



# I

## An Inviting Church

### THE CRITICAL QUESTION

Do I belong here?

You have asked that question before. You've been invited to a party. Will you feel comfortable there? The members of an old club have gathered; they all know each other. Will they accept you? A class is forming. Are the others too smart, or too advanced for you? Are you "out of your class"?

Do I belong here? That is a natural question when people gather who are inquiring about a faith and about a church. We often ask the question about belonging with a bit of fear. We may be uneasy. It's a bit frightening.

Everything new is frightening. When what is new has to do with urgent issues, newness can be even scarier. Inquirers wondering about their health may tremble at the clinic. Those examining their financial condition may do so with a racing pulse. And now, as we begin to take up matters that affect the deepest, most intimate—yes, we may even say *eternal*—issues, we have reason to be a bit uneasy at first.

If you could visit groups of inquirers all over the map and everywhere in the church, you might find that a typical group would include uneasy people like these:

Two people have fallen in love and are to be married. One is a Lutheran. The other is not; he or she may be of another Christian church body or may not have been brought up in the faith. "Your church or mine?" such couples often ask. Some answer, "Both." Some answer, "Neither." Many want to inquire. They want to see whether they can share a way to express the love of God while they deepen their love for each other. They have many things to be joyful about, with their life of love ahead of them. Yet they are a bit frightened about all the choices and demands. Inquiring about faith is one more thing to be worked out.

Do I belong here? is also the question of others who came almost casually. Maybe she found this church in the Yellow Pages, or he came because of a news story or an advertisement in Saturday's newspaper. It could be that a college course on religion inspired questions for another. Coming to an adult inquirer's class at church, people wonder, Is this the place to have the questions addressed? The answer is yes.

Do I belong here? A retired person may have volunteered for activities to help others, and in this way come into contact with church members, who then invited him to join with them in worship. A young couple wants to pass on the faith to their two small children, but they want to know what it is to pass on the faith, and what the faith is to pass on. They want to stay ahead of their children's questions, and they have some of their own.

Do I belong here? That's a natural question for someone who is church-shopping. Have you ever been in a department store, wanting to take a quick peek at the merchandise and price tags, only to be nabbed by a pushy sales clerk who won't let you go? Perhaps you wonder, could this church be that way too? If I show interest, can I ever back off? Can I just quietly disappear and not be pestered? If not, should I back off now before people know my name?

We mention all these ways to feel unsettled or scared because the feeling comes to most people. The question of belonging is a natural one. How do we answer it? One way might be to say, "There's nothing to worry about. You're among friends. It's easy." Another might suggest, "Let's make the most of our slight case of nerves. People often learn best when they are on edge. Ask the athletes, or people who have to take examinations. It's good to feel edgy. We are going to be talking about life-and-death matters, and you should not take them casually."

We are going to talk about God. That's a short syllable. Everyone uses the word. Some use it for profanity. Others gasp it in prayer. A few seem to know all about what it means. Perhaps we have some sense of fear or awe when we speak of God. In the Bible we hear of people who take the shoes off their feet when they are in the presence of God. They shudder when God is vivid in the temple. If God is More than all that we can know, if God is Other in ways that we do not understand, it is good to feel off balance a bit as we inquire.

Do I belong here? Though it may kill some suspense, the answer has to be yes. Whether people come to classes like this by twos or tens, by accident, or because a friend or relative urged them, they come to know that the real inviter is God. And God is one who accepts us even when no one else does—even when we cannot accept ourselves. God invites anybody and everybody and says, “Make yourselves at home. This is my house. These are my people. I want to reach you all with my love.” God may be all-powerful, but this God does not force you to stay against your will. Neither do the people who speak in God’s name. Yet the love of God often reaches us through people—people who make up classes, or start churches, or guide inquirers. And they, too, try to say, “You belong” in this inviting church. The best way to test ourselves, our inviters, and our God is to do the inquiring. Let’s begin together.

## THE PRESENTATION

Let’s use a church building as a model for inquiring. A class of adult inquirers may not be meeting in a *sanctuary*, that is, a room for divine worship. Such a group may meet instead in an education room, a church hall, a school, a home, or under a summer’s sky, for that matter. Yet it is not likely that many who explore a faith have never been inside a place where its believers worship. We can use images of such a place as a model of what follows.

