



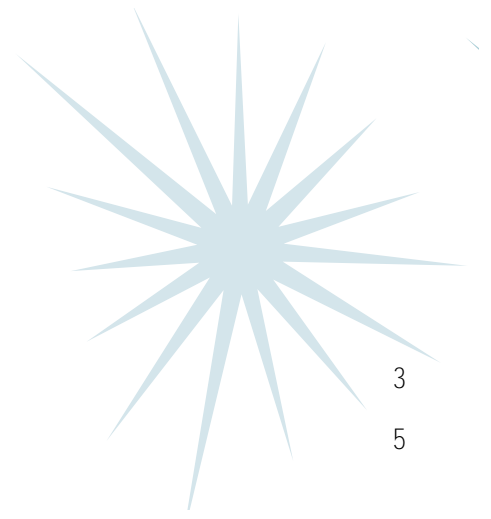
Called to deal with **difficult issues**

A challenging ministry



*A method for theological reflection and
decision making in ministry and daily life*

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Time required

These three one-hour sessions work best as a half-day program, with a 15-minute break after each session. Use of this format is strongly recommended to ensure continuity and greater mastery of the skills being taught, but it is also possible to make this a three-part study, using one session for each meeting.

Materials needed

For the facilitator

- A copy of the resource
- Newsprint and markers
- Overhead projector and screen; overhead transparencies of handouts 1 and 2 (optional)
- Name tags for participants
- A list of sample issues written on newsprint (participants will choose among these issues at the end of Session 1 and discuss the issues in small groups in Session 3)

For the participants

- Copies of the handouts
- Pencils or pens
- Newsprint and markers for small-group work

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We are called to consider how we think about God as we make decisions. We are called to be theologians.

introduction

In 1997–98 Women of the ELCA staff conducted a number of retreats titled *Feasting at Katie's Table*. The title was inspired by Katherine von Bora Luther, who most likely offered a great deal of insight and comment at the “table talks” led by her husband, Martin Luther. Norma Cook Everist, professor of church and ministry at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, was the featured presenter at these retreats.

Women of the ELCA videotaped this popular retreat and published a planning guide to accompany the videotape. That resource, first presented in 1999 at the Women of the ELCA's Fourth Triennial Convention in St. Louis, is now in its second printing. *Called to Deal with Difficult Issues: A Challenging Ministry* contains one segment of the material covered in *Feasting at Katie's Table*.

thinking about God

While Katie Luther served at the table of her famous husband and their many guests, she also listened. She spoke. She asked questions. She was a theologian in that she thought about God. We are called to do the same at every table where we serve. We are called to consider how we think about God as we make decisions. We are called to be theologians.

Whether we are aware of it or not, our theology informs our decisions. Every decision we make is based on our values, our belief system. Martin Luther said that at the core of our beliefs is our God (or god). “In our decision making, we are acting on our theology,” Professor Everist said.

decisions in daily life

During the retreats, Professor Everist led women in reviewing Lutheran doctrine and thinking theologically. She offered an understandable process for dealing with difficult issues. She offered participants new faith skills to use in daily life. This program offered participants new glasses with which to read today's headlines and a new way to think about those events. It allowed participants to respond to the questions, “What do you prize most about being Lutheran?” and “How is what you prize helpful as you connect faith and daily life?”

We believe that Professor Everist's process for dealing with difficult issues remains timely. When an issue is presented, more often than not our first reaction is, “Here's an issue that needs solving. Let's get to the solution quickly and move on to the

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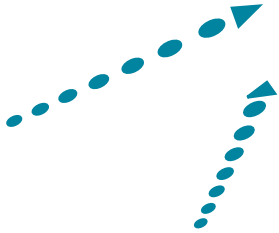
introduction *(continued)*

next issue!” Professor Everist urges us to follow four steps for decision making in ministry and daily life. In some cases, you’ll find that there is no single right answer, and that is OK. Talking through a number of options can be more important than the decision reached.

This process works equally well in addressing questions ranging from “Where will we spend our family vacation?” to “Will our congregation disband?” The process will help you search for God’s grace and justice in everyday situations. It draws upon what we believe and what others may believe. Along the way, it is exhilarating to be reminded of who we are and what we believe as Lutherans.

