

Encouraging Bible Classes in Our Congregations

by Mark Braun

[Delivered at Western Wisconsin District, Southwestern Conference Pastoral Conference, St. Paul's Cataract, September 18, 1984]

In October of 1982 I went to a seminar in Chicago to see Harry Wendt, a pastor of the LCMS, present a method of Bible study called *Doctrine in Diagram* (since renamed *The Divine Drama*). In the course of two and a half days, Harry Wendt said some things I could not agree with and some things about which I was disturbed. He said some things that were helpful and useful for teaching Christian doctrine. And he said some thought-provoking things. The most thought-provoking of all, in my opinion, was this: "*Jesus played with children and taught adults. Why is it the Christian church insists on doing the reverse?*"

Do we teach children and play with adults? We pride ourselves on the extensive, expensive commitment we make to Christian education at the Christian Day School level. Are we happy with the kind of Christian education our people receive after they're 14?

The topic assigned for this paper is called *Encouraging Bible Classes in Our Congregations*.

I hope to offer

- I. An assessment
- II. An attitude
- III. An approach

I

If we're going to talk about encouraging Bible classes in our congregations, a logical question to ask is, "How are we doing?" Let's take stock.

Let's look at *statistics*. According to *A Profile of WELS Lutherans*, published in 1981, 94% of all Wisconsin Synod Lutherans surveyed said that they were offered the opportunity in their home congregation to attend some kind of Bible class. But how many of them go? The 1983 Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Synod says that there are 314,792 communicant members in our Synod; of that number, pastors report that 27,880 attend Bible classes. That comes out to 8.9% of our members attending Bible class of some kind in their parish. The Statistical Report offers no clue as to how often Bible classes are offered in our congregations. Once a week? Twice a week? More often? Less often? Once a month? Every Sunday, year around? Every Sunday, during the school year? In six-week blocks? In ten-week blocks? In sixteen-week blocks? We don't know.

Perhaps it comes as no surprise to you that a far higher percentage of WELS members go to Bible classes *in the outlying districts of our Synod*. The *Arizona-California District* has an average Bible class attendance of 2,759 out of 14,150 communicants, or 19%. The *North Atlantic District*, 702 attenders out of 2,518 communicants, or 28%. The *Pacific Northwest District*, 833 out of 3,870 communicants, or 22%. The *South Atlantic District*, 961 out of 4,069, or 24%. The *South Central District*, 741 out of 2,903, or 26%. Such numbers come as no surprise if we look at the percentage of members in church on an average Sunday, or the ratio of the number of adult confirmands to total church membership, or per-communicant stewardship. All those figures are almost all consistently high in these outlying areas of our Synod.

By contrast, it probably also comes as no surprise to you that the lowest percentage of WELS members go to Bible classes in the three districts which are *the very heartland of the Wisconsin Synod*, the three districts which carry the very name "Wisconsin" in their name. The *Southeast Wisconsin District*, out of 59,561 communicant members, has an average Bible class attendance of 4,191, or 7%. The *Northern Wisconsin District* has 62,988 communicant members and an average Bible class attendance of 4,170, or 6.6%. Last and

least, the *Western Wisconsin District*, out of 60,905 communicant members, has an average Bible class attendance of 3,699, or 6%.

The figures for the Western Wisconsin District are mirrored in the Southwestern Conference, where the percentage falls slightly below the average of the district as a whole: there are 585 regular Bible class attenders out of a communicant membership of 10,325, or 5.7%. As you page through the 1983 WELS Statistical Report and look at the pages of all three “Wisconsin” districts, it is not at all uncommon to see numbers such as 1130 communicants, 45 in Bible class; 1504 communicants, 45 in Bible class; 2,146 communicants, 65 in Bible class; 969 communicants, 22 in Bible class; 168 communicants, 1 in Bible class.

The numbers are beyond debate. What are we to make of them? Is studying the Bible in an organized Bible class considered an optional activity for most adult Wisconsin Synod Lutherans? If it is, why is it? We have become used to the idea that “good Lutherans” go to church on Sunday; is it a new idea that “good Lutherans” go to study the Bible? When we look at numbers like these, do they lead us to think we really have a problem? Or are such numbers merely a lot of hot air? Is this something to be concerned about? Five years ago I asked somebody who worked at 3512 (now known as 2929) [Mayfair Road], “Why is it that when Synod decides we have a *stewardship* problem, all kinds of forces can be mobilized—stewardship packets, bulletin inserts, letters from the President, meetings with circuit pastors, special offerings, paid consultants? But don’t we also have a *Bible study* problem? If we’ve got only 6% or 8% of our people studying the Bible at an organized church Bible class, why aren’t we getting help from the home office about how to do better an that?” (I could even have added that if we solved the *Bible study*, the *stewardship* problem might have taken care of itself, but I thought better of that!). It was definitely the wrong question to ask!

