

PARTICIPANT

What Is a Lutheran?

REVISED EDITION



**To Know, To Live,
To Grow**

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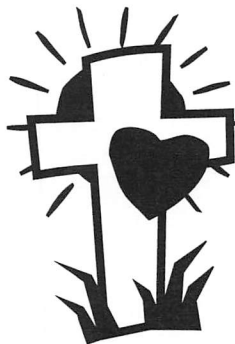
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**To Know, To Live,
To Grow**

Augsburg Fortress
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PARTICIPANT

What Is a Lutheran?

REVISED EDITION

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Session 1

Who Are Lutherans?

This session explores the keys of Lutheran faith and considers how Lutheran beliefs are similar to and different from other Christian faiths.

Begin by sharing your name and ...

- how many people are in your family.
- one group to which you belong.

As a group, make a list of groups and/or communities to which you belong.

- Why is it important to be a part of a group or a community?

Where Do I Fit?

- How would the groups change if one individual were missing?
- What can a group offer that an individual cannot?

Open with prayer.

One group we belong to is the Lutheran church. Certain characteristics are unique to Lutherans, and Lutherans have certain characteristics in common with other denominations. Play the “What Is Lutheran?” game and identify some of Lutheranism’s distinct characteristics.

What Is Lutheran?

After you have finished playing the game, review these four categories and write a short description of each, based on answers from the game.

- Scripture _____
- Faith _____
- Jesus _____
- Lutheran _____

Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran faith, said that Lutheran beliefs were based on three concepts: Scripture alone, Christ alone, and faith alone. You will learn more about these concepts in the sessions to come.

Within the Christian church are many branches. These branches are called *denominations*. While all denominations believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, each denomination sees things slightly different. You may be familiar with some of these other denominations. In small groups, list some characteristics of the Lutheran faith and compare them to other Christian churches (Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Assemblies of God, and so forth). What things are similar? What things are different? For example, if we compare Lutherans and Catholics, we might list the following things:

- Both worship one creator God.
- The rituals are different; worship services might be similar; both celebrate baptism and communion.
- Confession styles are different. Lutherans practice public confession primarily; Catholics practice private confession.

Lutheran beliefs:

Others' beliefs:

How are they similar?

How are they different?

What Would You Like to Know? (Optional)

Write one question you would like answered about Lutheranism. In the weeks to come, we'll answer these questions.

- What about ... ?

Timeline

Make a timeline of your faith journey. Place on this timeline important things like birth, baptism, first communion, new church membership, vacation Bible school, Sunday school, choirs, and so forth. If you did not grow up in the church, begin with the time you started going and who influenced your faith.

Close with prayer.

Session 2

The Reformation

Today's Society

Form pairs. Each pair is assigned one of the following roles in today's society.

- single parent on welfare, with three children
- CEO of a successful business firm
- social worker for inner-city youth
- cattle farmer in a rural community
- politician in Washington, D.C.
- pastor of a large congregation

Answer the following questions from the viewpoint of your assigned role.

- How do you view society?
- What worries you?
- What are your hopes and dreams?
- How do the choices of others affect you?
- What is the greatest challenge you face right now?

Our world is changing, just as it was in the time of the Reformation. The changes occurring in the world will ultimately affect the church.

- What are some challenges you see affecting your local church?
How would you deal with them?
- What are some challenges you see affecting the larger church?
How would you deal with them?
- What are the positive things impacting the church?
What influence will they have for the future of the church?

Open with prayer.

Martin Luther was an influential leader during the time of the Reformation. His intent was to reform the Catholic church, not to break away from it. The church and society at this time were in disarray, and people were ready for someone like Luther to offer new ideas and hope for the future. In 1517, Luther posted a list of 95 statements on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg in the German state of Saxony. These statements, the Ninety-five Theses, were issues he thought needed to be addressed in the Catholic church. Let's discover a bit about the world in which Luther lived.

This session explores the time of the Reformation and the issues the church was facing.

The Church before the Reformation

The church and government were connected in Martin Luther's time. The Roman Catholic Church was the official (and only) Christian religion in Western Europe. The priests of the church were often uneducated and had little interest in the spiritual life of their congregations. The political ties to the church caused many problems, especially corruption. Money from the sale of indulgences (the sale of forgiveness for the sins of the dead) was used to build elaborate churches and pay extravagant salaries.

One Issue for Luther

Scripture does not require the collection of money in order that people might be forgiven. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross made forgiveness a gift, the gift of grace. Because of this, Luther strongly disagreed with the sale of indulgences.

Social Life before the Reformation

In the 14th century, the Black Plague killed one-fourth of the population, causing many people to fear that the end of the world was coming. As the population began to rebuild, the movement of people from rural areas into the cities began to cause problems between the rich and the poor, and many of the poor revolted against their masters. This movement also caused an abundance of workers in the cities, and people were doing more work for less money. Inflation resulted.

