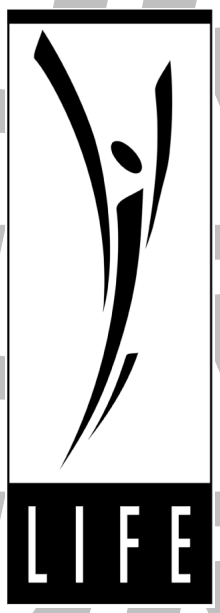
GOD GATHERS PEOPLE INTO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH



BAND A

PLANNING GUIDE

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This planning guide is a part of LIFE, a Christian Studies curriculum developed for Lutheran schools.

LIFE is a joint project of the Board for Lutheran Schools of the Lutheran Church of Australia and Openbook Publishers.

God gathers people into the Christian church is one of twelve concepts covered by LIFE curriculum. This BAND A planning guide contains model units for the first three years of school.

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Published September 1998

© Board for Lutheran Schools, Lutheran Church of Australia, 197 Archer Street, North Adelaide, SA 5006

Printed and published by Openbook Publishers, 205 Halifax Street, Adelaide, South Australia 5000

GOD GATHERS PEOPLE INTO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

AIMS

The ultimate aim of LIFE curriculum is that

- students will come to know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- students will have faith in God as their Father, Saviour, and Helper.

We understand that faith is entirely a gift of the Holy Spirit.

We teach in obedience to Jesus' command to go and teach.

How can people have faith in the Lord
and ask him to save them,
if they have never heard about him?
And how can they hear,
unless someone tells them?
Romans 10:14 (CEV)

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As Christians we believe this and are compelled to tell others.

Our aim in teaching this concept is that students

hear,

explore and

reflect on

these faith statements:

1. The Christian church is the community of believers created by the Holy Spirit
2. God has gathered his people together throughout history
3. Lutherans in Australia work together in ministry and mission*

* Here we use the Lutheran Church of Australia as an example of a denominational church body.

BACKGROUND NOTES FOR TEACHERS

GOD GATHERS PEOPLE INTO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? When the Bible talks about church, it does not mean a building or a worship service or an organisation created by human beings. The church is people — the people of God. The Greek word for 'church' in the New Testament is 'ecclesia', which means 'an assembly' and has the basic idea of a group of people who are 'called out' to form God's special community. In the Old Testament the people of Israel were God's special people called out from all the nations, set apart ('holy') to receive God's gracious blessing and to be a blessing to all nations. In the New Testament this privilege is given to Christians (1 Peter 2:9,10).

In the Apostles' Creed we say we believe in *the holy Christian (catholic) church.* This church is made up of people whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Jesus as their Saviour.

The New Testament uses several pictures to teach us about the church.

- The church is the 'body of Christ', in which Jesus is the head and each believer in Jesus is a member (Romans 12:4,5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27).
- The church is a family (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15).
- The church is a living temple in which Jesus is the cornerstone and Christians are the bricks which have been laid on the firm foundation and support each other (Ephesians 2:20–22; 1 Peter 2:5).

The vine (Jesus) and the branches (people joined to Jesus by faith John 15: 1–7) and the shepherd and his sheep (John 10) are other pictures of the Christian church.

THE OUTWARD CHURCH We can talk about the church in a wider and a narrower sense. In the wider sense, the Christian church is the outward organisation that is made up of all people who call themselves Christians. This includes people from every Christian denomination and congregation. But not all people who call themselves Christians are genuine believers in Christ. The parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13: 24–43) reminds us that in every denomination and every congregation there are hypocrites as well as true believers. We can't tell who are believers and who are hypocrites, so we are not to try to do the sorting out that God will do in the judgment.

THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH
In the narrower sense the Christian church is only those people who genuinely are Christians, believers in Christ as their Saviour. They are 'holy' people ('saints') because by faith they have the forgiveness of sins. At the same time, they are sinners. This means that there will never ever be a perfect church; it will always be an assembly of people who live only by God's gracious forgiveness. The Lutheran Confessions say: *'The church . . . is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in (people's) hearts . . . The following phrase, "the communion of saints", seems to have been added to explain what "church'" means, namely, the assembly of saints who share the association of the same gospel or teaching and of the same Holy Spirit, who renews, consecrates and governs their hearts'* (*Book of Concord p169).*

> When the word of God is taught or proclaimed and when God's special gifts of baptism and the Lord's Supper are celebrated, the Holy Spirit is present and active to build up the family of God. This family is called the church.
> (Theological Foundations of LIFE curriculum)

When we describe this church as 'catholic' (universal), we mean that it exists all over the world — wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion are used according to Christ's command. A Christian congregation — Christians gathered around the word and sacraments — is the church of Jesus Christ in a particular locality. There are members of the holy Christian church in every Christian denomination and congregation. Through the gospel and sacraments the Holy Spirit *calls people to Jesus, brings them together into the church, leads them to know and trust Jesus, makes them holy, and keeps them with Jesus in the Christian faith* (*Third Part of the Apostles' Creed, Small Catechism,* Martin Luther).

