



## KEY BIBLE PASSAGE

"[You are] ... God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

– 1 Peter 2:9

## SUGGESTED HYMNS



"God Is Here!" (ELW 526)  
"Built on a Rock" (ELW 652)



## GETTING STARTED

*In the large group, respond to the prompts below.*

What does it mean to belong to Christ in whom you've been baptized? What's special or unique about your congregation? How do you describe your congregation to people who are not familiar with it? Think about aspects such as these:

- How you have seen God working in your lives and through your lives
- Your church roots
- Pastors, musicians, staff and lay leaders who have played a significant role
- Worship, prayer and other spiritual practices
- The location
- Relationships with neighbors near and far
- Ministries your congregation especially values or feels called to carry out
- Ways pastors and members have supported and participated in synodical or churchwide ministries



## HERE'S WHAT

Your congregation is indeed unique. Yet the church is universal, and your congregation is one part of the much larger church and connected to other faith communities. But how is the larger church formed?

Martin Luther teaches us how the church comes to be in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, one of the ELCA's three historic statements of our faith. The Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth."<sup>1</sup> God has created the church as a gift to the world. It is much more than a human institution. In Christ, we are joined, saved and set free to serve one another.

How do we recognize the church? In the words of the Nicene Creed, another statement of our faith, Christians confess that the church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic." These terms are called "marks of the church."

- The church is "one" because it is joined together by Jesus Christ, united in its relationship with and witness to the one God (John 17:20-23).
- "Holy" means "set apart." The church is set apart to carry out God's purposes in the world, reconciling the world to God (2 Corinthians 5:19).
- When we say the church is "catholic," we confess that it is "universal." It reaches across time and space and is not divided by denomination, nation, race, gender or other human factors (Ephesians 2:19-22).
- The "apostolic church" is rooted in the preaching and the witness of Jesus' apostles. "Apostle" means "messenger," reminding us that the church is sent to carry the message of good news of Jesus to all the world (Mark 16:15).

*As a large group, review the list of descriptors you created during "Getting Started." Mark with an O those that show the world how your congregation is one. Mark with an H those that demonstrate it is holy, with a C those that express how it is catholic, and with an A those that confirm it is apostolic.*

Form a small group, and share your thoughts about the following questions:

- What mark seems most meaningful to you?
- What does it mean for you?
- How would you tell someone who does not go to church what is the church?

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000), p. 355.



### SO WHAT?

Now that you've talked about what is the church, explore how it fulfills its purpose.

*In your small group, take turns reading aloud the following passages.*

- The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.<sup>2</sup>
- Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)
- "The church is ... not an institution, an organization, or a building, but a community of relationships where people's selves are with God and with one another, bound by love... In our world, these relationships extend beyond other human beings and God. We are not only related to other people, but we are in community with all of creation."<sup>3</sup>
- "At the center of our life together is worship and at the center of our worship is the crucified and risen Christ. When we gather for worship we turn our gaze away from ourselves to the source of our life and hope and salvation. When we gather for worship we are encountered by the living God in Scripture, proclamation of the gospel and the sacraments. God meets us and transforms us."<sup>4</sup>

*Which do you think best explains why the church exists? Mark that item and tell the members of your group what draws you to it.*



### NOW WHAT?

*In the large group, offer your thoughts about the implications of the ideas you have raised.*

- In what way is Jesus the center of your congregation?
- How might your understanding of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic affect your participation in your congregation?

Think of one activity or ministry in your congregation that is important to you. How could it better reflect what uniquely being the church, in the broadest sense, means?

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper One, 2012), 195.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth A. Eaton, "Getting to what really matters," *The Lutheran*, January 2014, [http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article\\_id=11792](http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=11792).



## WRAP-UP AND BLESSING

*In the large group, review the main points you covered today. Respond to this question:*

Reflecting on your conversation today, what does "church" mean?

*Close today's conversation with a prayer or blessing.*



## FOR THE NEXT CONVERSATION

*If you like, for the next conversation, bring a photo, certificate or other memento of your baptism, confirmation or another experience among Lutherans that is meaningful to you.*

