

Lutheran with a wink

By KAREN HERZOG, Bismarck Tribune

It could be a question on “The \$10,000 Pyramid:” What do these people have in common? Hunters, birders, wildflower fanciers, Boy Scouts and Lutheran teens?

Answer: A field guide to help them identify and navigate their world.

The Lutheran Handbook: A Field Guide to Church Stuff, Everyday Stuff and the Bible (\$14.99, Augsburg Fortress, 2005), uses the concept of a “field guide” as part of a new confirmation curriculum to teach teens Lutheran theology.

And a logo of a winking Martin Luther on the book cover clues readers in that its serious lessons about “grace” and theology are mixed with lighter pieces such as “how to avoid getting burned at the stake.”

In 264 pages, Lutheran theology and history is explained with a light touch, and Lutheran idiosyncrasies are explored—the appropriate potluck dishes to bring by region and “how to survive an hour in an un-air conditioned church.”

The editors offer advice on serious topics—“how to forgive someone,” “how to pray” and “how to work for peace”—and breezy teaching aids — “the top 10 Bible villains,” or “the five grossest Bible stories.”

With its rounded corners and tough polyethylene cover, the book is meant to be knocked around, said Kristofer Skrade, development editor at Augsburg Fortress.

The book marks the launch of “Here We Stand,” Augsburg's new confirmation series, as a humorous yet theologically sound approach to teaching early teens.

However, as Skrade said, “(while) aiming at confirmation students, the book hit a vein. Standing right behind our target was a whole bunch of adults.”

Feedback from churches is that the book is being used in new member classes and basic adult education courses, he said. In fact, the demand for an adapted version for adults has been so strong that Augsburg is now working on that version, due out in December, Skrade said.

Several local Lutheran churches have seen samples of the book and are considering it for their confirmation programs. Ben Luger, youth minister at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Bismarck, said the church plans to use the materials along with others published by Augsburg.

“People are saying they like the humor,” Skrade said. “I served in parishes for 10 years. People welcome a joke or a funny story because people can be so bound up about church—a little laughter feels 10 times better than other places.

“It's doing so well, we must have hit something right. It's breaking every record that we've ever set internally.”

Released in March, the book is already in its fourth printing, said Bill Huff, publisher for congregational life and learning materials for Augsburg.

Since that time, the book has been in the “in stock” category for only six days, Skrade said. And now group orders are starting to come.

“It must resonate with people,” he said.

The decision to produce the book started in October 2004, Huff said. Twenty-two writers were hired to produce the pieces, with input from Augsburg staff members.

Starting with a table of contents, the book became a collaborative process of winnowing some items out and adding others, he said.

Adopting a tone from the popular “survival guide” and “. . . for dummies” books, the result was a collection where every entry has educational value, even the humorous ones, Huff said.

Luther's Small Catechism, the core document for traditional confirmation instruction, is included in the book, plus some pragmatic advice on the issues of everyday life from a Lutheran theological base, such as “The Top 10 Attributes to Look for in a Spouse.”

All items were vetted by pastors, theologians and professors, especially those of a more conservative stripe, to weed out things that might be offensive, Skrade said.

“For our audiences, there's exceptional value in people understanding what is Lutheran, what it is to be saved by grace,” Huff said.

Part of the strategy was to make the book theologically accessible, Huff said. So substance is leavened with a dry wit and illustrations by Brenda Brown, who illustrates the “Worst-Case Scenario” series, Skrade said.

The feedback has been almost 100 percent positive, he said. “We've had people reading them on airplanes with people looking over their shoulders,” he said.

For more information about the book, visit <http://www.herewestandconfirmation.org>.

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