



Report of the Church Periodical—*The Lutheran*

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(*There are two vacancies as of this writing.*)

Advisory Members

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Ms. Kristi S. Bangert, Chicago, Ill.
Bp. Harold L. Usgaard, Rochester, Minn.

Mr. Daniel J. Lehmann, *editor and executive director*

Statement of Purpose

The Lutheran is the monthly magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, nurturing an understanding of the faith, mission, and ministries of this church and providing informed editorial content about relevant concerns in this church's common life. The mandate of *The Lutheran* appears in provisions 17.30–17.31 of the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA*, printed in Section X of this volume.

Report of Work for 2007–2009

The magazine continues its commitment to the highest standards of journalism as it serves the Church of Jesus Christ through the print medium and increasingly on the Web. The quality of writing, editing, and illustration in the magazine upholds a history of excellence. As evidence, the Associated Church Press (ACP) honored *The Lutheran* with 10 awards for its 2007 issues. As of this writing, the magazine was awaiting word from ACP on its 2008 issues.

The magazine reports on the ELCA and its ministries, congregations, and members, reflecting their faithfulness and diversity. The publication and staff remain committed to nurturing the faith of readers and their witness to Christ in their homes, communities, congregations, and beyond.

The Lutheran's mission statement expresses the magazine's editorial purpose. This is a guiding document for the staff as it prepares for publication each month. The statement reads:

The Lutheran magazine belongs to the people of the ELCA in all our diversity. The magazine:

- Nurtures an awareness of Christ's presence in our lives and the world.
- Shares the stories of God's people living their faith.
- Connects us with the global Christian community.
- Provides an open forum for discussion.
- Challenges us to bring God's grace and care to all.

In 2007 the magazine welcomed the return of the Rev. Walter M. Wangerin as a regular contributor. The longtime columnist offers his participation on a quarterly basis as he is able while dealing with cancer. His pieces appear in the March, June, September, and December issues.

Mr. Joel A. Stombres joined the staff as advertising director in 2007. He came to the magazine after 14 years with Christianity Today International, publisher of *Christianity Today* magazine, where he served as senior advertising executive.

Magazine staffers attended 33 synod assemblies in 2008 and planned to attend at least that many in 2009. Nearly all provided podium time for staff members to update voting members on the circulation challenge facing the magazine and to reestablish relationships between the magazine and synods and congregations. In the long term, the magazine hopes to attend each synod's assembly every other year.

A subscription program called the Synod Plan was kicked off in 2007–08. It is first being offered in synods that publish a synod supplement that is bound into the middle of the magazine. Most synods produce supplements four times a year, so *The Lutheran* will sell the magazine to congregations not already on some type of subscription plan those four issues at a rate of \$3.95 per subscription per year. The magazine shoulders the entire cost of printing and distributing the supplements as a free service to the synods. To help promote this program, all ELCA congregations were offered single-copy sales of the November 2007 issue that contained a complimentary copy of Martin Luther's 95 Theses.

The Synod Plan met with limited success. The first two synods to be offered the plan, Southwestern Pennsylvania and Oregon, generated sales to 12 congregations in Southwestern Pennsylvania and zero in Oregon. Undeterred, the magazine will continue to promote the plan to other synods in the months ahead.

Columnists have been added or changed, most significantly with the addition in 2007 of the Rev. Stephen G. Marsh, who concluded his column in December 2008. He is the first featured monthly columnist in the magazine's history to be a person of color. The "Our Faith" column was turned over to the Book of

Faith initiative for all of 2009 and half of 2010. Various contributing editors to the initiative will write columns on their area of expertise to help generate interest in the Bible fluency campaign.

As happened after the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, *The Lutheran* staff will rush the September 2009 issue into production so subscribers will receive it within a few weeks of the closing of the assembly. This was seen as an appropriate use of resources by the magazine and in the best interest of readers.

In 2008, *The Lutheran* was reduced to 56 pages monthly from 60 pages monthly. Additional pages continue to be added to the November issue to accommodate the report on higher education matters across the denomination. The reduction in pages cut publishing costs while demanding a more focused editorial product from the magazine's staff. No complaints have been received about this action.

The Lutheran's budget for 2008 was \$3.6 million, and for 2009 is \$3.2 million. Circulation and advertising actually provided \$2.7 million and \$1.04 million, respectively, in 2007 and are projected at \$2.53 million and \$1.1 million, respectively, in 2008. The magazine produced a surplus of \$200,000 during 2007 and should exceed \$100,000 for 2008.

Major Directions for 2009–2011

Despite the positive cash flow of the past four years, the long-term health, even survival, of *The Lutheran* magazine remains in question. Paid circulation stands at 269,500. A break-even analysis puts the danger threshold at roughly 220,000 copies under current economic conditions. There should be time to address the issues facing the magazine, but the current recession confronting the nation presents many uncertainties.