Let’s assess another way: look at *staff*. At St. John’s in Sparta, we have 4 ½ full-time called workers who offer a highly specialized form of Christian education to 94 souls in our church family. At the same time, St. John’s has one full-time called worker (as of this writing, without a paid secretary), to serve 972 souls in a far broader pastoral ministry. I’m sure many WELS churches have a similar called worker balance. I’m willing to venture that the Wisconsin Synod has loaded more eggs into one basket—by offering the kind of intensive program of Christian education which we offer our children—and yet has more general practitioners in the parish ministry wearing two dozen hats than any other church body in the world.

What’s this saying? I believe it’s saying that we consider Christian education to be extremely important stuff for children, but we apparently consider Christian education to be relatively unimportant stuff for adults. What do people, after they’re 14, expect from their pastor? He’s there to preach. He goes to the hospital. He marries. He buries. He’s entrusted with the huge and sometimes confusing task of “getting the people active” (whatever that means). Is adult education one of his major activities? To look at the numbers, we’d have to say, “No.”

Let’s assess this a third way: consider *schedules*. Ask a pastor how much time he spends on the varied duties of his ministry—or, better yet, ask him how much time he’d *like* to spend on the varied duties of his ministry—preaching, counseling, hospital calls, administrating, educating. For most pastors, in spite of our training, and perhaps in spite of our wishes, I’m quite sure administration lies at or near the top, and educating lies at or near the bottom. It strikes at the very heart of how we spend the majority of our hours and what we’re paid to do best. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, touring America 140 years ago, said when he came to visit the churches, “Where I expect to find a priest, I find a politician.” What would he say today? What would he say about us?

If this assessment looks decidedly grim, we can at least comfort ourselves that this is not a problem unique to the Wisconsin Synod. A Gallup poll taken not quite four years ago revealed *that most Americans think a lot of the Bible, but not very many think much about it*. Seventy-two percent of those questioned answered that they believe that the Bible is “the Word of God,” yet only 12% said they read it daily; 52% said they read it less than once a month. A more recent survey showed that only one church member in ten knew who the man was who sold his birthright for a bowl of pottage, only one-half knew who delivered the Ten

Commandments to the children of Israel, only 26% knew the name of the disciple who betrayed Jesus, 32% didn't know where Jesus was born, and 43% couldn't tell that Jesus was raised from the grave.

Three quarters of a century ago, Alexander Maclaren, the Great Scottish preacher, said:

There are thousands of men and women in all our churches who know no more about the rich revelation of God in Jesus Christ than they did on that day long ago when they first began to believe and apprehend that He was the Savior of their souls. . . . I believe that there are a terribly large number of professing Christians, and good people after a fashion, whose Bibles are as clean today, except on one or two favorite pages, as they were when they came out of the bookseller's shop years ago

Prof. John Bright, in his book *The Kingdom of God*, wrote:

It is unnecessary to furnish proof that there exists even among Christians a widespread biblical illiteracy, and gratuitous to deplore that fact as disastrous. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that Protestantism will not survive if steps cannot be taken to remedy it. . . .

There has grown up in the Church, alongside a total neglect of the Bible, a dangerous partial use of it. As a church we declare that the Bible is the Word of God, and we draw no distinction between its parts. But in practice we confine our use of it almost entirely to selected portions—the Gospels and the Psalms, portions of Paul and the Prophets—and ignore the rest as completely as if it had never been written. The result is that we not only neglect much that is valuable but, what is worse, miss the deepest meaning of the very parts we use because we lift them from their larger context. (pp. 7,8)

Lutheran dogmatician Johann Bengel (d. 1752) said, “As a rule, the way in which Scripture is being treated is in exact correspondence with the condition of the church.” How are we doing?

II

Now, to a great extent, I admit, we are dealing here with externals. Behind such externals as statistics I'm convinced there are some attitudes about adult Bible study in our churches. We may be giving far different signals than we intend to give, or than we realize. What are some of those attitudes?

You're confirmed. Now you have learned all the chief teachings of the Christian faith. Now you know everything you need to know to go to heaven, and to go to the Lord's Supper, and to be considered a good Lutheran. I'll bet there is not a one of us here this morning who has ever dared say such words. I'll bet every one of us here, in his own way, has been struggling valiantly against our people gaining just such an understanding. I'll bet we've all said things in confirmation sermons like: “Don't think of this as the end of your study of God's Word. Think of it as the beginning. Keeping coming to Young People's Bible studies and Adult Bible Classes.” But you know and I know that many of our people (and some of our *best* people) think much more like the first thought mentioned above. Have we been responsible for giving the impression that now that they know everything that's important, their only major goal from now till the day they die is to *stay faithful*?

