



## Leader Guide for *Reclaiming the “E” Word: Waking Up to Our Evangelical Identity* By Kelly A. Fryer

### About this Guide

This Leader Guide and companion **Participant Handout** offer the tools needed for a one-hour discussion on the themes of what being evangelical means and why it is essential for our church today—the themes of *Reclaiming the “E” Word: Waking Up to Our Evangelical Identity*, by Kelly A. Fryer.

The guide also provides suggestions for expanding the one-hour general discussion of being evangelical to a series of sessions based on each chapter in Fryer’s book. For a more in-depth study of *Reclaiming the “E” Word*, see “Digging Deeper” at the end of this guide.

To get out the word about an upcoming study of *Reclaiming the “E” Word*, download the **Publicity Flyer** and customize it to fit your needs.

### Pre-Session Preparation

Prior to the session, read *Reclaiming the “E” Word*, and reflect on the “Key Points” presented in the box at right. Read through the Leader Guide and the Participant Handout, and choose options from the materials presented to use with your group. Gather the materials you will need for the study:

- Bibles
- Copies of the Participant Handout (a companion piece available on this website)
- A dictionary
- A white board, large pad of paper, or other writing surface (helpful but not essential)
- Name tags, if desired
- Copies of *Reclaiming the “E” Word* (Participants will get the most out of the conversation if they have read the book, but the one-hour session is designed so that you can welcome and include guests who haven’t done the reading.)

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### Key Points

- The word *Evangelical*, as it is commonly used today, has political associations. However, its origins are broadly Christian, describing people who act as messengers of good news—a practice through which God builds, enlivens, and blesses others through our congregations.
- For social and spiritual reasons, many congregations have experienced slow or no growth. But being a Christian is about loving and blessing the world, letting God use us in spite of any doubts based on demographics.
- In large, fast-growing congregations, clergy and laity see God as a real, active force in their lives. Dramatic things happen when people listen for God and tell each other how God is acting in their daily lives.
- In these growing congregations, the Bible is a framework for what people do, think, say, decide, and dream. One approach is to read the Bible and ask, “What do we hear God saying to us?”
- These big congregations are deeply committed to the priesthood of all believers. We, too, are set free to serve.
- The people in these congregations do whatever it takes to connect with new people. We, too, are free to say, “Let’s try it” for the sake of the gospel.
- People in these congregations expect things to happen, because they believe that God changes lives. Imagine what can happen in your own faith community if people act on that belief!

*“The Lutheran Voices series is tapping into the rich resources of the church and bringing us together to talk about issues and ideas that shape our present and future.”*

*Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA*

## Single-Session Plan

The following ideas suggest how to use the **Participant Handout** in leading a one-hour discussion of *Reclaiming the “E” Word*.

### Opening (3 minutes)

Introduce yourself and welcome the participants. Pray the opening prayer together, or invite someone to lead the prayer.

### Getting Started (10 minutes)

Invite the participants to briefly introduce themselves and to answer this question: What good news—trivial or significant—have you recently heard? If the group is large, have participants introduce themselves and respond to the question within smaller groups of 4–5 people.

### Points to Ponder (45 minutes)

Use questions from the Participant Handout as a framework for discussion.

