

STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

The Timeless Power of Storytelling

“Tell me a story!”

It’s a familiar request from a small child. But we never really outgrow our love of stories. We happily pay to watch movies and cable shows. We enjoy “behind the scenes” stories about athletes on ESPN. Many of us still relish a good, old-fashioned novel, whether at bedtime or on the beach.

Given the universal appeal of storytelling, how do we use stories to support and inspire ministry in our congregations? How do we celebrate the good work that is being done in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

For as long as stories have been told, they have been used to instruct, lead and inspire. Jesus is our role model in storytelling, as in so many other areas of life.

Notice how Jesus’ stories (also known as parables) were short, accessible and used images and words familiar to his audience. In an agrarian society, he talked about seeds that take root in good soil or die in parched earth. He chose a familiar route from Jerusalem to Jericho to illustrate what it means to be a good neighbor. And he urged the fishermen who became his closest followers to consider a new kind of catch: people.

In a world drowning in information, stories break through the clutter to speak to us with remarkable clarity. Stories get people to care, to take action, to engage.

When you want to raise money for your youth group so they can renovate homes in Mississippi, tell a story about how a previous mission trip transformed the life of a teenage member of your congregation. When you want to lift up volunteers who were crucial to the success of a new ministry, tell a story about one person’s experience of grace through giving.

Keep the example of Jesus’ parables in mind when you’re choosing a story to share with your congregation.

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The Timeless Power of Storytelling (cont’d)

A good story is:

■ Short and sweet

Jesus’ parables were memorable in part because they were brief and easy to remember.

■ Packed with concrete details

Think of the woman who searched her house for the lost coin. You can feel her sense of urgency; you can see her frantically sweeping.

■ About a strong main character

Build your story around one engaging person, such as the poor widow who put the rich to shame with her gift of two copper coins.

■ Timely and relevant

Give your story a practical application and, if possible, a local angle. Everyone in Jesus’ audience understood the “problem” with tax collectors—and what their social status was.

■ An invitation to action

By talking about the simple, every day task of separating sheep from goats, Jesus got his listeners to think about how they were treating those in need.

In the 21st century, we are blessed with a wealth of tools to tell the stories of “God’s work. Our hands.” Video. Blogs. Print. But the way we tell stories hasn’t changed. And the need for stories is greater than ever.

“Tell the story!”

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Biblical Advice for Cheerful Givers

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

We've been told this since our days in Sunday school: We need to give and we need to give gladly. But a spirit of generosity isn't enough to guide us in our decisions. What else does Scripture have to say on the subject?

Three kinds of financial giving are mentioned in the Bible: offerings, tithes and alms. Understanding what they mean helps us achieve a thoughtful, balanced plan for our cheerful giving.

Offerings and Tithing

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come (1 Corinthians 16:2).

The faith practice of making a regular financial offering to your congregation is grounded in a "first fruits" biblical principle. Your generosity is not an afterthought; it's part of your day-in-and-day-out joyful response as a child of God.

Tithing includes all undesignated giving and supports local ministries and outreach. Your congregation then shares a portion of your offering—mission support—with your synod and the churchwide expression. *Stories of Faith in Action* is filled with examples of how God changes people's lives through your mission support. It is God's work with our hands.

Offerings refer to giving that is above and beyond, and never in place of, your commitment to regular congregational giving, which many Christians talk about as a tithe. This helps you to differentiate between your financial commitment to your congregation and the special offerings you designate to specific causes. Such causes may include World Hunger, a program unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a congregation's building fund or a pan-Lutheran organization such as Lutheran World Relief. We encourage your designated support of these worthy causes.

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Biblical Advice for Cheerful Givers (cont'd)

Alms

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys (Luke 12:33).

Alms are our compassionate, heartfelt response to the people Jesus mentioned in Matthew 25: those "least" of our sister and brothers who are "less" than we in circumstance only and always our equal in their humanity.

Example: This is our most personal and spontaneous kind of giving in response to people in need. Think about the homeless man you see everyday by the bus stop or the family in your congregation whose home was lost during a fire. Your outreach makes God's love for them feel very real and very immediate; your kindness reveals Christ's presence within them as well.

Time and Talent

It's also important to remember that when we focus exclusively on giving in terms of money alone, we lose sight of the bigger picture. God calls us to be generous in all areas of our lives and invites us to explore the many opportunities to share ourselves through our time and talent.

When we ground our giving in a biblical context, our financial generosity becomes an expression of our love for God, for our neighbor and for ourselves. We are new people in Christ: compassionate and eager to share.

We give cheerfully because God has given us so much.

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Building a Church for the 21st Century

The members at Living Grace Lutheran Church, Omaha, Neb., are incredibly well-connected. They connect at worship services on Sunday mornings, at meetings during the week—and on Facebook anytime they'd like.

Melissa Jewell believes Facebook has been a blessing to this suburban congregation under development. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) churchwide expression works in partnership with the ELCA Nebraska Synod and local congregations to provide the compensation package of the Rev. James Lindberg, the mission developer.

