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Learning Unit: The Small Catechism

Introduction

This learning unit will serve as a 3-month-cycle based curriculum for confirmation classes at First Lutheran Church in Norfolk, VA. Specifically, this unit will cover co-learning the classic piece of content of the Small Catechism for the Lutheran tradition found in the Book of Concord. This learning unit is also in consultation with [Vella's Twelve Principles for Learning](#).

Practices

Although this learning unit is based upon a 3-month cycle, each month will have a set week in which the class takes a break from the learning content and does some sort of activity together. This practice will help the co-learners not only to take a break from content, but also learn the importance of taking breaks in our learning, building deeper relationships with one another, and embody a new way of learning that includes a process that goes beyond institutional walls. Another practice that is included in the curriculum is establishing a learning covenant. Not only will this learning covenant establish clear roles of the learners and facilitator, but it will also establish a safe place for all to ground our learning practices in.¹ Additionally, another practice in which is unit will engage is a weekly ritual in which every session will open and close with a prayer. The opening prayer could be a prayer of [Julian of Norwich](#) and the sending prayer could be [The Lord's Prayer](#), both of which can be done in a variety of forms like song, with motions, with art, or with popcorn reading. This prayer practice will help to welcome us into the space of our co-learning together, as well as send us forth into the other parts of our lives. With this

¹ Vella's twelve principles, #9

practice becoming ritual, it can also invite learners to lead for one another with more comfortability.

Needs

In addition to this learning unit and the Small Catechism, the facilitator will also need additional reading resources throughout the unit. These resources are included in the annotations of this document. Another need the facilitator needs to prioritize is a safe environment for which learning can happen.² This safe environment includes in which all abilities and intelligences are accommodated for, like accessibility, a circular classroom set up, and windows and an open door if indoors. Not only does this safe space include the physical environment, but it also includes inclusive language, like inviting learners to share their pronouns, using gender neutral terms for God, promoting questions and experiences, as well as offering multiple ways of engaging, like reading, writing, drawing, singing, etc.

Learning Outcomes

There are four learning outcomes of the Small Catechism learning unit. By the end of the unit, learners will be able to:

1. Express their own understanding and perspective on the elements of the Small Catechism of the Lutheran Tradition and how they are localized today³
2. Critically engage texts they encounter with a growing confidence
3. Articulate an inclusive and expansive understanding of God who calls forth justice⁴
4. Reflect upon their own faith and vocation that sends them forth into the world

Curriculum

² Vella's twelve principles, #2

³ Mai-Anh Le Tran. 2017. *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*. Abingdon Press., 164.

⁴ Ibid., 64.

Week 1: Learning Covenant and Needs Assessment

In Week 1, learners are invited to get to know one another and begin to form relationships. Part of this week can include individual introductions, getting to know one another [icebreakers](#), as well as story sharing within small groups. Through these introductions and activities, learners can begin to establish sound relationships with one another that go beyond the classroom.⁵ In addition to forming relationships, Week 1 will also be vital in establishing a safe and mutual learning space. This learning space can be established through a collaborative creation of a covenant. We can use the Forum for Theological Exploration's [Covenant of Presence](#) as a starting point that you can take from or add to. Part of this covenantal piece is going over the expectations of learning.⁶ Not only that, but learners should also be invited to express their interests and investments in their learning. One activity that can invite this reflection on engagement can include learners writing a letter to self that they will receive once the unit has completed.⁷

Week 2: Introduction to the Small Catechism

It is important to start this learning unit from moving from small to big, establishing a clear sequence that is reinforced.⁸ Part of that work looks like starting from a general overview, into things that the learners have had some potential exposure to, like The Lord's Prayer in Week 3 and the Ten Commandments in weeks 5-6. For Week 2, get the learners curious about what the word "catechesis" means in Greek, meaning, "instruction by word of mouth." Invite the learners to engage and share in small groups: What kinds of instructions have you been taught and how? What are other kinds of "catechisms" are in your lives today? What are "catechisms" you have

⁵ Vella's twelve principles, #3

⁶ Vella's twelve principles, #1

⁷ Vella's twelve principles, #11

⁸ Vella's twelve principles, #4

seen that are good for people? What are some “catechisms” that are harmful for people?⁹ After small groups, invite people to share what they heard from their neighbors. After sharing, introduce the students to [The Lutheran Handbook](#), particularly on the sections about the Small Catechism and history. Invite the students to explore the book in pairs and share one thing they found interesting to the whole group. Close the learning space together with questions from the learners about “catechesis,” and the Small Catechism, which do not have to have answers, but just ponderings.