We hope you will enjoy using this resource and leading others as they learn to use the process.

Talking through a number of options can be more important than the decision reached.



We can learn a great deal by following
the thinking process rather than focusing
solely on finding the answer.

using this resource

In a society that wants instant answers to all problems, situations, and issues, this resource is “out of sync.” But we feel that the decision-making process it presents is a gift to such a society because it offers permission to not always come to a solution. Not every issue has an immediate solution, but we can learn a great deal by following the thinking process rather than focusing solely on finding the answer.

Take to heart the guidance offered in handout 1. The purpose of this resource is not to find answers to specific questions but rather to teach a process to use as you seek the information you need to make such decisions as “Should I purchase?” “Should I move?” “Should I say yes?” “Should I say no?”

session 1 *(1 hour)*

decisions, decisions, decisions *(handout 1)*

It is important to have something in front of the room to point to as the participants review handout 1. You may put the information from handout 1 on newsprint ahead of time, or you may wish to use transparencies and an overhead projector while you talk through the reasons to have a process for decision making. Give participants plenty of discussion time.

Lutherans thinking theologically today: the process *(handout 2)*

Handout 2 presents the process: the four steps and the questions within each step. Again, you will want to have the information also on newsprint or an overhead. Let the participants know that it will be helpful to keep this handout in front of them as they practice the process; it will remind them of the questions to ask themselves and the group.

At the end of Session 1, let people discuss any of the concepts that created a problem for them or that they feel require more attention. Be certain that the group is ready to move on.

Allow a 15-minute break before beginning Session 2. Ask the participants to sign up during the break for one of the issues you have listed on newsprint (these will be discussed in small groups in Session 3). The optimal size for the small groups is 8–10 people. If a large number sign up for one topic, it's fine to have more than one group discuss that topic.

(continued)



using this resource *(continued)*

session 2 *(1 hour)*

Lutherans thinking theologically today: a sample issue *(handout 3)*

Handout 3 presents a sample exercise using the decision-making process. Note that although it may be easy for people to do steps 1 and 2 in isolation, they will need assistance from others for steps 3 and 4. Gathering facts may be done in isolation, but theological reflection requires the voices of others—many others! Allow a 15-minute break before beginning Session 3.

session 3 *(1 hour)*

Lutherans thinking theologically today: practicing the process *(handout 4)*

You will want to be prepared with a variety of issues for people to choose from as they practice using the process, working in small groups. Issues from world, national, or local news or issues in the wider Church or a local congregation may be used. It is helpful, where possible, to assemble relevant newspaper clippings or magazine articles as background information for the small groups to use. The most beneficial discussions will be those that center on a sharply focused issue. As you prepare the list of issues on newsprint, leave space for the participants to add their own suggestions of issues for discussion.

Some sample issues

- Violence in the community
- Life changes (for example, the death of a spouse)
- Problems in family relationships (for example, problems caused when a 30-year-old son or daughter moves back home)
- Questions about death (for example, how do we talk to people who have experienced a tragic death in their family?)
- The relevance of the Lutheran church today
- Accepting self and others vs. judging self and others
- Deciding whether our congregation should become a Reconciled in Christ congregation (one that is welcoming to gay and lesbian people)

Lutherans thinking theologically today: practicing the process on your own *(handout 5)*