Most of our congregations have organized, effective ways to see to it that all the children under our care are duly channeled into Christian Day School or Sunday School and then, in time, into confirmation instruction. In some congregations the matter becomes a concern of the Board of Elders if parents do not present their children for the confirmation class. There are few threats more potent to a fourteen-year-old or to his parents than, “You won't get confirmed. . . .” But how much do we, in an organized way, labor to get post-confirmation people into Bible study during the rest of their lives? A half-hearted, “Please come to Young Peoples”? And

how do we entice them? With the wisdom they're going to gain? Not half as much as the trips they're going to take the fun they're going to have.

What is the measure of adult involvement in our churches. Is it, how much Scripture study is done? Not in most people's minds, I'm afraid. In most people's minds, the key word concerning adults is "active"—meaning, I think, "Do they come to potlucks? Are they part of the Fellowship Group? Do they show up for workdays? Do they sing in the choir?" The Lutheran church, I'm afraid, has sold a bill of goods that when you're fourteen and you're confirmed, you're in. Why keep on studying the Bible if you've got it made?

A second attitude: *We have the Word in its truth and purity.* Now, that's all well and good, and maybe even true, but do you see how that attitude could affect the possibility of studying the Bible? *We have* the truth already; why be digging for it? We possess the Word, but does the Word possess us? We know we're right and all the other churches are wrong. But do we know why we're right? Why are they wrong? What are the battles all about? Why aren't we in fellowship with other Christian churches? with other Lutheran churches? Alexander Pope said once, "Some people will never learn anything because they understand everything too soon."

Let your people read the Bible—really read the Bible—and they may have a few struggles with "the Word in its truth and purity." Have you ever had to answer the question, "How come God let Abraham and Jacob and David marry all those wives? Has God's will changed on some subjects?" What do you say when a bright Bible reader asks, "How could God tell Old Testament Israel to practice genocide on her neighbors?" What's your best reply to the question, "How can *He who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks* (Psalm 137:9) be the inspired, inerrant Word of God?" Have you read the Song of Songs with your study group lately? *Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. . . . Your temples behind your veils are like the halves of a pomegranate. . . . Your two breasts ate like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies* (4:1,3,5). What do you say when people open their NIV's and read those footnotes that say, "Some manuscripts have. . ." or "Some early manuscripts do not have. . ."? What's all that about? Are we really ready to put the book—the whole book and nothing but the book—into people's hands and let them start wrestling with those thorny ones? Or is it easier simply to proclaim, "We have the Word in its truth and purity" and keep the hard parts to ourselves?

A third attitude: *The Bible's too hard for the average person to understand. Come to Bible class and your pastor will explain to you what it means.* Again, there is surely some truth in that. St. Peter wrote about St. Paul's letters, that *they contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction* (2 Peter 3:16). No doubt every congregation has its quota of ignorant and unstable people. But has the Bible become so incomprehensible even to the best and the brightest of our people that we must translate or interpret it, even in this age when Bible translations in contemporary English are widely available?

What is the most urgent task we hope to accomplish when we teach a Bible class? "I want to make my members conform to the doctrine and practice of the Wisconsin Synod"? "I want to clean up the woman problem/lodge problem/Scout problem"? Or is our chief concern: "How can God's people be brought closer to their Savior by getting a grip on another portion of God's Word? How can this Word bolster their faith and brighten their hearts to face another week of challenges which the devil, the world, and our flesh will throw at them?" People don't come to church to find out what happened to the Jebusites, and I don't think most people come to Bible class just to have it proven to them how correct their Synod is. They want their faith strengthened and their lives touched.

III

But this paper was meant to be, I think, a "how to." Perhaps it's easier to define the problem than it is to offer a solution. Who has *the solution*? Not I. But an approach has worked modestly well at St. John's, though it

is only a year old. It is only a beginning, and its ultimate success remains to be seen. But I'm willing to offer it as one possible approach to encouraging Bible classes in our congregations.

Arouse interest. How about this for an exciting announcement of a Bible class?

Starting this Wednesday we're going to go through the book of Habakkuk. Surely that's one book of the Bible none of us knows very well, and we ought to know it better. I do hope more people will come to Bible classes. Really, it's terrible how few of us study God's Word. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I work so hard to prepare for these classes, and then nobody comes. I want to see a good turnout for Bible study this time.

Doesn't that just set your heart on fire?