- *Questions 1–4 (10 minutes)*: Besides providing basic background in church vocabulary, these questions address the media’s use of *Evangelical* to refer to groups of Christians with a fundamentalist and/or politically right-wing outlook. Members of your group may or may not share that outlook; in either case, the contemporary understanding can obscure the original meaning.
  - For question 3, bring to the session a dictionary with a definition of *evangelical* that includes more than one of its varied meanings. For example, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., offers 5 meanings.
  - For question 4, if your group includes people who don’t belong to a congregation, you could ask the question about your group or about participants as individuals.
- *Questions 5–9 (10 minutes)*: You may find the discussion most inspiring and energizing if you encourage the group to focus on what can happen when we share the good news, rather than on the shortcomings of the political scene, media messages, or your congregation or national church.
  - While there are certainly many shortcomings to acknowledge, if the group seems stuck on complaining, ask: What if we didn’t let that stop us? What might happen if we focused on sharing the good news? (If the group is wishful but puzzled about how to proceed, Chapters 2–6 and the “Digging Deeper” discussion suggestions provide ideas for authentic evangelism.)
  - For question 8, give participants a minute or two to write their ideas on the handout, and then invite them to share some of these.
- *Questions 10–13 (25 minutes)*: Introduce this Bible study with Fryer’s advice to avoid focusing on “what ‘Mark’ is saying or what they ‘think’ the story is about or what this story ‘means’” but instead to “listen for what *God* is saying to them through this biblical story” (p. 88). Then read the story and follow Fryer’s advice by spending most of your time with question 10.
  - Some groups may be used to having someone identify “the meaning” of a passage for them; if so, be patient and encourage ideas by asking: What thoughts occurred to you as we heard the story? What verses or images jumped out at you?
  - If time remains and the group wants more ideas about the story, questions 11–13 are related to Fryer’s insights on pp. 89–91. Her points include that Jesus takes us to the unknown, the “other side”; that evangelism is less about “taking Jesus” to others than about going with Jesus to notice, participate in, and report what God is doing; and that the process isn’t so scary if we have faith that Jesus will work miracles.

### Closing (2 minutes)

Note that the closing prayer, Psalm 117, calls on *all peoples* to praise God for God’s faithfulness and love—something people can do only if they know about God’s deeds and promises. Invite the group to pray the closing prayer together.

If you plan to continue the discussion of *Reclaiming the “E” Word* after this session, announce the place and time for the next meeting. Ask participants to prepare by reading the chapters of *Reclaiming the “E” Word* you plan to cover at the next meeting. Suggestions for subsequent discussions begin on the following page, “Digging Deeper.”

## Digging Deeper

After working your way through the single-session plan, use the following suggestions along with the chapter questions in *Reclaiming the “E” Word* to dig deeper into an understanding of how Christians can engage in authentic evangelism that blesses others. These suggestions provide a framework for a chapter-by-chapter discussion of *Reclaiming the “E” Word*, though it’s your decision as to how many chapters to address each time the group meets.

### Each Session

- This book encourages people to see God working in their lives and congregations and to share those observations with others. Give people opportunities to practice those skills. When someone mentions being blessed or seeing God at work, ask for details.
  - During each session (perhaps before or after an opening prayer), ask: Where have you seen God at work, changing lives? Don’t be discouraged if participants have few ideas the first time you ask. Remind them that God acts through people; that thought may inspire ideas. Also, simply because participants know you will ask at the next session, they may pay greater attention during the time between sessions.
  - During your group’s prayer time, give thanks to God for acting in our lives, citing the examples mentioned. This may further reinforce the practice of seeing God at work.
  - As participants become more confident about sharing their stories with the group, encourage them to share (with appropriate concern for privacy issues) their stories with others outside the group.
- Each chapter of *Reclaiming the “E” Word* ends with a prayer under the heading “Talking It Over.” Use this as your group’s closing prayer.

### Chapter 1: A Wake-Up Call

- From your congregation’s annual reports, council secretary, or church office, get a history of membership and church attendance numbers. (For ELCA congregations, you can get numbers for recent years online. At the ELCA Web site, [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org), use the Find a Congregation link to find your congregation, and then click the link to the Full Trend Report for This Congregation.) Compare the statistics for your congregation (and the memories of participants) with the descriptions on pp. 14–15 and 17–18. Ask: Has our congregation been growing, shrinking, or staying the same size? What forces in our community might be contributing to the trends in our congregation?
- Note that God works through ordinary, flawed people to love and bless the world—for example, Noah had a drinking problem (Gen 9:20-21), Moses was a fugitive because he had murdered (Exod 2:11-15), Mary was a teenager living in an out-of-the-way town (Luke 1:26-27), and before Paul, also named Saul, was converted, he was actively engaged in getting Christians arrested (Acts 8:3). Ask: Is it most astonishing that God chose to work through Noah, Moses, Mary, Paul, or you? If you question whether you are suitable for the job (as Mary and Moses did), can you trust God to help?
- Read the last paragraph on p. 11, about it being “our nature to be evangelical people.” Invite reactions. Ask: How accurately does this description portray this group or our congregation? If it doesn’t describe us, what is holding us back? This would be a good point at which to use Fryer’s Bible study about Paul (question 2 on p. 22).
- Note that Fryer bases many of her ideas on her study of fast-growing Lutheran churches. Read her list of five qualities shared by these congregations, in the first full paragraph on p. 21. Ask: Which of these qualities do you see in our congregation? Which do you want to learn more about? (Note that these are the topics of chapters 2–6.)