The Reformation happened over the course of many years, and included many different religious figures and movements. This was a time of confusion. Many of the people were not educated, and with changes in the leadership, people did not always know who to follow or believe. Many people voiced discontent with the medieval church concerning its beliefs and practices. Martin Luther was one person who took a leadership role in the midst of these changes. From his observations about what was happening in the church, four major things were changed or addressed in the Reformation.

Theology of the Cross: The church seemed to emphasize the powerful, holy side of Jesus, ignoring his human side. So Luther emphasized the cross and resurrection, pointing out that God chose human form and human weakness as the way to carry out the salvation of humankind.

Luther pointed out that to understand the cross and the resurrection a person must understand that God chose weakness and powerlessness to defeat the powers of Satan and death. This was called the Theology of the Cross, and it led to greater understanding of God. This view of Jesus made God accessible to people who had never had access to God before.

Role of humans: Luther believed it was impossible for anyone to earn his or her way into the kingdom of God. One thing that made Luther angry was the sale of indulgences. By purchasing a piece of paper issued by the church, it was believed that a person could release the sins and the souls of a dead relative from purgatory (the holding place for people, located between heaven and hell). Luther quoted Paul, saying there was nothing humans could do to earn salvation. It was a gift from God, made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. The medieval church tried to convince the people that it could grant this forgiveness, when in fact only God has the power to grant forgiveness.

Free will versus God's will: Luther did not believe humans had free will in matters of salvation. He once said that humans were like a drunk person being put on a mule. Put them on one side and they fall off the other. Put them back on, they fall off the other side. He believed humans would always continue to fall into sinful patterns. Luther believed people were not able to see all the things that shaped and directed them. He believed that the distance between humans and God is enormous, but God's love and mercy allow a relationship to exist between the two.

Scripture versus tradition: The medieval church believed in the authority of Scripture, but it also used tradition and the words of the pope as the basis of its religious practice. During the time of the Reformation, the church was often embarrassed when reformers like Luther pointed out practices that didn't agree with Scripture. The Reformation teaching said we should rely only on Scripture for our understanding of faith. Lutherans have held to this understanding ever since Luther's time.

- Only the sacraments commanded by Jesus (Baptism and Communion) are recognized in the Lutheran church. This is based on the idea of using only Scripture to understand our faith.
- Luther started to celebrate worship in the language of the people, rather than in Latin. Hymns were sung to familiar tunes and the Bible was translated into German so people could read it themselves. Preaching emphasized Scripture, not traditions and rituals. We continue this today when we worship in the language most familiar to us, using music that fits our culture, and basing our studies on Scripture.

Session 3

Along Came Martin Luther

Begin by sharing the name of your favorite teacher and ...

- describe the most famous person you've ever met.
- name two people you admire for what they believe.
- share an example of a person living out his or her beliefs.

Make a list of people who influence you. After each name, list the areas of your life these people affect:

- Who influences me? How?

Open with prayer.

To Tell the Truth

Play the game "To Tell the Truth," where three people claim to be the same person. The goal is to identify which one of the three is the true character. When finished, complete the biography of Martin Luther on page 10.

This session explores information about Martin Luther's life and the impact he made on the Lutheran faith.

Martin Luther Biography

Date of birth: _____

Birthplace: _____

Died: _____

School: _____

Occupation: _____

Spouse/Family: _____

Other important information: _____

Important works: _____

Discuss

- What things surprised you about Martin Luther?
- What did you already know about Martin Luther?
- Who could you compare him to today?
- What do you think was the most important change Luther made?

Dear Martin

Share your letters from last week, and write a group letter explaining how you see your church living up to Martin Luther’s ideas. Some things to consider:

- Who has authority? What affect does that authority have on you?
- What role does the Bible play?
- Go back to the last session and look at what it says about the Theology of the Cross. Where does this fit in your church?
- What about Luther’s ideas of using “the language of the people”?

Close with prayer.

Session 4

What Makes Us Special? The Sacraments

This session explores the definition of a sacrament and briefly looks at the two Lutheran sacraments, Baptism and Communion.

Begin by sharing the name of your favorite book and ...

- a time when you had to experience something before you would believe it.
- a time when you experienced doubt.

As a group, make a list of things you have to experience or see in order to believe:

What's the Word?

- Was it difficult not to use body movements?
- Were you able to find alternate words to describe each word?
- What was the easiest part of this activity? The hardest?

Open with prayer.

Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are the two sacraments recognized by the Lutheran church. We celebrate them within our worshiping communities. Three characteristics define a sacrament:

- A sacrament is a gift from God, given to show God's love.
- A sacrament uses a physical, earthly element combined with God's Word of promise.
- Jesus instituted the sacraments during his human life.

Let's look at each of the sacraments and see how they fit into the categories listed above.

Holy Baptism

- It is a time when we celebrate the gift of entering the family of God.
- It uses the element of water, combined with God's blessing, "You are a child of God."
- Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and commanded his disciples to go into the world baptizing. (Matthew 28:19-20)

Holy Communion

- It is the gift of forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.
- Bread and wine are Jesus' body and his blood, along with God's blessing, "A new covenant I give you ... do this in remembrance of me."
- Jesus instituted Holy Communion at the Last Supper with his disciples.