Think of the place of local worship as a kind of port of entry for the whole faith, for the whole church. Whatever you will need in order to understand Lutheran Christianity you can get locally, in that room and in what that room stands for. You do not have to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, nor must you get a visa to East Germany to see where Martin Luther lived and taught five centuries ago. You can go through life in your local church and never visit the national offices of your denomination or even know where they are, though you would be welcome there. Local Christians are part of the whole Christian church. They connect with Lutherans and other Christians everywhere. Yet you can stay home, right here, and gain access to it all.

So we are at a port of entry, where newcomers look things over. Let's enter and look around.

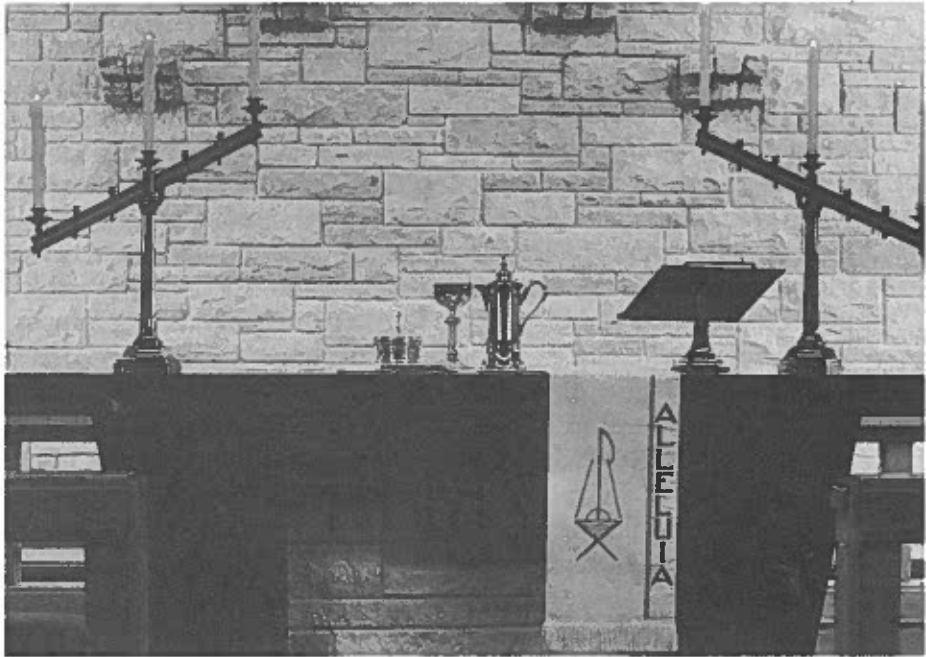
If this is an inviting church, it has to invite. A sign outside probably says "Everyone Welcome" or "All Are Invited." The people who put that sign there speak in the name of God who is the all-welcoming inviter. This God is their model. And so they open the door—perhaps a big door, perhaps one painted red so you cannot miss it. It is an image of welcome.

*A font.* One of the first things you will see is a place for baptizing. Some churches have it near the entrance, to suggest that this is how we are received by God. Others keep it up front, where the congregation can see the Baptisms. A font may be a little stand with a basin, or a sculptured rock. In a Lutheran church it is not likely to be a small pool, as it would be in a Baptist church or some other churches. Whatever its placement or size, it has to hold water, the earthly element in this washing of sins and for this initiation into God's family.

If you have witnessed a font in use at a Baptism, whether of a child or an adult, you heard words like these: "We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God."

Maybe one phrase caught your ear: "we are reborn," and you thought, so Lutherans and others who baptize this way belong to the "born-again" movement. You may not have known that, because Lutherans do not always use such language when they greet you or ask about your relation to God. Yet that font and its water remind us that we have to be "born from above," "born again," or "reborn," and that Baptism is the great sign of our rebirth. Lutherans are so "born again"-minded that they want you to hear the word of God every day, the word that asks you to repent, turn away from your old self, old ways, old sins, and let God give you love and grace. You will be asked to be born again and again and again, daily. The invitation to such a rich experience helps make this an inviting church. And the font reminds us of our rebirth.