What's wrong with that announcement? A better question is: what's right about it? What's wrong with it? For one thing, it lays an immense amount of guilt on people for not studying the Bible. Maybe they deserve it, but guilt doesn't end up being much of a motivator to do Bible study. There's a big difference between getting somebody to feel bad because he *doesn't* study the Bible, and getting him aroused to believe he *can* study the Bible for fun and profit. For a second thing, that announcement offers no clue why the Bible class will be of benefit to him or to anybody else, other than the pregnant promise that "you'll understand Habakkuk better." Were it not for the high view of Scripture which we share, we would no doubt burst out in reply, "Habakkuk? So what? What's Habakkuk got to do with me? with my problems? with my sins?" And if you can't answer those questions, why is it worth the bother to study Habakkuk? Another failure of that announcement, and a dead giveaway as to the preacher's attitude, is in the words, "I work so hard, and then nobody comes." Who exists for whose benefit? Does the congregation exist for the benefit of the preacher, to satisfy his need to be the sage soothsayer? Or does the preacher exist for the benefit of the congregation, called to be their servant?

I believe we do a better job of arousing interest by speaking to people's needs, and then by showing them that other people's needs have been met at previous Bible study. Last summer, I put this paragraph in our August newsletter:

I'll bet a lot of things have changed for you since you were 14. We've all grown a lot since then, and we look at things and think about things a little bit differently. Do you think the same way about money today as you did when you were 14? Or about marriage? Or sex? Or work? A lot's changed since then!

And yet, for many of us, 14 was the last time we studied the main teachings of the Bible and the Lutheran church—in confirmation class. A lot's changed since then. Maybe you've gone through some tough times, or maybe you've suffered a hurt. Maybe you've even been driven to question some of those most basic things your were taught at 14.

Come and ask your questions, and come to go through it all again! On September 8 I am beginning a sixteen week class called "The Adult Inquirers' Class." It is a review of the basic teachings of God's Word which we Lutherans believe. Maybe it'll look different this time around. Or maybe you'll look at it differently. Bring your Bible. Bring a pencil. Bring your questions. Bring a friend.

Let's grow together.

Another approach for arousing interest:

- *Are people born inherently bad, or do we get bad from the bad things around us?*
- *Why do Lutherans baptize babies, and Baptists don't?*

- *My friends at work asked me if I'd ever been "baptized with the Spirit." Have I? What are they talking about?*
 - *If I died tonight, what would happen to me? Can I be sure?*
 - *Why doesn't our pastor take his turn offering the opening prayer at the city council meeting?*
 - *On Pray TV I heard somebody talking about the "rapture." What's that?*
 - *What happens to my soul after I die?*
- Did you ever wonder about questions like these? Did you ever get put on the spot to answer them, and didn't know what to say?*
- Come to **the Adult Inquirers' Class**, and ask me. . . .*

An approach I used this summer, after the class had been taught twice last year:

WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING ABOUT THE ADULT INQUIRERS CLASS?

Ask them! Here are the people who went through the first two sessions of the Adult Inquirers' Class, held last fall and spring:

Carol Albrecht	Ron Baumbach	Cherri Brown
Dennie Brown	Chuck Bluske	Dorothy Day
Allene Evenson	Judy George	Rich George
Iona Hayter	Bob Jackson	Virginia Jackson
Frieda Johnson	Gerald Kolterman	Joan Kolterman
Agnes Krenz	Bob Krenz	Gail Lehman
Bob Lehman	Martha Lehman	Georgia Lindeman
Scott Lindeman	Marilyn Lukasek	Sie Maenpaa
Tom Maenpaa	Shelby Mantzke	Dennis Nichols
Elaine Quast	Dale Ritter	Vicky Ritter
Howard Roerig	Marilyn Roerig	Bev Riley
Lilah Olson	Elizabeth Schroeder	Wilfred Schroeder
Bernice Stickney	Joice Sullivan	Violet Thomas
Helen Warner	Janet Williams	Butch Williams
Moleta Williams	Gary Sydow	Paul Albrecht
Alice Bluske	Mae Bohnert	Leroy Lewiston
Dorothy Lewiston	E.O. Lukasek	Olga Kramer
Garland Jackson	Betty Mohr	Cecil Meyer
Helen Meyer	Eldor Rauss	Ida Mae Rauss
Alice Shoemaker	Janice Van Dyke	Dorothy Williams
Dora Baumbach	Janet Nichols	Esther Voight
Lydia Zenke	Elmer Holmberg	Stella Holmberg
Lorraine Garner	Evelyn Peterson	Harold Siekert
Vera Siekert	Marcella Rediske	Edna Kroener
Bonnie Deichler	Lewis Deichler	Bernita Deichler
Violet Friske	Carl Friske	Lillie Flock
Nancy Spivey	Stanley Spivey	Debbie Abbott
Randy Abbott	Elsie Amborn	Mary Ballman
Priscilla Braun	Marlene Burke	Lila Begley
Betty Cogdill	Sue Brownell	Fred Crawford
Joan Crawford	Doris Daniels	Robert Daniels
Dorwin Baumbach	Irene Dickenson	Gary Edwards
Lorene Edwards	Marilyn Gautsch	Ethel Johnson

