not include – social ministry, ethical decision making, computer, music?

Let the print model roll on with some work on the look and presentation. Put 70% of energy into making the electronic version become a must tool for active clergy and a “staying connected” tool for us old birds.

I am a retired pastor. I am not interested in dialogue. I am an interested spectator in the life of the Church. What is being said by authors of the articles and the response is an exercise that I would like to see continued and expanded.

Pastoral ethics were not mentioned, but it seems to be an important topic in today’s world. What is expected of leaders in today’s Church?

Maybe ask each writer to underline (or bold) one sentence which is key – or make the first paragraph stand apart as an abstract