

Practicing Our Faith in Salmon Nation: A 7-Week Adult Christian Education Class

*Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live,
and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there.
It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.” Ezekiel 47:9*

Curriculum Introduction

GUIDING QUESTION What makes for vital Christian communities in the Northwest, and what does this mean for this Lutheran congregation?

COURSE GOALS To help participants ...

- learn more about the religious context of the Pacific Northwest, that is, how people make meaning here;
- discover what treasures Lutherans have to offer;
- explore how to practice the faith in more meaningful ways; and
- deeply listen and reflect about these issues.

CURRICULUM OVERVIEW The earlier sessions (1-3) explore characteristics of the Pacific Northwest region and the spiritual landscape that forms our setting for ministry.

The latter sessions (4-6) explore theological concepts and practices of ministry that can speak to this setting. Included are useful tools for supporting religious life in the Northwest, including storytelling (narrative theology) and intentional faith practices.

The final session (7) invites the congregation or study group to reflect on learnings and take steps to incorporate these into their shared ministry.

SETTING Center your class space around a small altar or worship area (which could be a cloth on the floor) set with religious symbols such as a candle and cross. Also include symbols or icons of the Northwest such as a picture or sculpture of a salmon, local vegetation or a reproduction of a Native American petroglyph (one source for these is www.rarepetroglyphs.com).

You might also want to set up a resource table with books mentioned in each session or from the bibliography. Invite participants to bring in resources they have related to the class topics.

TEACHING NOTES Please tailor these sessions to fit your context. Although initially envisioned as a Sunday morning class, the material could more adequately be covered in a 90-minute evening class or in multiple sessions during a retreat.

Session 1: Regional Characteristics of the Pacific Northwest

Session 2: The Religious Landscape of the Pacific Northwest

Session 3: Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest

Session 4: Lutheran Treasures that Speak to this Region

Session 5: The Importance of Story for Forming Lives and Ministry

Session 6: Faith Practices that Transform

Session 7: Where Do We Go from Here?

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More about the “Practicing Our Faith in Salmon Nation” project

Feel free to contact any member of the Salmon Nation group; contact information is on the reverse. Please see our website under development at www.salmon.luther-house.org for more information and free downloads including a 7-week adult education class plan on congregational ministry in the Pacific NW; full bibliography of Pacific Northwest writers, artists, and resources; and more.

The defining feature of religion in the Pacific Northwest is that most of the population is “unchurched.” Fewer people in Oregon, Washington, and Alaska affiliate with a religious institution than in any other region of the United States. More people here claim “none” when asked their religious identification ... and, unlike any other region, the single largest segment of the Pacific Northwest’s population is composed of those who identify with a religious tradition but have no affiliation with a religious community. – Patricia O’Connell Killen¹

An anthropologist new to the Pacific Northwest would find more fish icons than crucifixes. – Timothy Egan²

Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.” – Ezekiel 47:9

About the name “Salmon Nation”:

The Pacific Northwest has been known by a number of names from the time of its first inhabitants, the indigenous tribes who greeted Lewis and Clark in the early 19th century, to the present. In the 1970’s and 80’s, novelist Ernest Callenbach and journalist Joel Garreau referred to it as “Ecotopia.” More recently, business leaders and bio-regionalists have dubbed it “Cascadia.” Patricia Killen calls it the “None Zone.” Ecotrust, a regional non-profit whose mission is to promote environmental, economic, and social sustainability, has developed the concept of “Salmon Nation,” defined as “a place, a state of mind, and a gift.” We chose this term as a way of framing the region for the purposes of our project.

About the Salmon Nation Project:

This project grew out of an endeavor by seven parish clergy and two religion professors to carry out our pastoral and teaching vocations more effectively in the beautiful but challenging environment of the Pacific Northwest. Our group was convened in March of 2004 by Dr. Patricia Killen and Dr. Samuel Torvend of Pacific Lutheran University’s Center for the Study of Religion, Cultures, and Society. In December of 2005, we received a generous grant allowing us to meet with some leading social, cultural, and artistic voices of our region for conversations about the place we all share in common.

¹ Patricia O’Connell Killen, “Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone” in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Religion by Region Series), edited by Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, AltaMira Press, 2004, p.9.

² Timothy Egan, *The Winemaker’s Daughter*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p.120.

Through our conversations, our goal was to:

- Listen to some leading voices of our regional culture to learn how they understand the place we live and how they make spiritual sense of it.
- Reflect theologically on what we hear in these conversations regarding ways in which to more effectively articulate the Christian faith – ways that are true to our tradition but also make sense in the context of the Pacific Northwest.
- Assist the people we serve to practice their faith in more meaningful ways, aware that they are likely to be a “minority” in demographic terms for the foreseeable future.
- Offer one another spiritual and collegial support as we seek new ways to more effectively practice ministry in a region with historically low religious identification and affiliation.

The primary questions that guided our project were:

1. What shapes the lived theological imagination of the people of the Pacific Northwest? How do people in this region of relatively low institutional religious affiliation make meaning?
2. What do Lutherans have to offer from our theological and liturgical tradition that might address the spiritual longings of the people who live here?

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³ Pr. Brian Brandt resigned from the project early due to time constraints.