Ruth Johnson	Vernon Johnson	Fritz Degner
Gordon Greene	Rick Greeno	Jerry Kamp
Liz Karbula	Vernabelle Kastberg	Delores Kenyon
Glen Kenyon	Ed Knoll	Nancy Knoll
Frieda Kroener	Mahlon Kroener	Shirley Kirchhoff
Florence Kuehn	Ed Lukasek	Marsha Lukasek
Kathy Phipps	Clyde Quackenbush	Janet Mitchell
Linda Roberts	Anna Schendel	Sue Peck
Louis Schlaver	Faye Schlaver	Lorraine Smale
Grace Sydow	Tonya von Ruden	Howard Wang
Betty Wang	Judy Welke	Bev Wendorf
Ed Wendorf	Jim Wendorf	Karen Schanhofer
Joann Waege	Jan Yahnke	Elsa Yeske
Evelyn Ziegler	Ruth Zielinski	Hubert Arentz
Mary Jo Amundsen	Don Clay	Eva Clay
Ruth Friske	Erna Knoll	Ervin Knoll
Elaine Lambert	Leo Lambert	Linda Williams
Stefanie Williams	Gary Kenyon	Carrie Schultz
Gary Cogdill	Lilah Storandt	

To arouse interest, I also think a Bible class has to be mentioned a lot. TV advertising has become a science, and advertisers know that one message doesn't get through as well as six. Our people are busy people; there are a lot of demands on their time. We have to compete. A year ago in July I started about this Adult Inquirers' Class every week. I said, "If you don't know what I'm talking about by the time we get to September, you aren't listening."

Invite personally. The Adult Inquirers' Class is basically the Adult Membership Information class. Do you have a prospective membership file—names of people you meet in the hospital, at weddings and funerals, friends and neighbors and relatives of members? Starting about a month before the new session of the Adult Inquirers' Class, I put blanks in the bulletin and the newsletter for people to submit names to be contacted for the class. In the weeks before the class you can send personal letters, make telephone calls, and make personal visits. Can you train some of your members (those who have gone through the class and who are, then, "satisfied customers") to also make calls?

What about those people inside the congregation? *The Board of Stewardship* could go out to see people and talk to them about something other than the depressing state of the budget (!). Wouldn't it be refreshing to have a visitor from the church come to your door some time to tell you about the new Bible class you can go to, or the sermon series which will be preached through the summer, or the new family film series that will be shown after Christmas, or to ask your opinion about whether the entire worship service could be broadcast on the local radio station, or to tell you about upcoming events in our Christian Day School or at Luther High School, or to give you a synopsis of what the Church Council discussed and approved at its most recent meeting, or to inform you about new opportunities for service in and around the church, instead of bringing you the latest gloom-and-doom statistics and an urgent plea to give more or the church will go belly up?

The Board of Elders can strongly encourage members who have strayed from Word and Sacrament to come back to an Adult class. The hurts and disappointments, the attacks of the devil and their sinful flesh, the guilt over past sins, have been ravaging these precious souls for *years*. One fifteen minute visit from an Elder and a Sunday back in church isn't going to fix it, any more than putting on a band-aid is going to fix cancer. The only medicine that can change a man is a strong, continued loving dose of the Word. What better place than in an Adult Class?

In addition, I have targeted individuals and offered personal invitations. Following are some example letters that I have sent out:



Church Phone
269-4966

St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church and School
Jefferson and Myrtle Streets Sparta, WI 54656
(Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod)

School Phone
269-6001

December 20, 1983

You and I share something in common. We're both new members of this church during 1983. We're getting acquainted with St. John's Lutheran Church and Sparta together.

I invite you to become re-acquainted with the teachings that you've grown to know and love in the Lutheran church. I invite you to come to

The Adult Inquirers' Class
beginning Monday, January 9,
at 9:30 A.M.
or 7:30 P.M.
for 16 weeks.