### Chapter 2: Waking Up to the Real Deal

- Fryer distinguishes between “knowing ‘the faith’ [doctrine] and knowing *God*” (feelings about, relationship with, experience of God). Ask: In your life, when have you made progress in each of these areas—knowing *about* God and knowing God? How has your faith community helped you in each of these areas?
- Invite reactions to Fryer’s statement “In the biblical story, God didn’t send people *ideas*. God sent *people*” (p. 27). This would be a good point at which to discuss the questions under “Wrestling with the Word,” pp. 37–38.
- Ask: When has God seemed real to you—for example, when has something happened that you believe was “from God,” or when have you felt certain that God would act? Encourage participants to tell stories and provide details. Ask: Where in these stories was God acting through people? When have you considered that God might be acting—or wanting to act—through you? Do you feel more confident because you believe God will be acting, or do you believe the success or failure of your efforts depends entirely on you?
- Brainstorm ways that participants can develop their awareness of God being real in their lives and community. Record them on the board or on large sheets of paper. For some ideas, see pp. 33–36. **Option:** Perhaps the group would like to begin a practice of opening meetings by identifying God’s actions and offering prayers of thanksgiving for them.

### Chapter 3: Waking Up to a Vital Word

- Ask a multiple-choice question: How do you use the Bible most weeks? (a) It sits on my shelf; (b) I read it regularly but don't really understand it; (c) I look up passages to find rules and guidance for specific situations; (d) I read it while praying that God will speak to me through the words; (e) Other (how?). The choices aren't meant to be all-inclusive but to be a discussion starter. Notice whether the Scriptures seem to play a vital role for participants. **Option:** Ask: Do you wish the Bible played a bigger role in your life? If so, what's holding you back from using it more?
- Invite reactions to these statements by Fryer: "The Bible is not meant to be an answer book" (p. 42); "The Bible is the story of God's loving mission throughout all of history to bless, save, set free, and reconcile the whole congregation" (pp. 43–44); "What makes the Bible holy, what makes it *scripture* is that it points us to Jesus Christ" (p. 44); and "The Bible does not tell us what we need to *know*. Rather, the Bible introduces us to the one who knows us" (p. 44). For each statement, ask: Does this sound like your understanding of the Bible? Does thinking about the Bible this way make it more or less helpful? Does thinking about the Bible this way shape how you want to share the good news?
- Read the 3 questions Fryer provides on p. 48 for "helping people learn to listen for God's voice through the Scriptures." Ask those questions when you read and discuss the Bible passages given under "Wrestling with the Word," p. 49 (John 1:14; 20:1–28 and Ezekiel 2:1–3:11). Ask: How does answering these questions affect you differently than asking what the passage means?
- Ask: When has the Bible been important in shaping your life? Referring to the examples given by participants who have experienced the Bible as important, identify situations or spiritual practices that have set the stage for this experience. Working as a group, develop a list of ideas for connecting with the Bible. Write your list on the board or a large sheet of paper for all to see.

### Chapter 4: Waking Up to a Purposeful Life

- Have everyone look at the illustration of arrows on p. 58 and read the caption, or draw the arrows on the board or a large sheet of paper and review what each arrow signifies. Ask: How do we express this summary of our faith in our worship? How do we live it out in our Bible studies? In our personal lives?
- Ask: How is being "set free to love" different from being required by God to love in order to be saved? Have you experienced God's call to serve more as gospel (set free) or as law (a requirement)?
- Read Amos 5:21–24 (**option:** for some context, also read verses 10–13) and Matthew 23:23–28. Ask: What is God saying to you in these passages today? Compare the group's observations with Fryer's paragraph on pp. 58–59.
- Ask: In our faith community, how do we serve others? How do we invite people to serve? How do we share stories about the experience? Does what we say sound more like we are burdened with obligations or more like we have been set free?