Week 3: The Lord’s Prayer

After the opening prayer, invite learners into a time of self-reflection about the Lord’s Prayer. Give them about seven minutes to do a stream of consciousness writing, in which they can write whatever comes to mind in terms of the Lord’s Prayer. Invite the group back to share how the stream of consciousness felt. Invite learners to listen the reciting of the Lord’s Prayer in [different languages](#), and share what they experience after. Popcorn read the Lord’s Prayer from scripture; you can use Matthew 6. In the collective group, invite learners to share what they like about the Lord’s Prayer, what they don’t like, and what confuses them. Invite learners to engage in hard questions like: What is Jesus teaching us from this prayer? Are there elements to the prayer you see missing? Be sure to close the learning space with the Lord’s Prayer, but this week in teaching a version of [The Lord’s Prayer – A Dance Anthem](#), which puts motions to the prayer.

Week 4: Content Break – Neighborhood walk

For the first content break, we want to invite the learners on a pilgrimage around the neighborhood in which our church stands. Invite the learners to take photos individually or together of things that they notice and where they see God at work. The intentions of this content

⁹ Tran, *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*, 10.

break are to localize ourselves, practice incarnational love, and get curious about the expansiveness of God's work in the community.¹⁰ After the walk, let's invite the learners to a sweet treat and a place where we can sit and reflect on our time together. Invite learners to share photos they took and engage in questions like: What did we notice about the neighborhood? What/who did we see? What/who did we not see? Where/in whom did we see God at work?

Week 5: The Ten Commandments (1-5)

There are a variety of perspectives and stigmas about the Ten Commandments, included life-limiting theologies rather than life-giving theologies. This week we want to invite learners to be subjects of their own learning process.¹¹ After the opening prayer, start the session with a brainstorming session: Invite learners to share any and all things that they have heard about the first five commandments (go through each one individually). Then invite learners to do some research on their own in small groups on the Ten Commandments; they can use scripture, the Small Catechism, and the internet. Call the groups back together to share. Spend some time reflecting together about the ways these stigmas relate/contrast with Luther's writing on each in the Catechism. Additionally, spend some more time on the fifth commandment and what it means for our world today, particularly in relation to Black Lives Matter, immigration reform, and LGBTQIA+ rights.¹² How can the commandments speak to the immediate world we are in today? In what ways has our religious communities failed in teaching these commandments?¹³ Later invite the learners to reflect on the research aspect of their learning: What was it like to do investigative reporting on their own? What new ideas or thoughts have we gathered around these five commandments?

¹⁰ Tran, *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*, 85.

¹¹ Vella's twelve principles, #6

¹² Vella's twelve principles, #8

¹³ Tran, *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*, 56, 65.

Week 6: The Ten Commandments (6-10)

Similar to last week, let's follow a similar structure in which the learners get to do some of their own investigative reporting on the Commandments. After sharing our experiences with the last five commandments, let's break the community into different small groups and explore additional ways the church has taught the Ten Commandments. Be sure to invite immediate issues and context to the table and what the commandments may say to them. In the continued reflection, let's not only see the ways we have expanded our understanding of the commandments from before last week, but let's also imagine a world in which these commandments are lived out as a means for justice for the world.¹⁴

Week 7: The Apostle's Creed

Let's get outside for Week 7 and start with an accountability check in.¹⁵ Invite learners to journal about what they have learned in the past 6 weeks, reflect on their learning outcomes, and what questions they still have. Then let's turn to the Apostle's Creed. If possible, be sure to include elements in your safe setting outside that connects us to the words of the creed; these things might include, sitting on the ground, dirt, a clearing in the sky, signs of life, and if possible, a small fire pit. Once outside, invite learners into a [deep listening practice](#) and mindful mediation. Through this [Lectio Divina](#) style mediation, invite learners to listen to the Apostle's Creed recited from different members of the group four times, each time with a different task in between (read, reflect, respond, and rest). After the mediation, invite learners to reflect on how the embodied practice felt. Similarly, discuss the ways in which we can we embody the Apostle's Creed in creation.

¹⁴ Tran, *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*, 110-111.

¹⁵ Vella's twelve principles, #12

*Week 8: Content Break – Service*¹⁶

For Week 8's content break, we are going to go beyond the church walls and engage the community in service. This content break can be done during the set time of weekly gatherings, or at a time outside that works best for everyone. Get connected with the [Salvation Army Emergency Men's Shelter](#) and sign the group up for a time to visit and volunteer. Be sure to connect with the director in hopes to find a time to share with us the local issue of homelessness in our area. In following the action reflection action model, after our time for service, let's reflect together on our experience learning about homelessness in Norfolk. Expand the conversation beyond the local community wider, as well as expanded to the intersection of racism and homelessness.¹⁷ The intention for this content break is to not only engage the community, but to engage systemic injustice through a conversation that sends us forth into the world.