Do I belong here? Is this an inviting church? The second piece of furniture in this place of worship helps give an answer. It is an *altar* or a table. If the font was off center, this object is likely to be



in the center. Lutherans have no magical view of their altar or table. They can commune with their Lord without one. If you are in an intensive-care unit at a hospital, they will bring you the little trace of bread and wine that the physicians allow, and you may feel more than ever that you are at the Lord's banquet. What's more, their military chaplains have used even the hoods of jeeps or a fallen tree to hold the bread and wine and book. Yet when Lutherans can settle down in a house of God, they place the same importance on the altar or table for their Christian life as they do on their kitchen or dining room table to life at home.

In ancient days, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, the altar was used to sacrifice animals or to bring gifts of grain and grape. Christians today, Lutherans among them, tell stories of those ancient days. They let an altar serve as an image for the way Jesus Christ was offered as a sacrifice for them. Such language is often hard to grasp, but most Christians sense in their hearts what their mind does not always catch at once or in detail. Indeed, Christians know that the story will always remain partly mysterious. It is the sense or knowledge that when Jesus gave up his life, when his blood was shed, he was their innocent representative. Hate, injustice, power, sin—all

these took their toll. The world has no room for his perfect love. It tries to get rid of him, it puts him to death. The altar is a reminder of the sacrifice.

Yet the altar is also a table for a meal. What better way to test an inviting church than to be welcomed at a meal! Sharing a meal is a special part of life. Young lovers court at romantic restaurants. We raise funds, honor heroes and heroines, make up our minds about politics, and entertain friends at a table. Lutheran Christians like to gather at this table. They don't call it "The Lutheran table" or "First Church's table." It is the Lord's table for the Lord's Supper. The table is a reminder of the last meal Jesus ate with his friends and disciples before he died. At this last meal Jesus told his disciples to eat bread and drink wine in the days to come. He said he would be there with them when they did. He also said he wanted to eat this meal with them in a heavenly banquet. And he will. Meanwhile, it is this Lord who welcomes Christian believers regularly. They are "born children of a fallen humanity," and they fall into sin regularly. But when the ministers hand out the bread and wine in and with which Jesus is present, they are saying, in effect, "Take it, it's for sinners."

So there's a font for initiation and a table for nurture. Now your eye falls on a third piece of furniture. It may be a *pulpit*, a *lectern*, a reading stand, a place to hold a book. In some churches the minister simply stands near the altar to speak. Most of the time, though, this bookstand is rather prominent, sometimes raised and usually well-lighted. Such accents are there to suggest that something important goes on here. This is a place for speaking, for encouraging, for judging, for offering the activity of God. The Lutherans, the Bible, and most other Christians call this *preaching*, and make much of it.

If you stayed to hear a preacher, you learned again why this is an inviting church. Preachers prepare for their message. They use memorable stories and images if they can. They strive for some eloquence and passion, even if their words are not flowery and they do not raise their voices. Why? Because they are speaking the word of God in each gathering.

They use language for inquirers, like the word of the Lord in Jeremiah 29:13-14: "You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord." They use language for those who have been invited, like the word of the

Lord in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." They will tell stories like the one in Luke 14:23 that ends with the master saying to a servant, "Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled." They are talking about God and talking for God, who invites people who expect no invitation, who invites people to take the places of those who turned their backs. Lutherans believe that even though the speaker is also a fallen sinner, even though the grammar may not always be perfect and even though there can be a slip of speech or a lapse in thought, God's word is being spoken here.

The font is used once per life. The table is used frequently, perhaps weekly, for the Lord's Supper and whenever Christians gather to offer prayer to God. The pulpit may be pounded and its podium worn from constant use. Picture the three together—font, table, and pulpit—as poles around which Lutheran worship revolves. Yet there is a fourth place in a sanctuary that is important: the *pews* or chairs where the congregation sits, stands, and perhaps kneels in worship.

The *congregation*. Those who are "born children of a fallen humanity." Like you. These are people who are not perfect. In case you think they are, or in case you think they think they are, stick around and get to know them. They can be weak and petty and mean. They are here because they know they can be weak and petty and mean, and often are. They have simply accepted an invitation and are equipping themselves to extend more invitations. They are like hungry people who know where to find food. Here, in this inviting church. In case you think these imperfect people are not capable of being changed, of responding to God's invitation, stick around and get to know them. Recall the words quoted earlier from the Service of Holy Baptism: as "reborn children of God" they are to "live with him and with his people," to "grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God." They are to be "in Christ," or "like Christ," when God looks upon them as reborn children—God's own. They often overcome their old selves and let the new life in Christ show. They can then be generous and sacrificial. In such congregations you will feel the support of prayer and the works of love.



