



Here is my interpretation of “I Am Worthy”

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On the face of it the theme for the 2026 Women of the ELCA Triennial is non-Lutheran. Being worthy suggests one merits something or deserves something. This is the opposite of what God the Father did by grace in sending his Son to die for the sins of the world and gift mankind with the message of unearned salvation for sinners.

So how would an organization of Lutheran women come up with such a theme? There are a number of interpretations people could come up with such as Psalm 139:14. The one that makes sense to me is this. Let me tell you a story that will help you see where I am coming from.

In the fall of 1971 when our family was serving as missionaries in what was then New Guinea, my wife, Ina, received word that her father had died and that his funeral was going to be held a week later. We were set to go on furlough six weeks later so my wife did not go back for her father's funeral. When we got home, she had the opportunity to mourn with her sisters and her mother, Estelle. Estelle had retired earlier in the year from her teaching profession. We were to return to New Guinea in March of 1972.

What was Estelle's life now going to be like without a husband? It struck me to ask her, “Why don't you go back with us when we return to New Guinea.” Now, you must understand Estelle has hardly ever been out of the state of Minnesota. So, she replied with an understandable response. “Oh, I could never do that. New Guinea is halfway around the world. No, I could never think of doing something like that. It is way too far out to imagine.”

When I heard her say that I thought, “She is shortchanging herself. Yes, going on a long journey to a strange land with different languages sounds overwhelming, but she knows how to deal with things. If she goes with us, she will make the adjustments and do fine. We all feel insufficient at times. Paul asked God to take away his affliction, his thorn in the flesh. When God did not, in II Corinthians 12:9 he tells Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” What is Paul's response? “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”



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Estelle thought over the prospects of such a venture and probably prayed about it. Was her first response going to be the final word? No! As we talked about it more, how to pay for the trip, how to get a visa, more encouragement from my wife and kids, the possibility of taking such a bold exciting step started to get to her. In March, there she was in our car as we drove out of snowy Minnesota and headed for the west coast to get on a plane. She had overcome any feelings that she was not going to be able to do this, not equipped to take this on, not WORTHY TO FACE INTO SUCH AN UNKNOWN CHALLENGING FUTURE.

The 2026 Women of the ELCA Triennial is taking place at a pivotal junction of the ELCA. Predictors are telling us in another 25 years the whole church body will all but be gone. Were that to happen there would no longer be a W/ELCA either.

So, who is worthy, who is there, who is willing to claim that they can have some say in the matter? Who is willing to step out, take some bold initiative like Estelle did? Are the Women of the ELCA bold enough to be the ones to turn the ELCA around 180 degrees? Or are they okay in sliding out of existence with their parent church?

Can we find a passage in the Bible that will help us make some sense of all this? In Acts 26, Paul and his comrades share the Gospel with a woman named Lydia. What happened? We read in verses 14 and 15 these words, "A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she prevailed upon us.

Here we find a woman who did see she was in a new place in her life. She was now a baptized believer in Jesus, a new eternal child of God. So, what did she do? She took on hosting all of these men like Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Dr. Luke. She was not timid. Rather she prevailed upon them—"Come and stay at my house, come and dine at my table." These men were taken back it seems by her welcoming spirit and obvious generosity. That is probably why we have this unique story in the New Testament. She was not holding back for she was now a glorious child of God with much to offer. She was affirming for these men their Macedonian call. (See Acts 16:6-10). The response of her heart gave them a new confidence that God had led them to the area he wanted them to be.

As a 90-year-old pastor in the ELCA I have for decades missed out on what congregations could be doing but usually don't. I left such things unaddressed and undone as a pastor of a North Dakota congregation. I did not take the priesthood of all believers that seriously. Overlooking all that, I realize I was a participant in the downhill slide of what is now the ELCA. If the ELCA is going to get turned around, listen to the Bible and Martin Luther, the solution is sitting right there to be solved. What is that? It starts with regarding the welfare and future of our youth. How are they going to become strong Christians and pass on their faith to their kids and grandkids: (Psalm 78:1-8). How are they going to be salty members of our churches in the future, keeping congregations vibrant? First of all, it is going to take parents and grandparents fulfilling their callings. They are the irreplaceable ones in their offspring's lives that will have in most cases the greatest impact—for good or ill.



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If a W/ELCA woman were to look at her congregation realistically as Jesus does in Revelation 2 and 3 with the seven congregations, what is she going to see? Are parents and grandparents being equipped to be vital members of the body of Christ? Ephesians 4:11-16. Are parents seeing themselves as Luther saw them? Bishop, apostles, and priests in their own home? What is going on in the homes of the members of the congregation? Is she ready to face the music and be ready to initiate some changes? Will a woman coming to Des Moines count herself worthy to be an instrument of God to bring new life to her congregation? Will she go back home, ready to lift up the ministries and callings of parents and grandparents? Will she make sure they get the training and equipping they need to take on effectively the very hard challenges they face in raising their offspring? Will she lead them to curriculum to use as that found on www.adultssavingkids.org? Will she fend off excuses that would keep the status quo?

Parents and grandparents are to pass on the Christian faith by caring, teaching, praying, modeling, and sharing wisdom in discerning conversations as we find parents doing in Proverbs 1-7. Is that happening? Who will make sure it happens back home? Kids need wise skills, shrewd tactics if they are going to outfox and fend off the clever scheming foxes in their cell phones and in their lives. Parents and grandparents too need to have the tools they require to avoid being scammed or defrauded. It is a dangerous world. Bold Lutheran women are called to give the determined leadership required. Or do they let Satan and his henchman stop them in their tracks with a Ho-Hum, "Someone else will do it".

I must say I personally was faked out as a pastor. I did not take Jesus seriously when he called for all followers to be people who pray. How many congregations take Ephesians 6:18 as a call to have all members learn to pray and then do pray? A praying congregation is like a powerful motor that is well lubricated. There is strong movement. God is heavily involved. Destinations are being reached. Will a Triennial participant go home and give the leadership needed for her congregation to become faithful in prayer as Luther, himself was and taught many to pray? Are women at the Triennial going to see themselves as sent home with a mission that will transform their own congregations and yes, some others nearby?

When Estelle got to New Guinea she discovered she was not a tourist but a gift. She babysat the younger kids of two German teachers at the seminary while their wives homeschooled the older kids. She reorganized the seminary library. She became the grandma for our kids and others. She even went up to the school for missionary children and taught there for three weeks. The youth there loved having a grandma to relate to.

God is here to turn the ELCA around. Who does he have to make that happen? Could it be that the Women of the ELCA could have a very major part to play in all this? They are right there present in their congregations, and they have good national leadership. Has God made them worthy to be his transforming instruments? The answer to that question is to be answered by women who are ready to say like Lydia and Estelle, "I am God's child, I AM WORTHY IN CHRIST."