“We are a tighter family because of Facebook. I'm in contact throughout the week with half the people at church. I know what's going on in their lives. I can offer support, a prayer request or share a laugh.”

Ryan Blakestad says that it's no accident that Living Grace is on Facebook. In the early days of developing their strategy and vision, the core leadership team studied the demographics of the area and decided to build a 21st century church that would appeal to these young families.

The congregation produces very little paper and no monthly newsletter. Pastor Lindberg shares updates in weekly e-mails that members of all ages appreciate. He videotapes his reports to the congregation council. And now he's on Twitter too, sending out daily messages that include a Bible verse and a quick and relevant inspiration.

Any congregation thinking of adding social media tools to its communication plan must keep the needs of its membership in mind before making a decision. Nothing can replace the personal touch in keeping current members feeling informed and new members welcomed.

But in difficult economic times, the affordability of social media is a plus for congregations. Ryan thinks the benefit goes far beyond dollars and cents. “We're on the uptick in terms of growth,” he notes and believes social media has been a key factor in their success.

Ryan hopes Living Grace's experience will inspire other congregations to discover what Facebook and other social media tools can do for them. Used with discretion and an eye to mission, “these can be ways to invigorate a congregation and draw people together.”



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Reflecting Christ in the Community of the Baptized

Martin “Peanut” Jones is an active member of Bridge of Peace Lutheran Church in Camden, N.J., where he regularly attends Tuesday night Family Bible Study and Affirmation of Baptism class.



The fact that Peanut is only 5 years old and has been diagnosed with ADHD and sensory integration disorder in no way interferes with his full participation.

In fact, reports his mother Rose, one of Peanut’s favorite bedtime books is the Wengert translation of Luther’s Small Catechism. “[Reading this together] gave him a sense of comfort,” she reports, “and it helped me to know that Peanut knows that God loves him.”

The Rev. Giselle Coutinho says that Peanut is an example of the vibrant membership at Bridge of Peace. “Peanut reflects Christ to us and we reflect Christ to him in the community of the baptized. It is ‘God’s work. Our hands.’”

Bridge of Peace began as a mission development project of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the ELCA New Jersey Synod eight years ago and became an organized congregation in 2007. Pastor Coutinho has been with the congregation since 2006, first as the mission developer and then as the called pastor.

Bridge of Peace is thriving in a community recognized as the second poorest in the country with the second highest crime rate. At the root lies strong, local lay leadership—people like Peanut’s parents, Rick and Rose. Proud parents of three adult children and three adopted foster children, they have raised awareness about autism and other developmental disabilities among the congregation.

“Bridge of Peace is part of our family,” says Rose. “Here we’ve found a place that not only accepts my differently abled children but loves them unconditionally.”

Unconditional acceptance is the message of Bridge of Peace, which worships in three languages on Sunday: English, Spanish and Portuguese. It’s not about skin color and it’s not about ethnicity, notes Pastor Coutinho. “We are all created in God’s image. We are beautiful. It’s not about what we can’t do but what we can do. This is the congregation’s identity.”

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Planning for a Faithful Future

Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Church in Minneapolis, Minn., has been called many things—contagious, passionate, spontaneous—but “complacent” is not in this congregation’s vocabulary.



“The church is getting older and there will not be another generation coming unless we teach them,” said Masresha Gemechu, coordinator of youth and children’s ministry and the English-language program.

Our Redeemer is the largest African National congregation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and one of the fastest growing congregations in the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod. The congregation, led by the Rev. Melkamu Negeri, draws more than 600 Oromo-speaking worshipers from across the Twin Cities weekly.

Oromo is one of more than 80 languages spoken in the East African nation of Ethiopia.

Worship at Our Redeemer is filled with “lots of spontaneous singing, clapping, praising. It’s a joyful community,” said Gemechis Buba, director for African National ministries, ELCA Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission.

Our Redeemer received a renewing ministry grant to reach “second-generation immigrants”—youth and young adults who emigrated from Ethiopia as children or who were born in the United States.

With local partners, Our Redeemer has taken medical and humanitarian trips to Ethiopia and supported Oromo refugees in Kenya and Sudan. And it has provided leadership training and support for those launching Oromo congregations across the country.

“This congregation is respected and loved and lifted up as a model for its love and its passion and its evangelism,” said Gemechis.

Masresha said that the English-language ministry “is not only for Oromo ... we are planning, with the grace of God, to reach others” in the neighborhood.

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An Awakened Sense of God's Grace

Lutherans in the town of Lexington, N.C., gathered in October 2008 to experience a renewed awareness of God's transforming presence in their lives.

Four local congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) worked in partnership to plan the event, appropriately called Grace Awakening.

The ELCA North Carolina Synod and ELCA churchwide staff provided financial support, training and leadership.

The Rev. John Mocko of Holly Grove Lutheran says that Grace Awakening was a goal of his congregation's Church Health Team in its first year of Natural Church Development.

"Grace Awakening was a time for the Lord to feed us, minister to people in personal ways and awaken us to God's grace which is a source of strength, faith and inspiration," says Pastor Mocko. "The fruit of Grace Awakening was a group of believers who were well fed, hungry for a deeper relationship with our Lord and open to the continuing work of renewal among us."