### Chapter 5: Waking Up to Our Common Call

- Ask: When has welcoming a new person into your life caused you to make changes? How were the changes hard? How were you blessed by them? (You might want to be prepared with examples, such as the changes that come with falling in love, getting married, giving birth or adopting, fostering a child, mentoring a new employee, hosting an exchange student, or receiving new members at your church.) This chapter encourages us to accept the challenges that come with exchanging old traditions for new ways of welcoming people; it may be helpful to remember that welcoming new people also can bring blessings, even as we bless others.
- Read Exodus 20:8–11. Ask: When would the Sabbath be a blessing? Invite the group to imagine examples of situations in which someone would welcome the Sabbath. (For example, if we are exhausted from hard work, being told to rest is a blessing.) Perhaps some participants have a practice of honoring the Sabbath; if so, include their stories in your discussion. Ask: When might honoring the Sabbath be a burden? (In general, these situations would arise when a focus on the rules distracts people from caring for our needs, such as a need for healing.) Again invite examples.
- Read Mark 2:23–3:5. Remind the group that honoring the Sabbath was not only a central law but also a beloved tradition for many people. Ask: What was Jesus focusing on in these situations? What do his concerns and actions tell you? What Christian traditions are beloved to you? When could they interfere with serving our neighbors? What should we do in those situations?
- Ask: In what ways do (or don't) your congregation's worship services promote faith? In what ways do (or don't) the worship services promote "the service of love"? In what ways do (or don't) they welcome new people into your faith community? Is it time for your congregation to try something new? If so, what is God calling you to try? If you don't know, how can you find out? For example, do you need to notice who is *not* there? (Who might that be?)

### Chapter 6: Waking Up to Transformational Power

- Open by praying the Lord's Prayer, or read Matthew 6:9–13. Ask: When you pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done," what are you expecting from God? For you, is this wishful thinking, a firm expectation, or something in between? Do you expect God's will and kingdom here and now or off in the future, maybe in another place? Read or review Fryer's description

of God's kingdom, starting with the last paragraph on p. 79 and continuing with the 2 paragraphs that follow. Ask: How does this description compare with your own ideas?

- Ask: Do you *expect* to witness God's work in the world, or is it something you doubt or ignore? If some participants do witness God at work in the world, explore how they observe this. Invite them to suggest ways for others to pay attention and see God at work.
- Ask: What miracles have you witnessed or heard others tell about? To what extent do members of your faith community share these stories? How would the community be affected if the stories were widely shared? (Or how *is* the community affected if the stories *are* shared?)
  - If the group can't think of miracles, ask: Is God not at work in our community, or are we not noticing? In the New Testament, when Jesus met people, they were changed. Try asking in a different way: How is God changing your life or the lives of people around you? Or how is God working through people to change our community?
  - If no changes are occurring, ask: Are we meeting Jesus? If not, why not? If so, why aren't we letting him change us?
- Brainstorm a list of problems participants are concerned about in this group, their congregation, their community, and the world; record them on the board or large sheets of paper. Then ask the question posed by Fryer on p. 85: "If we dare to follow Jesus to the crossroads and do what it is we are supposed to do, as people who have been called to participate in God's loving mission to save and reconcile and bless the whole world, what will be different?"
  - Referring to the items on your list of problems, create a list of headlines that might appear in the newspaper or on TV newscasts as people get involved in following Jesus.
  - Ask: Would you be excited to share news like this? If God is truly at work in the world, what would you risk to be part of that? What would you gain?



## Deeper Still: Further Resources to Explore

We hope you enjoyed your study of *The Bible's Importance for the Church Today*. The Lutheran Voices series includes over 40 books focused on faithful living, global issues, healing and wholeness, Martin Luther's teachings, and church revitalization and leadership. Free, downloadable study materials are available for select books. For a complete list of titles, go to [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org) or call (800) 328-4648, in Canada: (800) 265-6397, ext. 215.