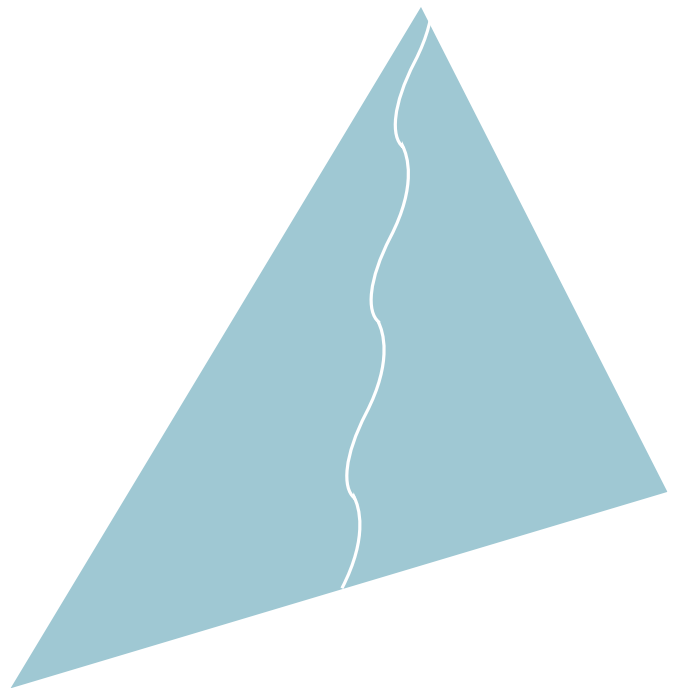
Distribute the extra copy of the worksheet and explain that participants may wish to use these on their own to help them think through an issue or decision they are facing in their own lives. They may make additional copies as needed.

Closing

Conclude by offering some final thoughts and the closing prayer.

Tips for the facilitator

- Be familiar with the material.
- Use the process yourself to think about a few issues ahead of time.
- Recognize that not every question under each of the four steps will be answered each time and in order. For the sake of practicing the process, however, encourage participants to respond to as many of the questions as possible.
- Remember that your job as facilitator is to keep the conversation going and to ensure the widest possible participation, not to share your own views.
- Be reassuring when people are struggling with a new concept.
- Be attentive to the need for people to be heard as well as the need to follow the schedule.
- Be prepared to initiate discussion.
- Find more than one way to ask the same question.
- Ask everyone to speak in "I" statements, such as "I believe" or "I think" or "I feel."
- Be prepared to bring discussions to an end.





decisions, decisions, decisions

The purpose of this resource is not to find answers to specific questions, but rather to teach a process to use as you seek the information you need to make decisions. Should I purchase? Should I move? Should I say yes? Should I say no?

We are called upon to make decisions every day. Behind the decisions that we make are *values*. Undergirding those values are *belief systems*. Luther asked the pointed question “Who are your gods?” He believed that whatever we choose as our god will determine the core of our beliefs.

When we attempt to engage in theological thinking, we often encounter hindrances.

- One hindrance is the temptation to jump too quickly to what we think should be done.
- A second hindrance is the temptation to simplify the process by focusing on one issue or topic. The reality is that even within one issue or topic, we will uncover different viewpoints, opinions, and beliefs. These must be taken into account, even though they complicate matters!
- A third hindrance is caused by our emotions. Emotions of course have a place in theological thinking, but we must recognize that the more emotionally charged the issue, the more difficult to follow the process of theological thinking!

Think of some decisions you have recently made.

- How did you make those decisions? Did you use a process?
- Did you think about your core values every time you made a decision?
- Did your decisions reflect your belief system?
- Did your decisions reflect the God in whom you believe? Did they reflect some other gods that are central in your life?
- Might a carefully laid out thinking process have assisted you?

Session 1: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



Lutherans thinking theologically today the process

Theology is something we do everyday when we think about God. Thinking theologically involves asking questions. It involves getting as much information as possible before making decisions. It involves bringing your values, your belief systems, your gods, or your God into the decision-making process.

STEP 1: attending, listening, observing

Just as we imagine Katie Luther did, begin tackling an issue by attending, listening, and observing. Ask these questions:

- What is going on (the surface issue)?
- What is the context?
- What are the issues behind the issue?
- What are the obstacles to our understanding?

STEP 2: exploring, seeking perspective

Now think of the people and their context. Seek the perspective of others. Explore their points of view. Ask these questions:

- What is going on from the perspective of different people?
- Who is not present? Who is voiceless? What might they say?
- What cultural influences are at work here?
- What systemic evils, or "isms," might be at work?

STEP 3: reflecting, searching

Then we move on to the hard work of reflecting and then searching for the theological issues. Ask these questions:

- What beliefs are represented here?
- What theological issues do we see?
- What images of God and God at work do we see?
- What biblical themes do we see?
- How do Scripture, creeds, and confessional understandings inform our decision making?
- What is the world's view of the issue?

