

Walking Together in Solidarity: A Theology of Accompaniment

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Overview

A Theology of Accompaniment has emerged within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as a way of understanding and engaging in mission in the 21st Century.¹ Theology is defined as the study of God. Accompaniment is the process of walking alongside someone and joining with him or her in solidarity. A Theology of Accompaniment refers to how individuals and communities enter into relationship with one another for the sake of fulfilling Christ's message of reconciliation. We understand that God is first and foremost a God of reconciliation and this is made evident in the Incarnation.

This model of "walking together" is not just for those who engage in mission as it is traditionally understood – through international and domestic travel, service, etc... but also for the people who are called to be agents of faith formation. A Theology of Accompaniment provides those who work with young people and families a framework for understanding how we are called to love God, love self and love others for the purpose of being in relationships that are authentic, meaningful, just and transformative.

As we consider faith formation in a missional age, we must answer the following questions:

- What is the theological underpinning that grounds our mission in faith formation?
- What is a Theology of Accompaniment and why is it important for faith formation to incorporate this theological understanding?
- What skills help us cultivate a Theology of Accompaniment with young people and families?
- How do we meet young people where they are and help them translate this theology into a way of being?

This session introduces participants to a Theology of Accompaniment and invites them to think about how the ministries they lead and are a part of understand and use this model of being. It is important for you as the Session Leader to spend some time reviewing this document before hand and becoming familiar with the material. It is helpful to answer the questions and engage the material before your session so that you are able to be fully present with those who participate in this session.

The material is preceded by an introduction, broken into four segments, and is designed to be 90 minutes long.

¹ For more information about the ELCA's understanding of accompaniment, including stories, videos and a history of how this theology was developed, please visit <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Global-Mission/How-We-Work.aspx>.

Introduction (10 minutes)

*Spending time on introductions is very important to creating an environment conducive to sharing and receiving. **You're primary goal during this time is to welcome participants and create hospitable space that allows learning to occur.***

Begin by introducing yourself – name, where you serve and why you answered the call to lead this session. Invite participants to introduce themselves – their name, where they serve and why they are participating in this session. It's helpful to take notes as participants share why they are attending so that you have a better of understanding of expectations. If it is appropriate, you may want to re-cap what you have heard from participants regarding why they are attending. This helps people feel like their interests matter.

After everyone has introduced himself or herself, say the following:

The purpose of this session is to begin to understand a Theology of Accompaniment and how this way of being impacts faith formation and our call to serve young people and families. This may seem like a daunting topic but please understand that the main point of this theology is to live out what it means to “walk together”. Theology is defined as the study of God.

Accompaniment is the process of walking alongside someone and joining with him or her in action. A Theology of Accompaniment refers to how individuals and communities enter into relationship with one another and walk together modeling an incarnational relationship, one that is marked by presence, love and justice. Let's take a few minutes to reflect on who has walked with us throughout our lives.

Ask the following questions and invite participants to share in groups of 2-3 people. If you have a group of less than 5 participants, invite them to reflect silently and then share their thoughts with the larger group.

- Who has accompanied you in positive ways on your journey? In negative ways?
- What characteristics did these different people embody?

These questions are designed to get participants thinking and talking about what it means to journey with someone. We all have had negative and positive experiences with people walking with us. The goal is to create a list of characteristics that are present in positive accompaniment experiences and refer to them later in the session. Say the following:

It's important to reflect on our personal experiences as they speak to our own leadership formation. In order to know where we are going, we have to know where we have been. This way of thinking is used throughout this session as we will spend time reflecting on our theological rationale, our mission as ministers for faith formation, a theology of accompaniment and what it means to practice and relate this way of being within our context.

Segment 1: Grounding our Theology (15-20 minutes)

Your primary goal during this segment is to introduce participants to a way of thinking theologically about faith formation and what grounds our theological understanding. Say the following:

In recent years, youth ministry has emerged as a segment of practical theology that is concerned with the faith formation of young people and the methods used to nurture and support them. Taking it a step further, theologians like Dr. Andrew Root of Luther Seminary have provided a framework for thinking about how we walk alongside and minister to young people. His book Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry was groundbreaking in that it helps us understand what our central task is in youth ministry – to move from a strategy of influence and to be present in an incarnational way. Root says the following:

The incarnation has made these very children our responsibility, our beloved brothers and sisters. We must reach out to their humanity even if it means the suffering of our own humanity, for this is the way of the cross. It may be that the reason they don't trust our offers of friendship is that they intuitively know that we are not willing to see, hear and accompany them in their deepest suffering. We have offered them trips to Disneyland, silly games and 'cool' youth rooms, not companionship in their darkest nights, their scariest of hells.²

As Lutherans, we subscribe to a theology of the cross – a way of understanding who God is as revealed by Jesus Christ on the cross, in a time of suffering and agony. We believe in God's continual presence with us as evidenced by the Incarnation and that the central task of God's relationship with us is to seek reconciliation. This is what we are charged to model – a way of being that seeks reconciliation and joins with others in times of suffering to let them know that they are not alone.