The first session of the Adult Inquirers' class, which was just finished this week, was especially rewarding. It gave me the chance to get to know a lot of longtime St. John's members better. And it gave us a chance to explore together what the Bible says about some pretty important questions: Who is God? What does He want from me? What did Jesus Christ do for me? What difference does it make to be a Christian? What's going to happen to me when I die? What I was most gratified about was the number of people who said that even though they had been Lutherans for years (some all their lives!) they still benefited a lot from the class.

See you there?

Pastor Mark Braun

Mark Braun, Pastor
269-3837

Arnold Nommensen, Principal
269-5879



Church Phone
269-4966

St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church and School
Jefferson and Myrtle Streets Sparta, WI 54656
(Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod)

School Phone
269-6001

August 20, 1984

Dear friend,

Allow me to share with you two comments that were made by people who attended the most recent session of the Adult Inquirers' Class:

I guess that I'm somewhat surprised with the misunderstanding, lack of understanding, etc., demonstrated by some members (of St. John's) Sometimes I believe many of these people participate but don't listen or actively participate in the service

I didn't realize how vague I was on church doctrine. I understand better now, where we stand on certain beliefs and issues, and why.

At our Annual Voters' Assembly in January, you were elected to a position of leadership here at St. John's. Because leadership in the church is not only a matter of business but, more importantly, a spiritual leadership, I especially invite you to attend the next session of the Adult Inquirers' Class. I know that you may have already decided to do so, and may have talked to me about it, but I wanted to extend this invitation all the same. Not only will you be giving a good example to our church family, but you will also find strength and knowledge in that saving Word.

The next session of the Adult Inquirers' Class, as you may know, begins *Thursday, September 6, 1984, at 7:30 P.M.* It will run for *16 weeks, through December 20, 1984.* Bring your Bible. Bring a pencil. Bring your questions.

Thank you.

In Him,

Pastor Mark Braun

Mark Braun, Pastor
269-3837

Arnold Nommensen, Principal
269-5879



Church Phone
269-4966

St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church and School
Jefferson and Myrtle Streets Sparta, WI 54656
(Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod)

School Phone
269-6001

August 20, 1984

Dear friend,

Your spouse is a member of St. John's Lutheran Church. Perhaps you know quite a bit about our church and have often attended as a guest at our worship services or other activities. Perhaps your children or other members of your family attend our Christian Day School or Sunday School or are in the Pioneers. On the other hand, perhaps you know very little about St. John's Lutheran Church in particular, or about the Lutheran church in general.

I invite you, if you are interested, to come to find out more about our church. I will be teaching an *ADULT INQUIRERS' CLASS* this fall. This class is a 16-week course covering the basic teachings of the Christian faith as the Lutheran church believes and teaches them. In that class there will be some people who are our members, going through it as a review, but there will also be others who are not members but are interested in knowing more about us.

This class *does not obligate you* in any way. You are *not* making a commitment to changing your church membership and becoming a member of St. John's Lutheran Church by attending this class. If you are at present an actively involved member of another church and do not wish to attend a Lutheran Bible Class, that is fine. But if you wish to know more about this church, and especially if you have questions about the differences in the various Christian denominations, this class is for you. I have had several people during the past year attend the Adult Inquirers' Class, who are not members of St. John's and who do not wish to leave their own church, who nevertheless said that it was beneficial to them to review the teachings of the Bible in this class.

The class will be held:

BEGINNING THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1984

7:30 P.M. to 9:30 P.M.

For 16 weeks (through Thursday, December 20, 1984)

In the church.

If you have any questions, call me. Or, ask your spouse!

Pastor Mark Braun

Mark Braun, Pastor
269-3837

Arnold Nommensen, Principal
269-5879



Church Phone
269-4966

St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church and School
Jefferson and Myrtle Streets Sparta, WI 54656
(Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod)

School Phone
269-6001

August 15, 1984

Dear friend,

I am happy that you and I were able to go through an Adult Inquirers' Class together during the past year. I pray that you found that class as rewarding and as beneficial to your faith as it was enjoyable for me to teach. I hope that you have been able to tell others about the benefits of the class, and that more and more people, both in our church family and outside our congregation, will be encouraged to attend.

Listed below on this letter are the sessions of the Adult Inquirers' Class which you missed, if any. The next session of the Adult Inquirers' Class will begin on Thursday, September 6, 1984, at 7:30 P.M., and will run for 16 weeks, through Thursday, December 20, 1984. Each week, the lesson which will be taught will be listed in the bulletin. I invite you to come to any of those lessons which you had to miss, and "fill in the gaps."

Secondly, beginning on Wednesday, September 12, and running every Wednesday through the year (except on the Wednesdays of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Lent) I will be teaching a class called "Gospel Highlights." It will be a class going through the main stories in the four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I am sure that you have heard many sermons about Jesus' birth, His teaching, His miracles, His suffering and dying and rising. Here will be a chance to ask questions and open up the class for more discussion.

