

2009 Monthly Offering Devotions



Mobilizing women to Act Boldly on
their faith in Jesus Christ

Create a Thankoffering Devotion

Thankoffering devotions are expressions of God's abundant blessings. Creating your own is a way for you and the women in your group to grow spiritually as you express how God is active in your particular ministries.

Take some time to make a list of the many ways women gather and interact in your congregation. Meet together to discuss the importance of spiritual growth and how it relates to participation and giving. Further consider how you will share these devotions with all women: those in your community and those you invite from another congregation to join in fellowship and sharing of ministries.

Some elements you may wish to include in your Thankoffering devotion:

- A hymn
- A litany
- Prayer
- Scripture
- Responsive readings
- Silent reflection/meditation

When to use your devotion:

- In your Women of the ELCA circle or Bible Study group
- For personal or family devotional time
- For a committee or other business meeting
- For retreats
- For informal worship time
- At a cluster/conference or synodical women's gathering

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Women of the ELCA

2009 Monthly Offering Devotions Connect and Challenge

As a community of women

created in the image of God,
called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and
empowered by the Holy Spirit,

we commit ourselves to

grow in faith,
affirm our gifts,
support one another in our callings,
engage in ministry and action, and
promote healing and wholeness

in the church,
the society, and
the world.

Connecting with and challenging one another in our stewardship, so that together we may implement great change in our church, our society, and our world, is one of the ways we fulfill our purpose. These devotions will help you reflect, discern, and give thanks before an offering is received. As you read, pray with open mind and heart for God's guidance as you continue to support the many important ministries of Women of the ELCA.

The churchwide staff of Women of the ELCA wrote this collection of devotions. **We encourage you to make copies of this booklet for every woman in your circle and unit, and even for women who are not currently involved in Women of the ELCA.** Encourage them to use these devotions as meditation starters for journaling and prayer.

January

Devotion to Prayer

Prayer. It's a simple word that conjures up many meanings. There are the spoken prayers we offer in the liturgy, like the prayer of the day and the post-communion prayer. There are the often quickly said prayers before a meal and the desperate words that come in desperate times. There are the spontaneous exclamations of joy and thankfulness. These are prayers offered with words, but prayers can also be offered with dance, music, movement, even sighs.

When I was young, offering prayers at meals and at bedtime was fairly typical for me. As a teen, I expanded my prayers to include petitions before exams and significant events like taking my driver's test. As a young woman, I became part of a prayer chain. Over time, I've come to embrace Martin Luther's words that "prayer is everything the soul does in God's word." I'm not always voicing a prayer petition, but I see all that I do as part of my constant dialogue with God. I am quite cognizant of the corporate and personal prayers I voice to God, while I am less cognizant, but still aware, of the many other ways in which I converse with God.

I once drove a portion of the Pacific Highway in Oregon. I stopped twice to simply stand in awe, taking in the grandeur of the vast ocean and breaking waves on one side and the verdant mountains on the other. I didn't voice a word. I just stood there, contemplating the Creator and the creation.

My wish for you as we begin the new year is this: May you find ways each day to be in dialogue with God without using words. Do not limit your experience with God to that which can be translated into words. "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (Colossians 4:2, NIV).

Offering Focus: Your offerings support resources and events that support our evangelism strategy, enabling women to share Christ in their daily lives.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director, Women of the ELCA.

February

Unnamed voices

Who are they that spoke in tongues? We read the passage in Acts where the crowd is filled with the Holy Spirit, and we try to comprehend the shock and wonder that must have rippled through the crowd as they all heard in their own language. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:3–4). The passage continues with a guest list of who was in attendance: both Cretans and Arabs, both Jews and proselytes . . . can’t we also infer both men *and women*? It is one of many instances in the Bible where we know women are present, and though they may not be named, their voices are indeed there and no less valuable.

Is it not the unnamed who often call out the loudest and with the most authority? A popular perception in our culture today is that name recognition is of the utmost importance. If you Google your own name, how many hits does your name get? Why, as a culture, have we come to believe there is any value in this?

It is the unnamed who often cry out with the most passion, and it is the silent actions of countless unnamed others who passionately respond to those appeals that reveal to us how little significance there is in a name.

It was the Spirit-filled yet unnamed crowd who called out with so much conviction. We do not know the names of those who were in the temple that day, but we do know that their voices were not only heard but understood by all who were there! May we all endeavor to seek out the unnamed persons in our midst, acknowledge their voices, and understand their needs.