Allow time for participants to ask questions and reflect on this quote. The following questions should be used to continue to engage in conversation. Again, if your group is larger than five people, ask them to split into small groups.

- How has God been incarnate in your life?
- How have you been an incarnational presence?
- What are the struggles that present themselves when we engage in this way?
- What are the implications of using a "theology of incarnation" in our settings?

² Root, Andrew. Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Accompaniment. IVP Books: Downer's Grove, IL. 2007.

Segment 2: Defining a Theology of Accompaniment (25-30 minutes)

As conversation ends, it's time to move participants into a brief time of bible study. Your primary goal during this segment is to help participants understand what a Theology of Accompaniment looks like. Say the following:

“From the gospel and the stories of our faith, we understand that God’s mission is reconciliation. We, and all people, are broken before God. We are turned in on ourselves, away from God and others. We sow discord and dissension. We hurt one another and abuse the earth we have been given to care for. We are alienated, far from God and from one another. Jesus came to reconcile us with God. God meets us in our brokenness, and restores our relationship with God and with one another. God desires our reconciliation with one another, so that we no longer exploit or hurt; and our reconciliation with the earth, so that we no longer abuse or waste. We continue to be imperfect, but we are constantly called back to God’s mission of reconciliation.”³

One of the best stories in scripture that helps us understand what it means to be present and walk alongside one another is found in the Gospel of Luke 24:13-35. This is commonly referred to as “On the Road to Emmaus”. Jesus has died and is no longer in the tomb. The disciples and Jesus’ loved ones have had quite the traumatic preceding 72 hours. At this point in scripture, two of the disciples are walking and discussing what’s happened. Jesus joins them, though they don’t know that it’s him. Let’s revisit this story and see what is revealed.

Invite a participant to read the story and ask the group to listen or read along. Ask them to pay attention to things that stand out to them. If necessary, read the passage twice.

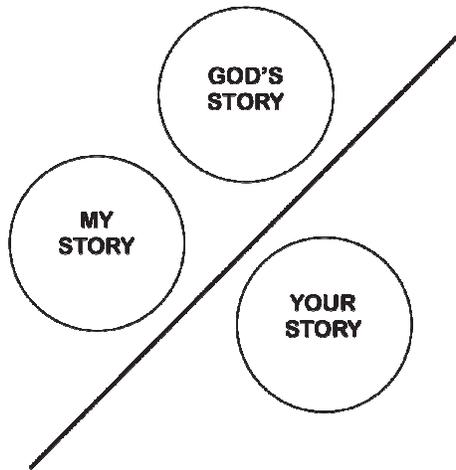
- What stands out to you in this text?
- How do you think the disciples felt when they realized that they were not walking alone?
- How is accompaniment being revealed?
- What does this text say about God’s nature?

Make a list of what is shared. Say the following:

This text helps lay the groundwork for understanding a Theology of Accompaniment. It’s about walking together, forming relationships that are authentic and sharing with one another. The following drawing helps us think about a Theology of Accompaniment in visual form.⁴

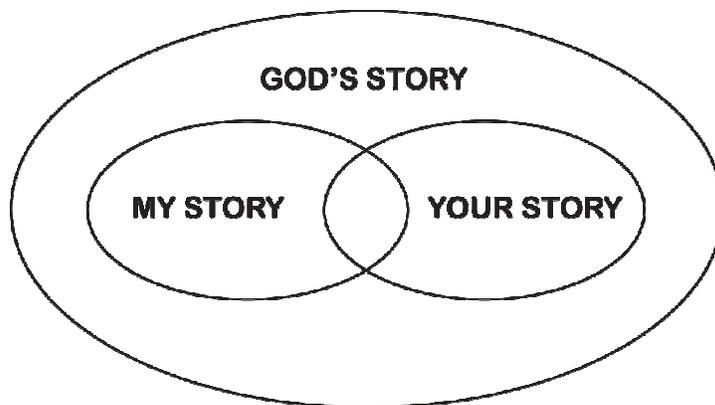
³ Accompaniment Section in the Glocal Mission Gathering Resource Binder. Published by the Global Mission Unit of the ELCA, 2011.

⁴ See preceding footnote.



For a long time, this picture has depicted our theological understanding. There is a line separating us from our neighbor, separating us from the “other”. God is on our side and the goal is to bring the other over to the right side. This way of thinking is harmful. The other person isn’t valued and we erroneously assume that we are on the “right” side. There is a wall present that impedes our ability to be in loving relationship with one another.