"Gospel Highlights," as I mentioned, will begin on Wednesday, September 12. It will go from 8:00 P.M. (immediately after choir) until 9:30 P.M. If there is a great interest in this class, I will very likely also teach a day class of "Gospel Highlights," very likely on Thursday mornings.

I hope to see you there! The Lord bless your continued study in His Word.

Pastor Mark Braun

The Lessons of the Adult Inquirers' Class you were not able to attend were:

Mark Braun, Pastor

Arnold Nommensen, Principal

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Make it good. The best advertising you can have for a Bible class is good word-of-mouth from your members. All the hype in the world will do no good if the class falls flat.

What makes a class good? Well, we can offer the same pat answers, and, of course, they're correct: teach the *Word*, the *whole* Word, and *nothing but* the Word. But I think there are some particular things which make a class good for many people. These are only suggestions. Disagree with them if you wish, add to them, subtract from them, correct them:

1. *Make people welcome.* Have them introduce themselves to each other, or, better yet, you introduce all of them to each other ("My goodness, Pastor does know my name!"). Tell them you are genuinely happy that they're there (you are, aren't you?). Don't complain to them about all the people who aren't there; what are they going to do about it? Keep that up and they'll be some of them, too. Tell them you expect the class to be a success: "I look forward to spending these next weeks with you and I am eager to grow with you in the knowledge of our Lord's Word and in faith in our Savior."
2. *Establish an atmosphere of trust.* Tell them right away that you're not always going to be the expert, and that you don't know all the answers. If you don't know, say, "I don't know." Smile at them. Assure them there is no such thing as a stupid question in your class, and then go out of your way to avoid proving the reverse. Make sure that if a person doesn't know something you think is pretty "basic" to Christianity, you don't make him feel as if he isn't a Christian.
3. *Apply the Word to our lives.* How is all this going to help me in my job, with my family, in school? What does this say to our church, and to my life together with other Christians? Peter Drucker, the business advisor, has said that he doesn't want audiences to go away from one of his seminars thinking, "I never knew that before." Instead, he wants them to think, "I always knew that. Why haven't I done anything about it before?"

Ask for an evaluation. Ask people to give you a report card. They've probably got marvelous ideas. At about Lesson 11 of the Adult Inquirers' Class I handed out an evaluation sheet.

Chances are a lot of the answers you'll get will be, "I like it a lot," or, "Don't change anything." Most people who say it mean it. Great! Some people who say it say it because they think that's what you want them to say. OK. Some people may tell you things they disliked. Don't be hurt (or, at least, go home and be hurt in private). But if you ask, you'll get some answers that will make you smile, make you think, make you thank God.

(Sample Survey on next page; essay continues on page 14)

Please fill out the following sheet as candidly as you are able and return it to me tonight or on Sunday. I really appreciate your comments and suggestions. There's a blank line on the bottom to sign your name. You don't have to sign your name unless you want to.

1. How have you liked the Adult Inquirers' Class so far?
2. What would you say are the greatest benefits you have gotten from coming to the class?
3. What things have you disliked about the Adult Inquirers' Class?
4. What suggestions would you make for improving the Adult Inquirers' Class?
5. Do you think everybody in our congregation would benefit from coming to the Adult Inquirers' Class? How can we get more of our members to come to future sessions of the class?
6. If we had continued Bible study for those who have completed the Adult Inquirers' Class, what books of the Bible or topics would you like to discuss?

Name _____

How about this one, from a former Jehovah's Witness:

Everything about this class is so exciting and so interesting to me. This is the first time I've really felt this way about Church and God. There's so much to learn about not just the Bible but other things. I just don't know where to begin. It's been a long time since I've been to church, about 10 years, I think. I feel there's something I've missed. I think I need to start over. This class was a start for me.

This is from a life-long Lutheran:

It is a good review of Lutheran beliefs and why we hold these beliefs. A better understanding of times and places and how the Bible was written. Strengthened my faith. Feel more assurance of forgiveness of sins.

Another:

Feeling even closer to my Lord, seeing that there is more faith in this congregation than I realized. Seeing people "open up" and ask some "tough" questions. Finding that the more I learn about God's Word, the more I want to learn.

Another:

It's been stimulating (not from the coffee!) Monday evening and has encouraged me to read all of the books without feeling guilty when I don't understand some parts.

Another:

I didn't realize how vague I was on church doctrine. I understand better now where we stand on certain beliefs and issues and why.