A history lesson is in order here. The magazine started in 1988 with a circulation in excess of 1.2 million—by far the largest religious publication in the United States. Issues of sheer volume plagued *The Lutheran*, as indicated in the recorded exchanges between the magazine and Augsburg Fortress. Decline set in almost immediately, with circulation falling roughly 25 percent in each of the five-year periods of 1988–1993 (27.7 percent), 1993–1998 (26.3 percent) and 1998–2003 (22.7 percent). Still, the circulation volume was so large the decline did not appear to be that troubling, and little was done to correct the slide.

During this period the magazine—rightly or wrongly—developed a reputation for editorial liberalism and staff elitism. It is a burden *The Lutheran* carries to this day. In addition, the magazine became a lightning rod for criticism of the ELCA as a whole, due in part to the perception of its aloofness and one-sided coverage.

Lingering in the background was a general decline in magazine readership and an erosion of membership in smaller congregations. It is here where the magazine faces its greatest exposure to failure. It sells best in small, usually declining congregations and has virtually no circulation in large, growing parishes.

At the beginning of 2009, congregational subscription cancellations picked up with alarming speed. After significantly trimming losses in 2007 and 2008, congregation after

congregation cited budget difficulties for dropping their subscription plans with *The Lutheran* at the start of 2009. This challenges the magazine to dramatically trim costs or to find new sources of revenue. (*The Lutheran* receives no mission support from the churchwide organization, only free rent) Further reductions in size and eventually staff would diminish the perceived value of the magazine and, in turn, make it more difficult to land new advertisers and retain current ones.

The magazine needs help from ELCA members if it is to avoid collapse in less than a decade. Since its creation with the merger of the ELCA, *The Lutheran* was to be the principal communication vehicle of the greater church, linking congregations to synods, to the denomination, and to the greater church worldwide. That link was seen as vital to the success of the denomination. That relationship remains true today for *The Lutheran* and the ELCA.

There must be a sense of urgency by leaders at all levels in this church for the well-being of *The Lutheran* and by extension the ELCA. Hopefully, readers have sensed this in the pages of the magazine over the past three and a half years. With the help of the staff, more substance is being put into the content, with more balance, so it will be a magazine worthy of purchase and support. In 2009, staff will reconsider what works in the magazine, what doesn't, and what might be done differently if a magazine were started from scratch.

More than \$500,000 in promotion will have been spent over four years by the end of 2009. This figure will have to be scaled back in the future if circulation continues to slide. Staff constantly looks for ways to cut costs and increase efficiency, being good stewards of the resources entrusted to the magazine. More needs to be done, however, and the magazine must have help. Without a stable circulation base, cost reduction and efficiencies alone will not get the job done.

Advocates for *The Lutheran* are needed at every level. From denominational officers to bishops to parish pastors to members of local church councils, people need to speak up for the magazine. Raise its visibility among members. Advocate a minimal commitment to *The Lutheran* as a start. If all 10,400 congregations took just 50 magazines—at a cost of less than \$400 to a congregation annually—circulation would be 520,000, a figure that would keep the magazine serving this church for years to come. There is plenty of opportunity—more than 5,000 ELCA congregations do not buy a single magazine.

The situation at *The Little Lutheran* is a bit more encouraging. This magazine for very young children was launched with the July/August 2007 issue, timed to coincide with the previous Churchwide Assembly. Sales started out strong but have since reached a plateau of just under 10,000 copies monthly, so the picture book for children ages 6 and under is now being marketed more heavily to congregations and other organizations that can benefit from the group subscription rate that cuts the magazine's cost roughly in half. Take another look at this excellent product: it tells children about God's love for them. It contains stories, prayers, puzzles, activities and rituals that help children become aware of God's presence in and around them. It will also help introduce them to the knowledge that Jesus Christ is their Savior and friend. It is designed to help

parents, grandparents, and other important persons in a child's life to nurture the child's spiritual awareness from a young age.

With the start of 2009, staff spun off a related magazine, *The Little Christian*. With the same content of *The Little Lutheran* but under a broader title, the hope is that this magazine will make its way into homes where children are being raised in other Christian traditions. An effort to sell *The Little Christian* to members of The United Methodist Church will be a test case. If that proves successful, it will be marketed to all of this church's full-communion partners.

We pray you will join the staff of *The Lutheran* in taking a chance, in stepping up in support of this church's magazine, in being proactive in the face of the challenges before us. May God bless our efforts in this journey together.

Ms. Carol A. McDivitt, *chair*

Mr. Daniel J. Lehmann, *editor*

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