## THE STUDY

As members of the congregation are gathered in a place of worship, one might wonder, Do *they* belong here? They do, because they have the one needed and proper credential: a desire to praise God. If we study them in the act of praising, we will begin to learn what Lutherans think Christian worship and life are about.

A wise Lutheran named Joseph Sittler once reminded his fellow believers that when they praise God they are doing something the church alone is equipped to do. Anyone, he says, can have duplicating and mailing machines, heat and light bills, committees and task forces, agencies<sup>3</sup> for doing good. But the church exists to return thanks to God. The church exists to remind the world of the source of its life and its good. When Martin Luther preached a sermon dedicating the first chapel built for Protestant worship, he came to the point: Nothing, he said, should ever happen there except that our dear Lord speaks to us through his holy word, and we in turn respond in prayer and praise.

What good does that do? Lutherans would answer that there is a prior point. Before they get practical about worship, they will tell you that it should reflect How Things Are. In their reading of the Bible, How Things Are goes something like this: the God they worship created and creates the world, out of a desire for relationship. God makes humans in the divine image, makes a world, calls it good, gives it life. This God reaches into the world of a fallen humanity in Jesus Christ, out of a need to restore a relationship. God does this simply out of divine love. That is how things are. When believers worship and praise, when they lift up hands in prayer or voices in song, they are making a statement about the universe. They do not picture God as one who has to be constantly admired. They do picture that in worship they are reordering their lives, they are helping set the world right. Whenever they praise God they are recognizing God as the source of life; they are learning how to care for the world and its people.

Lutheran worship, then, is God-centered. It is *theocentric* (*theo* is the Greek word for God). It is not human-centered, or *anthropocentric* (*anthropos* is the Greek word for "human"). Of course, God cares about humans; enough to have made them and to have sent Jesus Christ to keep them. Of course, human experience and emotion are important. But as you hear the Lutheran hymns you may

note a consistent strain. They don't keep telling God how the believers feel at the moment—except as invited people who are now praising God. God, not human emotions, is the subject of the prayers and hymns. Lutheran worshipers believe that things go best for humans when they are on course with God and God's ways. They are less interested in philosophies of positive thinking or techniques for earthly success than in returning praise and thanks to their loving God.

Someone once wrote a book about Luther's thought. He called it *Let God Be God*. Lutherans at worship believe they are letting God be God in their praise. When God is God, then everyone is welcome, and the church is not a club. When God is God, sinners are welcome, and the church is not a society of achievers. When God is God, inquirers are treated with respect, for God does not force anything on anyone. When God is God, the church is inviting: it sends out invitations in God's name and does what it can to make its worship and ways inviting.

To study the Christian life as Lutherans picture it, we may use books, including this manual for inquirers. Yet observing this congregation in worship remains like the port of entry, a place to get an idea of what the books are out to say. If you are inquiring, you may wonder what else is required of you. Clubs have rules, societies have standards, even churches have constitutions. You know that some religions have long lists of dos and don'ts, of commands and requirements. It is very satisfying to have these lists. With such a scorecard it is easy to measure growth. One can tell where the boundaries are between those who belong and everybody else. It is frustrating that Lutherans don't hand you such a list.

Study the Lutherans as they baptize and grow in obedience to the will of God, or as they share the Lord's table, or hear the word of God. What is expected of them? Maybe we can get a clue from the offering.

The *offering*. Do I belong here? Is the church interested in me for my money, as little as I may have? People will bring up the subject of money to support institutions sooner or later. Better sooner than later. Better openly than sneakily. What's involved?

*Lutheran Book of Worship* directs, "The offering is received as the Lord's table is prepared." Then people sing not about money, but about vineyards and harvest and seeds and bread and prayers as offering. And there may be a prayer that says "we offer with joy

and thanksgiving what you have first given us—our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love.” Or “we offer ourselves” with “these gifts.”

We offer ourselves. That’s the point of it all. The money we give may help heat the place of worship, or pay for the Sunday bulletin or for a doctor in New Guinea or a New Testament professor. We offer to make that possible. What is at stake, though, is the offering of ourselves. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). The worshipers are



not to step back and take a look at life and then open their pocketbooks. They are to toss their possessions on this moving train—and then keep up with it. They will soon learn that if they toss themselves on it, they will find their hearts located at a new place: in the loving purposes of God.