(continued)

Session 1: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



the process *(continued)*

STEP 4: ministry options

Finally, consider all the ministry options. Ask these questions:

- How do we become part of the solution rather than part of the problem?
- What is the need for the gospel, for grace, in this situation?
- Who needs ministry here?
- What are the possibilities for ministry?
- What obstacles may we encounter?
- How do we decide what roles are needed and who is called for what role?
- How do we call each other to faithful accountability?



Session 2: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



Lutherans thinking theologically today a sample issue

the issue Mining in
Appalachia*

STEP 1: attending, listening, observing

What is going on (the surface issue)?

- The continued use by coal companies of a controversial method called mountaintop removal (decapitating mountains) to access deep pockets of coal.

What is the context?

- A federal court ruling may sharply reduce coal mining in Appalachia.

What are the issues behind the issue?

- The landscape cannot bear any more mining.
- Some do not want mountains destroyed.
- If mining dies, the economy of a town or state may die.
- As the mountaintops are removed to get at the coal and as the removed earth fills the valleys, streams are polluted, and wildlife habitats are destroyed.
- The mining industry is exaggerating its importance to the economy.
-

What are the obstacles to our understanding?

- I do not live in Appalachia and therefore have no real knowledge of the economy.
- I have no knowledge of the coal mining industry.
-

STEP 2: exploring, seeking perspective

What is going on from the perspective of different people?

- The West Virginia Coal Association says, "Over time, these sites will either mature to look more like surrounding vegetation, or they can be left to provide developable space for airports, prisons and the like."
- The Coal River Mountain Watch, a local environmental group, says, "The right to mine coal here ends where it endangers our health and safety. You may have your job tomorrow, but what do you tell your kids? That you wasted the future of these mountains?"

(continued)

* This material is drawn from an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 2002, from Whitsville, West Virginia: "State Flat-out Torn Over Mining."

Session 2: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



a sample issue *(continued)*

- The Bush Administration has backed coal as a key component of its energy policy and is warning in legal briefs of “severe economic and social hardships” and “a tremendous cloud of uncertainty over all future coal mining in Appalachia.”
- Chief U.S. District Judge Charles H. Haden II in West Virginia has all but barred the coal industry from filling in Appalachian rivers and valleys with rock and dirt from the mountaintop mines.



Who is not present?

- Those who daily work the mines
- The residents who live in the affected areas



Who is voiceless?

- The majority of those affected by this type of mining and the possible ruling



What might they say?

Two people quoted in the newspaper article might well speak for many of the other “voiceless” ones:

- A 59-year-old cook in a diner that serves breakfast to dozens of coal truck drivers: “No one likes to see the mountains destroyed, but if mining dies, this town dies.”
- The last remaining resident on Kayford Mountain, a 56-year-old who has a 50-acre ancestral home with the graves of some 300 of his relatives on the acreage: “Do you see that sky there? That used to be a mountain. It is gone. And you’re going to tell me any job is worth that?”

What cultural influences are at work here?

- The belief that the area cannot survive without coal mining
- The perception that prosperity is nearly impossible to achieve in Appalachia
- The “I owe everything to the company store” mentality



What systemic evils, or “isms,” might be at work?

- Greed (the coal company wants the best coal at the least cost, no matter what the environmental cost)
- Possibly neither side is telling the complete truth.
- A company may believe it has control over people’s lives, no matter what the cost to the people.



(continued)

Session 2: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



a sample issue *(continued)*

STEP 3: reflecting, searching

What beliefs are represented here?

- Coal mining is needed for survival in this area.
- The land will eventually rejuvenate itself, or it will be used in another way.
- The future of young people in the area is being threatened by the loss of the mountaintops.

●

What theological issues do we see?

- Decisions must be made on the grounds of what is good for the whole community.
- All voices must be heard, and no issue is neatly divided into two sides.
- Any decision must be made for the *long-term* good of all.
- All suffer when God's creation suffers.

●

What images of God and God at work do we see?

- To me a mountain is an image of God.
- I see God at work with the people in the article who are saying there may be a period of adjustment for the mining company, but there is time.
- At this point people are still talking to each other, and as long as conversation continues, there is always room for God to work.

●

What biblical themes do we see here?

- People are meant to be in community with one another and need to talk to each other.
- All creation is a gift of God and must be treated as such.