God loves us and wants us to remember that sacraments are very physical ways God connects with us, ones that we can touch and feel. Read the story of Thomas in John 20:19-29.

- What did Thomas need to believe in Jesus' resurrection? _____

- How are you like Thomas? _____

- Based on this story and your own experience, why did God give us sacraments? _____

- What new things did you learn about sacraments from this session? What is different than you thought? _____

Jesus came so we could be connected with God and know God's love. Following his death and resurrection, Jesus gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to act as a guide for our faith journey. He also gave us the gift of the sacraments as ways we could physically celebrate our faith.

Assignment

- How can you physically show someone you love him or her? Choose at least one idea to carry out this week.
- Ask your parents about your baptism. Fill in the following information to share with the group next week.

Date: _____

Location (church, city, state): _____

Pastor: _____

Sponsors: _____

Other people present: _____

- Next week, bring any special items (photos, special memories, clothing) from your baptism.

Close with prayer.

Session 5

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

Begin by sharing the name of your favorite song and ...

- a story about an experience with water.
- ways water is helpful to you.

Form pairs and share the information you collected about your baptism. Find out what you have in common and what was unique about your baptism.

Open with prayer.

Waterlife

God used water for baptism because the characteristics of water itself help define baptism. Spend some time “watching” water at work and reflect on these characteristics. Afterward, discuss how the characteristics of water help us understand baptism.

Song (Optional)

Read the words to the song “Singing Through the Water” and then answer the questions below.

- How is baptism like “singing through the water”?
- How does baptism “change everything inside”?
- In your own words, define *baptism* (what it is and why we do it).

The session explores baptism, the role of water, and the Lutheran baptismal service.

Singing Through the Water

**Singing through the water
I hear a melody
Singing through the water
I hear a symphony
Singing through the water
The world is in harmony
Singing through the water
The rhythm of life
I hear the song of life
The rhythm is the dance of
life
I feel the Spirit move
Changing everything inside**

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Read about baptism in Luther's Small Catechism. Answer the following questions, using your Bible as a reference.

- What is baptism? Read Matthew 28:18-20.

- Why be baptized? Read Mark 16:15-16 and Acts 2:38.

- What happens after baptism? Read Romans 6:1-4.

Session 6

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

This session explores Holy Communion and the role it has in our Christian community.

Begin by sharing the name of your oldest relative and ...

- a time when you have celebrated a special occasion with a meal.
- your favorite meal.

Individually, write down times when you have felt “broken.” Use a separate notebook for privacy. Think about broken relationships, times when you have needed forgiveness, or any other painful times in your life. Then, after each one, write when and how your brokenness was healed, mended, or forgiven. If you are comfortable doing so, share one of these times with the group. Finally, write down one thing you would like mended in your family right now.

Open with prayer.

Bread Making (Optional)

After washing hands, make bread dough. After mixing all the ingredients, take turns kneading the dough. As you are doing this, make a list of different kinds of bread and the ways bread is used. (Time may not allow for the rising and baking of the bread.)

- What does it take to make good bread?
- Why is unleavened bread used for Holy Communion?
- Look up *bread* in the dictionary. Write the definition here:

- What is the importance of bread in our lives?

Forgiveness (Optional)

- In this activity, what does the salt represent?
- What does the water represent?
- How did it feel to give the hurt (salt) away? Is the feeling of hurt really gone?

God's Love

Read about Holy Communion in Luther's Small Catechism.

We are all sinners. This means we often choose to rely on our own power rather than on God's power, leading us into loneliness, self-centeredness, and times of hurt. As sinners, left to our own resources, our lives are empty and without meaning. God gave us the sacraments as gifts to change our emptiness into meaningfulness, our brokenness into mended wholeness, and our loneliness into community. The sacraments are Baptism, the initial welcoming into the Christian community, and Communion, the celebration of our forgiveness. It is in Communion that our slate is wiped clean, our past wrongdoings are dissolved, and our hurts are healed with God's love.

Communion is the opportunity to give our hurts to God. We empty ourselves of sin. The bread and the wine are all we need; bread to sustain us, wine to celebrate, both to symbolize God's love.

We join together to celebrate this holy meal as members of God's family. We are joined together, celebrating God's presence in our lives.

The Words of Institution

Leader: We declare ourselves to be Easter people.

People: We come to share in the table God has prepared for us.

Leader: Jesus took the bad news of sin and guilt and changed it to good news by dying and rising for us.

People: We are here to celebrate the good news and the presence of Christ with us.

Leader: And Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it. He said to his disciples, "Take, eat, this is my body." Also, he took a cup of wine. After saying thanks, he gave it to them saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant. It is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Do this to remember me."

People: We thank you, God, for these elements given in love for us. Accept us, forgive us, and heal us, so we might live lives that are pleasing to you.

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Each morning this week, thank God for the love offered to you.

Close with prayer.



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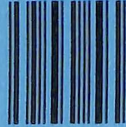
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Jesus of Nazareth
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