Study these worshipers and what they say they are about now. They have offered themselves; they are to “grow in obedience.” Their hearts are now with God and the ways of God that they have

praised. If so, we should follow them out the door as they disperse. Some of them have children in hand, children who have worshiped with them or who have been worshiping and learning in church school. Walking hand in hand is a symbol of the message of God's love and the activity of praise and obedience being transmitted across generations.

These people, as often single as married or in a family, disperse into communities, to distant farms and nearby high-rises. They may come together for church activities during the week, but for most of the next 167 hours they will be out in the world. There may be 400 worshipers, 100 families, 20 meetings, 2 services of worship. But there will now be, among them, a week's worth of temptations by the millions and opportunities by the millions. Most places that the church can go only the laity can go. They outnumber ministers 400 to one. No, they *are* ministers, in different places. Study them as they go to their homes and parties, their offices and factories and farms, their unemployment offices or sickrooms.

If they offered themselves, they give each day back to God. Many may make the sign of the cross at the start of the day; you won't see this, because it is part of their praise in private. This is the way they remember their Baptism. It's not a magic act, but a reminder. They are free for the day. They have no guilt about yesterday, no worry about tomorrow. God will give strength and grace for the day.

Many will now be good stewards. We do not use that word much, but in the Bible it appears often. The steward is trusted to take care of property and business for someone else. Lutheran Christians make a great deal of the way they are to be stewards of creation. They are not to misuse resources. They are to be stewards of human relations. Their faith is measured not by how many nights a week they will return to keep the church lights on. It is measured by how they relate to parents or children, how they serve on hospital or zoning or school boards, how they transact business. They get to turn each day back to God that way. If they succeed they will not become prideful, and if they fail they will not despair. Theirs is a theocentric, God-centered faith. They trust.

Stewardship means filling out the church's calendar of doings and dealings. Some will rehearse in a choir, to offer praise in beautiful song. Others will make layettes for Lutheran World Relief or visit the sick, attend committee meetings or serve as trustees of

church property. What is not on the calendar is just as important and revealing. The ways of obedience and love are as varied as the persons seeking to obey and love. You belong if you can turn back your person and your ways to God. In doing so, you get to show forth the person and the ways of Christ in the world.

## SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

One more thing remains to be said. We asked, Do I belong here? and addressed it to a class of inquirers at a Lutheran church. This is not the only "here," and we would do well to look beyond the circle of two or twenty at this place. Do Lutherans think this is the only "here"? An encyclopedia tells us the astounding fact that there are over 20,000 separate Christian denominations in the world. Only *some* of these are Lutheran. Do Lutherans think theirs is the only place God's people belong?

Not at all. Lutherans believe that they are part of the larger people of God. They *may* say that this or that reading of the Bible by another group may be incorrect. Lutherans are interested in being true; they are interested in truth and faithfulness. But they are not interested in being alone, in being the only true and faithful people. Wherever the love of God in Christ is taught and believed there are the people of God, there is the church.

Lutherans know that some things they do result from who they are, from where and when they are. The Christians in South India or South Africa or South America—which include many Lutherans—have different accents. As we shall learn, Lutherans believe people can be God's people without ever having heard the name of Lutheran or Lutherans.

What they do believe is that whoever they are, wherever and whenever they are, they are to be faithful. They are to grow in hearing and responding to the message of God. They believe that very rich treasures of grace have been given them. They want to be good stewards. They also want to spend those treasures on others. Since these are treasures of love and grace, they will never run out but will only grow as they are put to use.

Lutherans cannot be the whole church, but they can be an inviting church. They speak not for themselves but for their God when they say, "You're invited. You belong here." They seek to be patient and understanding if you feel the call to go elsewhere. They only hope that you will not move yourself beyond the circle where the message of God reaches out, or beyond the people who respond in trust and faithfulness. They want you to use your mind to study this, in the name of the God who offers freedom along with love.

1. What does it mean to you that God is an inviting God?
2. What does it mean to you that this church is an inviting church?
3. Think of yourself as an inviting Christian. What are you like? How could you become more like this?
4. What is the main question or idea that remains with you at the end of this first session?