From a former Missouri Synod Lutheran:

I guess that I'm somewhat surprised with the misunderstanding, lack of understanding, etc., demonstrated by some members . . . Sometimes I believe many of these people participate but don't listen or actively participate in the service.

How can we get more people to come?

By letting them know they can ask questions without feeling stupid, and are encouraged to do so.

Encouragement from those who are attending. Myself—I wanted to attend, but one more trip to town. . . . Listening to Dennie Brown talk about the class helped me make the final decision.

Making posters, bulletin and newsletter inserts about the Inquirers' Class which pose some of the questions about which we base discussion, i.e., "Have you ever wondered. . . ?"

Keep attendance. On the first night of the Adult Inquirers' Class, I asked all those there to do the best they could to do three things: (1) Worship every Sunday. (2) Do the assigned reading at home as best they could

(in the course of the class, people are asked to read all of Genesis, Exodus 1-20, and the entire New Testament; a lot of them never make it, but I'm amazed at how much was done). (3) Come to all sixteen classes. I take attendance each week with a pass-around sign-up sheet. Each week's lessons are three-hole punched, to be put in a binder; a person may pick up any lesson he or she has missed. All the classes were recorded, and so a person can ask for a cassette tape of any class he or she has missed. At the end of the sixteen weeks I send a personal letter to each attender, thanking him for his time, expressing the hope that the class benefited his Christian faith and life, and listing the classes which he missed. I invite them to come to the missed classes at the next session of the Adult Inquirers' Class. Each week in the bulletin I list the lesson we're doing, so people can come to the right one.

I also keep a permanent Adult Education File Card on each communicant member. It looks like this:

Name: _____

Adult Inquirers' Class	Date Completed	_____
Gospel Highlights	Date Completed	_____
Corinthians	Date Completed	_____
God's Ways I	Date Completed	_____
God's Ways II	Date Completed	_____
Difficult Doctrines	Date Completed	_____
Why So Many Churches?	Date Completed	_____

As years go by it will be easy to know who to concentrate on to invite to future sessions of the class. Obviously, something like this can be abused. Such an Adult Education File should never be used to pressure people or to make them feel as though they are not Christians unless they get another "diploma." But we think it's all right to keep attendance in Sunday School and confirmation class; why not with adult education?

And that leads directly to: *Follow up*. After the Adult Inquirers' Class, then what? Let them drop? Let them hang? Follow up. Keep going. All those who've completed the Adult Inquirers' Class have received a personal invitation (see page 11) to the next class, *Gospel Highlights*, which is going through selected parts of the life of Christ. The class began last Wednesday night, and will meet every Wednesday except during Lent and Advent—about 25 weeks. In the future, I hope to have a class, on *I Corinthians*, because it is so down-to-earth and talks about so many of the same problems that confront our churches today. Down the road I see a two-year, sixty-lesson course which would go through the entire Bible. Harry Wendt has entitled his two-year course *Crossways*; those of you familiar with *Christian News* know the problems involved with that piece of work. Yet the idea is basically sound: four blocks of fifteen weeks, with discussion and application done in class, and the Bible reading itself done at home. Pastor Ron Heins at St. John's, Wauwatosa, has cleaned up the class and renamed it *God's Ways*. At that point people will really be getting into some meat: reading all the Old Testament, studying the intertestamental period, talking about Daniel and Ezekiel and Revelation. *Difficult Doctrines* would be a kind of advanced doctrine course, done topically. Some suggested topics are the Antichrist, suffering, the millenium and the rapture, the need for creeds. *Why So Many Churches?* would compare denominations, their history and development, their distinctive teachings. Pastor Vic Prange's series of articles in *The Northwestern Lutheran* will soon be made into a paperback, and I'd guess it would be required reading for the course.

I don't know if all this will work or not. I don't know if the people who've come through the Adult Inquirers' Class will continue in Bible study or not. I don't know how many Bible classes a pastor can handle during a week. After you've taught a class once, there isn't as much preparation to be done before the next time you teach it. Still it takes time and energy.

This brings us back to where we began. How important is Bible study in the life of a Lutheran congregation? How much of it do we really want? How do we see our roles as pastors? Is education one of the

primary things we do, or does it take a back seat to “running the church”? If a congregation really wants this level and this amount of adult education, is it willing to provide the staff to do it? If we really want this much Bible study, are we willing to call the additional staff necessary to handle the load? Can we still think that having one pastor for a thousand church members is acceptable when we have not just 3% or 6% or 8% of the communicant members studying the Bible, but 30% or 40% or more? Is all of this paper just so much hot air? Youthful idealism? Are you wondering what I’ve been smoking over there in Sparta lately? Or could this really happen in our churches?

We’ll see.