●

How do Scripture, creeds, and confessional understandings inform our decision making?

- We reap what we sow: if I work for my own profit at the expense of others, eventually there is a price to pay, and I and others will pay.
- Making a decision without consulting others, even if we don't want to hear their voices, is not wise.
- The environment is God's creation. We may have been given dominion over it, but the word *dominion* is misunderstood, and chaos often results.

●

(continued)

Session 2: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



a sample issue *(continued)*

What is the world's view of the issue?

- I believe that on an issue like this one the world does not hold a single view. Those thinking only of money will have one view, and those concerned with the environment will have another view. A third view, of course, is that "as long as it doesn't directly affect me, I don't want to get involved."

STEP 4: ministry options

How do we become part of the solution rather than part of the problem?

- On an issue such as this we probably will not get directly involved unless we live in Appalachia.
- We can, however, find similar issues in our own area: are the environment and possibly people's health at risk because of . . .
-

What is the need for the gospel, for grace, in this situation?

- The grace to admit that the "other side" has some of the truth
- The grace to admit that neither side is totally right or wrong

Who needs ministry here?

- Everyone involved in making this decision
- The people who live in the area and are afraid of the outcome, no matter what decision is made
-

What are the possibilities for ministry?

- Bringing people together in small groups to talk about their fears
- Bringing smaller groups together into larger coalitions
- Providing opportunity for a town meeting with "both sides" presenting their case
- Assisting people in the community to get information for themselves so that they can form their own opinions
-

What obstacles may we encounter?

- People in this area may not be comfortable with the above suggestions for ministry.
- Appalachia has a low literacy rate, so it may be difficult for individuals to do fact-finding.
- "Bucking the system" is usually a dangerous ministry.
-

Session 2: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



a sample issue *(continued)*

How do we decide what roles are needed and who is called for what role?

- First we need to assess together the needs of the community.
- Then we should have people name the roles needed.
- Then we should look at the strengths of each person and who can fulfill each role.

How do we call each other to faithful accountability?

- By coming together and talking and by trying to leave anger and bias aside for the good of the process of decision making
- By asking questions and keeping the conversation going
- By not becoming passive-aggressive (for example, letting others make the decision and then gossiping about it)
- As Christians, through prayer
- With an open mind, admitting that I may not always be right and may not have all the truth
-

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



Lutherans thinking theologically today practicing the process

the issue _____

Now apply the four-step process as you discuss an issue chosen by your group. Use this worksheet to record your thoughts as you and the group work through the process.

STEP 1: attending, listening, observing

What is going on (the surface issue)?

What is the context?

What are the issues behind the issue?

What are the obstacles to our understanding?

STEP 2: exploring, seeking perspective

What is going on from the perspective of different people?

(continued)

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



practicing the process *(continued)*

Who is not present? Who is voiceless? What might they say?

What cultural influences are at work here?

What systemic evils, or "isms," might be at work?

STEP 3: reflecting, searching

What beliefs are represented here?

What theological issues do we see?

What images of God and God at work do we see?

(continued)

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



practicing the process *(continued)*

What biblical themes do we see?

How do Scripture, creeds, and confessional understandings inform our decision making?

What is the world's view of the issue?

STEP 4: ministry options

How do we become part of the solution rather than part of the problem?

What is the need for the gospel, for grace, in this situation?

Who needs ministry here?

(continued)

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



practicing the process *(continued)*

What are the possibilities for ministry?

What obstacles may we encounter?

How do we decide what roles are needed and who is called for what role?

How do we call each other to faithful accountability?



Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



the issue _____

Lutherans thinking theologically today

practicing the process on your own

An extra copy of the worksheet has been provided so that you may apply the four-step outline on your own to an issue or decision you are facing in your life. Use this worksheet to record your thoughts (you may make additional copies as needed).

STEP 1: attending, listening, observing

What is going on (the surface issue)?

What is the context?

What are the issues behind the issue?

What are the obstacles to our understanding?

STEP 2: exploring, seeking perspective

What is going on from the perspective of different people?

(continued)

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



practicing the process on your own *(continued)*

Who is not present? Who is voiceless? What might they say?

What cultural influences are at work here?