A Theology of Accompaniment looks more like this.



This shows that our stories are interconnected and contained by God’s story. The center part that overlaps represents where Jesus is found – in relationship and in the places and spaces that need reconciliation and healing.

- What do you think about these images?
- Which picture reflects the way you think about your ministry?
- How does these pictures help with your understanding of Andrew Root’s proposal that we move from a strategy of influence to a theology of incarnation?

Say the following:

God's mission of reconciliation means that we learn to see others, not from our human point of view, but from God's point of view. Our old ways of seeing and relating have passed away. In Christ, we no longer live as the world lives. This theology enables us to live out reconciliation. In Christ's reconciliation, we are all in relationship, all part of the body of Christ. We are not just called to love those who love us, who "get" us and understand us because we are very much alike. Rather we are called to love and be loved by those who are not like us, whom we might have to work quite hard to understand, or who may not understand us at all. God's reconciliation is across borders and boundaries. This is not just true for mission and service but for our everyday ministry context and call to be agents of faith formation.⁵

BREAK

Segment 3: Practicing a Theology of Accompaniment (10-15 minutes)

Your primary goal during this segment is to describe actual skills a Theology of Accompaniment calls us to cultivate. It is very important to help participants move from the reflection and theory to the tangible practices that this theological understanding embodies. Say the following:

There are certain skills that we can cultivate and model that portray a Theology of Accompaniment.

1. Mutuality – This refers to how people engage in relationship with one another. Reciprocity, trust, and recognition of gifts within each other are key.
2. Inclusivity – This refers to our ability to see who is and is not included in our efforts and ministry. We are called to be hospitable and to be honest about our assumptions and walls.
3. Vulnerability – This refers to our ability to be authentic and honest about our thoughts and feelings. We give up power and are open to new relationships and experiences.
4. Empowerment – This refers to our ability to let go of power and support others as they claim their power.
5. Sustainability – This refers to the reality that relationships take work. Without dedicating the time, care and compassion necessary to nurture a relationship, it will die.

These are five skills that a Theology of Accompaniment calls us to cultivate.

- What do you think about these skills?
- Did the people you lifted up earlier who accompanied you on your journey exhibit any of these skills? What might be missing?
- Have you lived out any of these skills in your ministry?
- Is there one that you are more comfortable with? Less comfortable with?

⁵ This has been adapted from the Accompaniment Section in the Glocal Mission Gathering Resource Binder. Published by the Global Mission Unit of the ELCA, 2011.

Segment 4: Relating a Theology of Accompaniment (15 minutes)

Your goal in this segment is helping participants think through how this information not only informs their ministries but also how they are able to communicate this way of being with young people so that a Theology of Accompaniment is lived out in their everyday lives. Say the following:

So what does this mean? We've talked about how we understand faith formation in a missional age using the frameworks that the incarnation and a Theology of Accompaniment provide. We've discussed skills that are important to cultivate if one is to live out a Theology of Accompaniment. Let us now think about how we communicate this way of being to the young people and families we are called to walk with. There are four adjectives that help to describe the characteristics of relationships that utilize a Theology of Accompaniment.

Ask participants what each of these words mean to them before giving the definitions listed below.

1. Authentic – When we are in authentic relationship with others we are aware of our thoughts and feelings and how they affect the other person. We reveal our true selves and speak with integrity, compassion and honesty. Authentic
2. Meaningful – Meaningful relationships are those that seek to carry the joys and burdens of the other. These relationships push you to not only find meaning in your life, but share with each other in ways that are transparent and seek to build up and not tear down.
3. Just – Just refers to how power is used in relationship and how we see people as WHOLE – formed by their personal, cultural, societal, economic, religious and other narratives. Just relationships cause us to care for one another in ways that level the playing field and allow us to walk together instead of walk ahead of or behind another.
4. Transformative – Relationships that are transformative consistently push you to be your best self. They challenge you and hold you accountable. They provide space for reflection and encourage creativity.

After discussing these adjectives, say the following:

Young people are inherently relational. One of our tasks is to help them build healthy relationships that live out a Theology of Accompaniment.

- Where and how do you see these young people living out a Theology of Accompaniment?
- What can your ministry do to live out a Theology of Accompaniment?

Living out a Theology of Accompaniment is revealed through relationships that are authentic, meaningful, just and transformative. Our goal is to model this way of being and help our young people and families engage the world through this lens. These skills and ways of being can be used anywhere, not just in the context of the church but in our everyday lives. By doing so we live out God's message of love and reconciliation.

As you conclude, ask participants to share what they learned, what they have questions about and what the plan on doing with the information shared. Ending with a prayer would be appropriate.