Offering Focus: Your gifts support *Café*, our online publication for women 18–35, and other programs that reach out to younger women.

Emily Hansen is an associate for programs in the areas of grants, scholarships, and stewardship for Women of the ELCA.

March

Springtime

What a long cold winter season it can be. I woke up early one morning to the voice of the radio's all-night newscaster delivering the update on the conditions outside: "It is currently eight below with a high for today of four degrees and sunny." I had spent the previous evening shoveling snow and doing volunteer well-being checks—folks of limited means living without heat during the coldest part of the winter is a reality—and my morning thoughts and prayers once again turned to those enduring the worst of winter. Still, I was motivated to crawl out from beneath the covers by the thought of the sun shining and spring being not too far away.

The seasons are not just the focus of those who work the land. No, all of us pay attention to the seasons. We find all kinds of ways to hope for spring no matter how long the winter. The harshest days of winter would crush our spirits if there were no hope of spring. But our hope, our real hope, comes from the One who came to dwell among us. Spring is a season of restoration and seemingly endless possibilities, like an artist bringing new and vibrant colors to her canvas. Spring brings us signs that we will once again feel full of life, and spring gives us renewed confidence that we can be nourished and full. And though the transition into spring brings a few storms, they are soon forgotten.

As we move toward springtime, we take care to reflect on what needs to be recovered and uncovered. It's a time of preparation and anticipation, for the good news of Christ's resurrection—like the day you realize you can shed the heaviness of your winter coat for this new season—is approaching. Our thoughts of winter become but a distant memory. We rejoice in springtime and Easter, and in all their hopes and promises, today.

Offering Focus: Your gifts support events and resources for the Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls Initiative.

Valora K Starr is an associate for programs in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, and global education for Women of the ELCA.

April

God Is Good

“God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good!” I was practically raised on this saying. I heard it so often that it became a cliché. Yet if you stop and think about the goodness of God, you can’t help but stand in awe.

Our good God:

- laid down the Son’s own life so that we may be saved
- woke us up this morning and gave us another opportunity to live righteously
- constantly forgives us and invites us back again and again to mirror God’s love
- showers us with new grace and mercy every day

Right about now you are probably asking, “but if God is good all of the time, why do I go through hard times?” In Matthew 5:45 we are reminded that God sends sun and rain on the righteous and unrighteous alike. In going through trials, we learn that God is always with us, inviting us to trust and see how God will bring us through. When we trust and believe in God not because of what’s happened in our lives but based on the Word, we’re stepping out on faith. We are reminded in 1 Peter 1:6–7: “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Yes, even when we are going through hard times, God is still working on our behalf. God is so good!

Offering Focus: Your Thankofferings support Women of the ELCA’s annual gift to the ELCA.

Deborah Powell is director for operations for Women of the ELCA.

May

Unity in Diversity

For this devotion, you'll need three differently shaped vessels, a pitcher of water, and a table.

Leader 1: Dear God, we gather as one (*pouring water into one vessel*), washed in the waters of baptism, yet we are not the same . . .

All: We rejoice in our forgiveness!

Leader 2: We gather as one (*pouring water into second vessel*), filled with God's Holy Spirit, yet we are not the same . . .

All: We rejoice in our diversity!

Leader 3: We gather as one (*pouring water into third vessel*), vessels for your grace and your service, yet we are not the same . . .

All: We rejoice in the gift of community!

Leader 1: Just as these vessels hold water, yet each has its unique purpose . . .

All: Rejoicing in our diversity, we serve our God.

Leader 2: Just as these vessels hold water, yet do not look the same . . .

All: Rejoicing in our diversity, we accept each other in Christ's love.

Leader 3: *Dip a fingertip into one vessel, and turn to the woman to your left. Make the sign of the cross on her forehead (or on the palm of her hand) and say:* In you I see my sister, sealed with the cross of Christ forever, possessing gifts needed to build the body of Christ.

Repeat around the circle and close with the Lord's Prayer.

Offering focus: Your offerings support Women of the ELCA's anti-racism programming materials and events.

Inez Torres Davis is an associate for programs in the areas of anti-racism, cross-cultural awareness, and commercial sexual exploitation for Women of the ELCA.

June

Unknown Paths

Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.” Ruth 2:11

Despite an opportunity to return to her own family, Ruth insisted on accompanying her mother-in-law, Naomi, to an unknown place. Her wish was to remain a faithful and hopeful companion, committed to creating a new community for herself and Naomi. It was a bold move to risk an uncertain future far from her native land. Ruth resisted the easier path, instead placing duty above sanctuary, loyalty above comfort. She risked creating a new community rather than falling back into a pre-existing one, and in doing so bravely faced the unfamiliar while ultimately helping those closest to her.