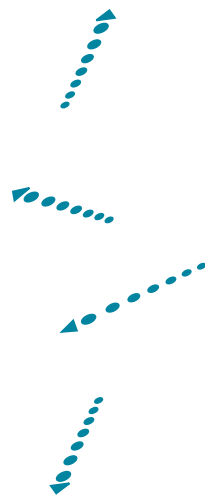
What systemic evils, or "isms," might be at work?

STEP 3: reflecting, searching

What beliefs are represented here?

What theological issues do we see?

What images of God and God at work do we see?



(continued)

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



practicing the process on your own *(continued)*

What biblical themes do we see?

How do Scripture, creeds, and confessional understandings inform our decision making?

What is the world's view of the issue?

STEP 4: ministry options

How do we become part of the solution rather than part of the problem?

What is the need for the gospel, for grace, in this situation?

Who needs ministry here?

(continued)

Session 3: Called to Deal with Difficult Issues



practicing the process on your own *(continued)*

What are the possibilities for ministry?

What obstacles may we encounter?

How do we decide what roles are needed and who is called for what role?

How do we call each other to faithful accountability?





closing

final thoughts

We live in a world that values being right. However, in our headlong pursuit of the “right” answers, we can easily overlook information that needs to be considered. This is especially true when we seek answers about God and God’s creation. Our challenge is to learn to follow a process of theological thinking rather than to focus only on finding answers. It’s tempting to want answers or a resolution to the discussion, and sometimes indecision feels uncomfortable. To shortchange the process, however, is to risk making a poor decision.

An important part of this theologically based decision-making process is making use of shared wisdom. Some would argue that no weighty decision should be made in isolation. Including others in your decision making will improve your decisions.

closing prayer

Good and gracious God, by your Holy Spirit your servant Katherine von Bora Luther heard the good news of “grace alone” and followed your call to ministry in daily life as spouse, parent, provider of hospitality, steward, and theologian. Send your Holy Spirit on us afresh today, that we too might seek your will, follow your call, and witness to your grace in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

An important part of this theologically based decision-making process is making use of shared wisdom.

resources

The Art of Theological Reflection, by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John DeBeer. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

The Church as Learning Community, by Norma Cook Everist. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

A Contemporary Translation of Luther's Small Catechism: Study Edition, translated by Timothy Wengert. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.

The Difficult but Indispensable Church, ed. Norma Cook Everist. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.

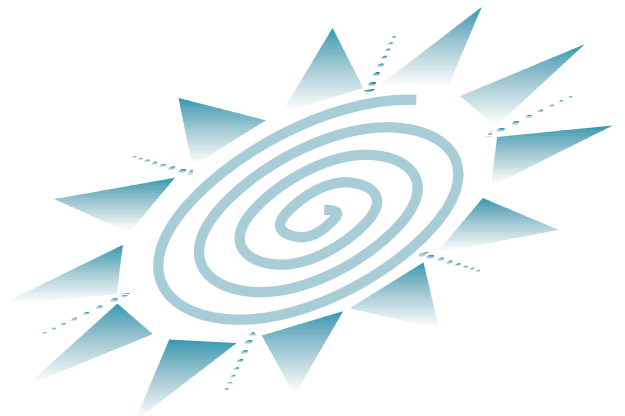
How to Think Theologically, by Howard Stone and James Duke. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Morning Star of Wittenberg. Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001. This 27-minute in-depth video documentary looks at the life of the woman who helped Luther change the course of history. It features the insights of two noted experts on Katherine von Bora Luther: Kirsi Stjerna, assistant professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and theologian Martin Treu, of Wittenberg, Germany. Order by calling 800-638-3522; cost: \$19.95.

Ordinary Ministry, Extraordinary Challenge, ed. Norma Cook Everist. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

A Study of Luther's Small Catechism for Adults, by Todd Nichol. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991.

Where in the World Are You? Connecting Faith and Daily Life, by Norma Cook Everist and Melvin Vos. Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1996.





notes

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notes

A large, empty rectangular area with a light blue background, intended for taking notes.

Called to Deal with Difficult Issues is one program in the Listen, God Is Calling series produced by the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to help women's groups explore together what God is calling them to be and do.

credits

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