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH There is only **one** holy Christian church. Jesus' prayer that his followers 'may be one' (John 17:21) has been answered: there is only one 'communion of saints'.

How, then, do we explain the lack of unity in the outward church — the fact that Christendom is divided into a large number of different denominations? This is due to the failings of human beings. Various denominations arise as human beings do not agree in their interpretation and application of the word and will of God. Every denomination must constantly check its teachings and practice against what the Bible says. At the same time every denomination should acknowledge that the Good Shepherd has his sheep not only in one denomination but wherever the Shepherd's voice is heard (John 10:16). All denominations should be prepared to dialogue with each other on the basis of Scripture, with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will lead them to know and understand the truth of God more clearly (John 16:13) and so bring them into greater outward unity.

The Lutheran Confessions stress that different ways of doing things in the church do not destroy the unity created by the Spirit.

> *The true unity of the church is not harmed by differences in rites instituted by [human beings]* (*Book of Concord* p 174) . . . *It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies instituted by [human beings] should be observed uniformly in all places* (*Book of Concord* p 32).

THE SURVIVAL OF THE CHURCH

The history of the Christian church is full not only of examples of great faith but also of stories of human frailty and shortcomings. It is a miracle of God's grace that the church has survived in the face of countless threats from inside and outside. As we Christians today struggle to be God's faithful church and wonder about its future in an indifferent and hostile world, we can hold on to Jesus' promise: 'I'll build my church, and death itself won't have any power over it' (Matthew 16:18).

FOR REFLECTION AND/OR DISCUSSION

1. What questions do the *Background Notes* raise for you? What questions do you think your students will have on this topic?

2. Why is this an important topic to teach to your students? What implications might the topic have for the life of your school?

3. Jesus promised: '. . . I'll build my church, and death itself won't have any power over it'. What church was Jesus talking about? all denominations together? one particular denomination? no denomination?

What evidence is there of Jesus' promise being fulfilled today when the church often seems to be ineffectual and struggling for survival?

4. How does the reality of the average Christian congregation in Australia today compare with the ideal of Bible pictures, such as
the body of Christ (1 Cor 12),
the holy temple (Eph 2: 19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–10),
the shepherd and his flock (John 10:14–16, 27,28)?

5. How does/should Christian school and Christian congregation relate to each other? Can a Christian school be considered a Christian community in its own right?

FOR FURTHER READING

There is a good summary of Lutheran teaching about the church in the Theses of Agreement V, *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions* A 6–11.

Book of Concord: Augsburg Confession Articles VII and VIII; Apology Artciles VII and VIII; Smalcald Articles XII;
Large Catechism, Part 3 of the Apostles' Creed.

Good Questions : Why don't church denominations work together? (p 29);
Do I have to belong to a church to be a Christian? (p 31)

BAND A STUDENTS

Before you begin to teach this unit, spend some time considering the experiences that your students may have had with 'church'. Some of your students will be familiar with a church building and the activities that happen within it, others will rarely have been inside a church. As you teach, be inclusive of students of all denominations and of students who do not regularly attend a church.

Even students who do not have first-hand experience with church can learn about the church. At this band level you are developing students' understanding of what the Christian church is and the terminology that is used when talking about the church, eg church, building, Christian, Lutheran. You will find examples of simple definitions in the model units.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS	***IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING***
Students are becoming more adept at expressing their feelings.	Students may give very 'honest' responses, eg 'church is boring'. Accept such responses without feeling personally upset by them.
Abstract thought and the ability to reason things out step by step has not developed.	Avoid the use of abstract images when you are talking about the church.
Students learn best from concrete activities.	Include a visit to a church building and allow students to touch, ask questions, etc. Include opportunities for acting, constructing and exploring concepts through play.
Talking about what they observe allows students to make sense and order of their world.	Provide opportunity for students to express their ideas and observations through talking, writing, art. Students who attend a church can be a valuable resource in this unit if given opportunity to share their experiences with others.
Students learn by asking questions.	Students who do not attend a church may have many questions about the building and what the people do. Take time to answer these in language that students can understand. If possible, arrange for your class to attend a worship service in a local church building. Talk about the experience as a class. If you invite visitors into the classroom, allow time for questioning. This can be structured by preparing some questions beforehand, eg ask the students: *What things would you like to ask the pastor when he comes to visit?* At the same time provide opportunity for spontaneous questions.

NOTES