Is there a time you bravely chose to take an unknown path? Can you reflect on a time when you encouraged someone to take an unfamiliar yet promising new road? Each year, Women of the ELCA’s scholarship program supports remarkable and bright women who are creating a new community for themselves and their families as they embark on a new career or new program of study—not with the assurance of success but with the faithfulness and excitement that makes taking that new path worth the risk. Give thanks for the support we give to women entering the many unknowns that accompany a new career, new degree, or new ministry.

Offering Focus: Your offerings support the Women of the ELCA scholarships program.

Emily Hansen is an associate for programs in the areas of grants, scholarships, and stewardship for Women of the ELCA.

July

Trust

If I'm saving for a rainy day, college, or retirement, or for my loved ones after I'm gone, does that mean I'm not trusting in God for what I need? In Matthew 6:19–20, Jesus tells us, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” I try to imagine using only the resources that God has given me without worrying about more, but how can I not worry just a little as I witness downsizings, foreclosures, and investment failures? And then there are the homeless, the hungry, the sick, and those mistreated by the system, and my congregation is asking me to do more because government programs are dwindling.

Matthew presents hope for us today. We read, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21). God shows us how easily all we have stored up can disappear, whether it is consumed by moths, rust, a pink slip, or a stock market crash. We have no absolute control. With all the unknowns, can we imagine relying solely on ourselves to provide for our every need?

It is only when we concentrate on our relationship with God and others that “our treasure” begins to make sense. Trust continues to grow with prayer, study of God's word, and sharing with others. Trusting in God for what we need frees us to serve God and unfold God's plan for our lives. Storing up what we can't count on is a waste of time. Don't worry about the rainy day. Give God thanks and trust God to show you where the sun is!

Offering Focus: Your offerings support Women of the ELCA's ecumenical partnerships and ministries, celebrating Women's History Month, World Day of Prayer, and Justice for Women activities.

Eva James Yeo is administrative assistant for communications and oversees Lutheran Woman Today magazine's Web pages.

August

Getting Rest

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Mark 6:30–32

Upon returning from their mission, the twelve told Jesus all they had accomplished, though there was still so much to be done that “they had no leisure even to eat.” Sound like your life? How many times has Jesus whispered to you, “Come with me by yourself to a quiet place and get some rest”? What was your answer? Did you answer?

Just as we easily skim over these few lines that come before the work of feeding the five thousand, we often don’t recognize or hear Jesus’ invitation to rest and retreat. Jesus issues this invitation to us because he recognizes the importance of rest and renewal to effective ministry. Practicing self-care is central to effective ministry: A rested body and mind are willing and able to serve as Jesus served. Accepting the invitation to rest can mean a quiet, slow-paced meal, a nap, or just stopping to drink some water.

Self-care gives God honor and praise. Jesus and the disciples did not always find it easy to get the rest and renewal they needed either, but they found their solitary place and then, refreshed and renewed, went back to work—feeding five thousand!

Offering Focus: Your offerings support Women of the ELCA’s global education program.

Valora K Starr is an associate for programs in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, and global education for Women of the ELCA.

September

Worship

Regardless of our personal preferences or history with celebration and worship, there is a yearning in each of us to show our devotion to God. Our styles of devotion might be different, but our hunger for it is the same. That hunger for worship and devotion is deep; it connects us with God, connects us with God's means of grace, and connects us with our own call for service.

In the hymn "Creating God, Your Fingers Trace," we sing, "Redeeming God, your arms embrace all now despised for creed or race; let peace, descending like a dove, make known on earth your healing love. Indwelling God, your gospel claims one family with a billion names; let every life be touched by grace until we praise you face to face." (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)

Devotion celebrated and expressed across cultures and traditions celebrates the renewing power of the gospel. We are called as one people of God to worship together: one family with a billion names and all with the ability to connect to God's promises and love for us. Let our lives be touched by grace as we worship, not necessarily with the same style but with the same substance that is rich with the power of the gospel.

As we worship together, we also celebrate not only our history but also our present. Did you know that there are 140 member churches in the Lutheran World Federation? The ELCA is just one of them. Indeed, what a vast and wonderful global church we are!

