

# What it means to be Lutheran

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



Lutherans don't often garner much media attention. In this country we don't make up a big segment of the population. When groups of Lutherans began arriving on these shores in the 18th and 19th centuries, they tended to stay in their nationality and language

groups and didn't assimilate completely into the surrounding culture. We kept to ourselves and so went relatively unnoticed. Lutherans, with some exceptions, weren't part of the political or economic elite. There are both benefits and problems because of this. More later.

Our state of relative obscurity is about to change. In 16 months we'll mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. For a brief time a spotlight will be turned on Lutherans in this country and around the world. Documentaries will be produced and aired, seminars will be held and, particularly if Oct. 31, 2017, is a slow news day, the media is going to seek us out and ask us to explain ourselves. When the local newspaper, radio or TV station comes knocking on our door, what are we going to say?

In our churchwide conversation about priorities for the ELCA ([elca.org/future](http://elca.org/future)), we have been asking what it means to be Lutheran. We aren't as good as we could be about giving a clear answer to that question. We speak about grace, about our work in advocacy, about the relief and development work we do, about our inclusiveness and diversity—though I believe these last two are more aspirational than actual—about our ecumenical and interreligious dialogues and relationships. These are true and beautiful and important. They are not exclusively Lutheran.

Many religious and secular organizations are deeply committed to serving the vulnerable and working for justice and peace. The ELCA couldn't engage in ecumenical and interreligious partnerships if there were no ecumenical or interreligious partners. What is distinctive about us then?

When trying to define Lutheran identity we sometimes default to cultural types—northern

and central European heritage, a certain kind of hymnody, even standard entrees at church dinners. I'm not dismissing the faithful witness of the millions of Lutheran immigrants who left Europe to start a new life on this continent. They built churches and hospitals and universities. They cared for the poor, the widow and the orphan.

They also lived in close-knit ethnic communities that, at first, helped maintain the Lutheran confessional movement. That is the benefit I noted above. The problem is that the Lutheran movement in this country has become overidentified with a particular cultural expression.

If we manage to not describe ourselves by a particular culture, we have the tendency of describing Lutheranism as a set of behaviors—we are inclusive, we work for justice, we stand with the vulnerable, we are an inviting church. Please, God, let it be so.

But the danger is we can slip into what scholasticism called "*fides formata*." Today we might say faith formation: not in the sense of a living faith that has first been given as a gift, but that correct action leads to faith. Either of these expressions—cultural or behavioral—can result in what Martha Stortz, a professor at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, calls the "presumptive we" that leads to the "othering you." Those in the majority assume their experience is universal and those outside of that experience aren't fully part of the tradition.

Neither culture nor behavior define what is distinctive about the Lutheran movement. It's our understanding of the gospel. The gospel word creates faith. The gospel word is judgment and promise. Faith created by this gospel word sets people free to serve the neighbor. The church's proper work is to proclaim the gospel word. You know, in the end, it's all about God's fierce and tender love that drives us to the cross, and there, at the very point of death, gives us life. The world deserves to hear the gospel—when the spotlight is on us, and when it is not. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: [bishop@elca.org](mailto:bishop@elca.org).

This column first appeared in *Living Lutheran's* July issue. Reprinted with permission.