Week 9: Confession and Forgiveness

Week 9 we are going to learn with ideas, feelings, and actions through visual and aural arts.¹⁸ Invite learners to read and listen to the Small Catechism's entry on confession. After reading, invite learners to use their artistic expression through whatever medium they are most comfortable with, to express their understanding of confession and forgiveness; mediums can include but are certainly not limited to: musical expressions, free drawing, coloring, painting, sculpting and crafting. Questions we can ponder together as we express ourselves are: What does confession and forgiveness look/feel/sound/smell like? Throughout the time of artistic expression, let's play some [Taizé style music](#) as a means of engagement, worship, and reflection. Invite learners to share their pieces of art and what it means to them today.

¹⁶ Vella's twelve principles, #5

¹⁷ Tran, *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*, 32-34.

¹⁸ Vella's twelve principles, #7

Week 10: Sacraments – Baptism

For Week 10, let's get curious about Baptism. Be sure to bring a bowl of water to place in the middle of the learning circle for all learners to see and touch. Open the session with each person sharing their baptism stories. Have each person share anything they know or have been told about their baptisms. Engage in a discussion with the learners about what baptism means for us today. Read through the four parts of Luther's writing on Baptism in the Small Catechism. Ponder what Luther's take on baptism mean for us today? How can we live out our baptismal callings beyond the church walls? Close the session in sharing together a time of [Affirmation of Baptism](#), found in the front pages of the ELW.

Week 11: Sacraments – Communion

For our last week of content, let's do a scripture search! Invite learners in pairs to find as many instances as possible of people being fed and/or eating together in the Bible. Create a master list all together once all the pairs have shared. Discuss the significance of these findings in the Bible. Then let's turn specifically to the Lord's Supper in the Bible. Engage in conversation around the circle about what stands out from this story after creating our master list of feeding/eating in the Bible. What does it mean for us today to receive the body and blood of our Lord at the altar? At the end of the learning time before the prayer, be sure to do another accountability check in by giving each of the learner's their original letters from the start of the learning unit.

Week 12: Content Break – Breaking Bread Together¹⁹

For this content break and final gathering, invite the learners to bake bread together. Not only will this activity promote teamwork and teambuilding, but it is also an embodied practice of

¹⁹ Vella's twelve principles, #10

imagining a world in which everyone has enough to eat. Similarly, baking bread together invites the learners to engage an action reflection action model after Week 12's content on the sacraments of holy communion. Topics and questions learners can engage while baking together can include, sharing stories about first communion and baking, talking about what it is like to cook for others, and discussing local food insecurity and food waste. Be sure to contact the break baking committee at the church for their [recipe](#) so that learners could potentially connect with this ministry down the line. This content break can also send learners forth into the world, a world hungry for life.

Resources

General:

The Book of Concord: <https://bookofconcord.org/>

The Small Catechism: <https://bookofconcord.org/small-catechism/>

The Prayer of Julian of Norwich: <https://paxtonvic.wordpress.com/2010/05/05/a-prayer-of-julian-of-norwich/>

Bible Study Tools: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/>

Tran, Mai-Anh Le. *Reset the Heart : Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope*. Abingdon Press, 2017.

[Vella's Twelve Principles for Learning](#)

Week 1:

Covenant of Presence: <https://fteaders.org/uploads/files/cop.pdf>

Icebreakers: <https://www.signupgenius.com/church/youth-group-icebreakers.cfm>

Week 2:

The Lutheran Handbook:

<https://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/9780806651798/The-Lutheran-Handbook>

Week 3:

The Lord's Prayer in different languages:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbsPF4xvDps>

[The Lord's Prayer – A Dance Anthem](#)

Week 4:

Take a loop around the church, from Colley Ave, to W 20th St. On to Colonial, then Redgate Ave, and back to the church on Colley Ave:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/embed?mid=1VXwISPL8KbHW-HF82bSMFXUmz0o&ie=UTF8&hl=en&s=AARTsJrijahHyivy2ka6eJizs3w8Wcjemg&msa=0&ll=36.86630160889737%2C-76.29771981045552&spn=0.082405%2C0.099564&z=16&output=embed>

Week 7:

Deep Listening Practice: <https://www.mindful.org/deep-listening/>

Lectio Divina:

<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf>

Week 8:

Salvation Army Emergency Men's Shelter:

<https://salvationarmypotomac.org/hrva/volunteer-opportunities/>

Week 9:

Taizé: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuPcxLjVxtg>

Week 10:

Affirmation of Baptism:

<https://princeofpeacebrookfield.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/VigilAffirmationofBaptism2020.pdf>

Week 12:

Communion Bread: <https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/241680/unleavened-bread-for-communion/>