We should feel free to explore different cultural and global styles of prayer, of music, and of life! It helps us connect to women around the world and remember that we all are connected with God's grace and God's call for justice and peace.

Offering Focus: Your offerings support the Women of the ELCA grants program, which funds both domestic and international projects that support women and children.

Emily Hansen is an associate for programs in the areas of grants, scholarships, and stewardship for Women of the ELCA.

October

What Is Safe

Leader 1: The principles of safety, responsibility, respect, and cooperation are basic to healing.

Leader 2: We distinguish between experiencing fear—which is an occasional part of everyone’s life—and living in fear, which is damaging.

All: Safety is being free from physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional threat. A safe environment is needed for healing. We all want this organization to be a place of healing for women, and our purpose statement outlines how we can provide such safety.

L1: To be personally responsible is to understand that the wounds received as a child at the hands of adults were not our fault.

L2: It also means that healing in our adult lives is up to us and that we are not to pass these wounds on to others by blaming or hurting.

All: As we daily remember our baptism, we are free to turn toward God and away from our need to see God’s judgment. Healing wisdom lets go—it lets go of judging, it lets go of control, it lets go of the first place, and it lets go of being right.

L1: Cooperation multiplies our safety. Cooperation is coming together to accomplish goals of healing not possible for one person to accomplish alone.

L2: Such cooperation embodies balance and builds on our communal strength so that safety can prevail. Healing occurs with balance.

All: This kind of balance, cooperation, and communal strength flows from the eucharistic table. Healing wisdom understands the faith that Martin Luther described as that which changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts, and all our powers.

L1: Healing wisdom is a byproduct of this living, creative, active, and powerful faith that compels us to action.

L2: Healing wisdom insistently seeks the wholeness that is given to us from God in Jesus Christ.

All: Amen.

Offering Focus: Your Thankofferings support Women of the ELCA’s advocacy and justice efforts and resources.

Inez Torres Davis is an associate for programs in the areas of anti-racism, cross-cultural awareness, and commercial sexual exploitation.

November

Holy Imagination

I have heard concern among many of the faithful women of this organization that we're outdated, no longer relevant, too old. As one of my friends would say, we're perceived as "chubby middle-aged church ladies" with all the stereotypes and baggage that come along with that. The writer Phyllis Tickle says that every 500 years or so "the church has a rummage sale." She said the last such upheaval was the Reformation, in 1517, when Martin Luther posted the 95 theses.

After these times of change, the old order doesn't go away entirely but loses much of its influence. If she's right, we're about due. In fact, she argued that the next big shift has already begun. What will these changes mean as we go to Bible study, make quilts, and do ministry in our congregations and communities? How badly do we want to make a difference? How much do we want to see growth and renewal in our lives, in our congregations, in our communities, and in this women's organization that we care so much about?

To remain influential will take *holy imagination* on our part—we have to open the doors and windows of our minds and hearts to new ideas, new people, new ways of doing things, and new ways of being. We can fling open those doors with energy and curiosity, or we can open them with trepidation and loud creaking. But if we don't open them, we will wind up speaking only to ourselves. And then we *will* be irrelevant.

Now is the time to sit and dream together. What kind of faith life do I wish for my granddaughter, my daughter, myself? Author Kathleen Norris says that "prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine." Let's ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with bold imagination and creativity, to change us in ways we haven't yet imagined, and to challenge, nourish, and renew this organization—to the glory of God and for the sake of the world.

Offering Focus: Your offerings support *Lutheran Woman Today's* Bible studies and other educational materials.

Kate Elliott is editor of Lutheran Woman Today magazine.

December

Glorifying God

You glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you. 2 Corinthians 9:13–14

Communications theorists tell us that we need to hear information seven times in three different ways before we really absorb it. It is sometimes difficult to find the time, energy, and opportunity to keep telling our story, over and over again, yet is exactly our willingness to keep talking about the love of God we have experienced through this organization and our congregations, friends, and families that God uses to touch people's lives. Our letters, phone calls, posters, announcements, articles in the paper, talking over coffee—all of these and more are the channels God uses to reach people.

Your offerings support our communication efforts, which help women on their faith journeys share their faith and hope with others. We ask God to help us be diligent in this work as we share your concern and commitment for all people.

Offering Focus: Your offerings support our monthly newsletter, *Interchange*; our Web site; our e-zine, *Café*; and other resources, including the new Women of the ELCA video *Created in the Image of God: A Community of Women*.

Bonnie B. Belasic is a program associate for special projects for Women of the ELCA.