During the three-day event, attendees of all ages enjoyed a remarkable array of opportunities for spiritual renewal, plus good food, music and inspiring preaching.

Since Grace Awakening, the four ELCA congregations have continued to enjoy a spirit of shared ministry, celebrating the Reformation together with a special program for children and planning numerous joint confirmation events.

As for Holly Grove, Pastor Mocko says Grace Awakening continues to bear fruit. "We are now in our second cycle of Natural Church Development with another set of ministry- and life-transforming goals.

"Our members are energized and excited about what God is up to here in Lexington. Natural Church Development has been a tool that has helped us identify areas for growth, develop relevant goals and implement specific steps that nurture faith in our Risen Lord."



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Celebrating Partnerships to Share the Gospel

For the Rev. Laura Strietelmeier, the last worship service of her seminary internship at Salem Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio, was filled with laughter and tears.



The congregation sang a song composed just for the intern by their pastor, the Rev. Mary Lou Baumgartner. “She didn’t miss any of my foibles,” remembers Pastor Strietelmeier with a laugh.

She was also presented with a handmade scrapbook that occupies a special place in her office at Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio, where Pastor Strietelmeier accepted a call in August 2009. Bursting with photographs and loving notes from members, the scrapbook is a tangible reminder of the place where she “lived and grew and served.”

Says Pastor Strietelmeier, “What an overwhelming gift to receive at the end of a year in which you have poured so much of your heart into your work and so much of other people’s hearts have been poured into you.”

Pastor Strietelmeier is one of a dozen interns Salem has welcomed under the leadership of Pastor Baumgartner.

Acknowledging that the congregation faces financial challenges, Pastor Baumgartner says, “What we aren’t able to give in mission support we can do by making an investment in future leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).” An ELCA Horizon Internship grant funds the interns’ salary and benefits.

Both pastors note that Salem’s presence in the Vistula neighborhood of Toledo is contingent upon a network of financial support from all expressions of this church.

“Salem is of absolute importance to this church,” said the Rev. Marc Miller, assistant to the bishop, ELCA Northwestern Ohio Synod. “It’s in places like Vistula where the presence of God can often be most strongly felt.”

Pastor Strietelmeier says, “At Salem I learned about the value of shared partnerships helping us to proclaim the gospel. Salem wouldn’t be here without the support and generosity of the ELCA and its members.”

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Discovering a Spirit of Generosity

Young guests of Camp Indian Sands, an outdoor ministry program in Neshkoro, Wis., may encounter a lot of firsts when they come here: sleeping in tents under starlight, swimming in a fresh lake, paddling a canoe and wandering through tranquil woods.



They experience another first as well. Through an innovative stewardship program developed in partnership with the Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission program unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), campers are invited to see that all of life is a response to God's love.

Executive Director Tim Knutson says, "As we create opportunities for kids to connect with creation, community and Christ, we are grateful for the educational resources of the churchwide organization. With their help, we've crafted a program that teaches a more authentic understanding of stewardship.

"How is our treatment of the natural world a response to God's love? How does Christ influence our actions within our community? What gifts may we bring to create a more just world? This model of stewardship in no way excludes financial gifts. Rather, it places them in their proper context as another type of loving response that brings glory to God."

Camp Indian Sands has a long history of primarily serving children from urban Milwaukee neighborhoods, many who have never had a camping experience before. After traveling two hours by bus, they arrive to discover a relaxing escape from the busy, noisy surroundings of their everyday life in the city.

The children experience nature at work as they watch the metamorphosis of caterpillars into butterflies, overcome their fear of frogs as they hold them in their hands and hear an owl's call late at night. And they learn the wonder of responding to God's presence in their lives with a spirit of generosity.

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Volunteering in China as the Hands and Feet of Jesus

Nicole (Xiao) Zhang's baptism on May 10, 2009, culminated a seven-year journey that began when she met a friendly American named Jeanne Mueller.



Jeanne was part of a group of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) members who were teaching English at a university in Chuzhou, China. They had been placed through the Amity Foundation, an ELCA companion program.

A member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Cedarburg, Wis., Jeanne says she didn't go to China with the intention of converting people to Christianity. "I volunteered to help as the hands and feet of Jesus," she said. "I went to be a servant, empowered by the Holy Spirit."

While working as a translator, Nicole recalls being "incredibly moved by how naturally Jeanne and the other missionaries showed their love to students. That love attracted me to them and to Christianity."

Nicole stayed in touch with Jeanne over the years. After completing her graduate studies in the United States, she received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism at St. Luke Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, Ill., with Jeanne standing by her side as one of her sponsors.

"I felt like God had been knocking on my door for seven years and I finally opened it," Nicole said. "When the door opened, I felt like I became a new person. The faith I have now will strengthen and support me for the rest of my life."

"I'm glad I've become a member of God's big family."

Jeanne says God has placed Nicole in her life to strengthen her own faith. "Nicole tells me that as her sponsor I have to tell her about God," she says. "As much as I think I know it all, I'm really a couch potato. I can become lazy. Nicole holds me true to my responsibility as her sponsor to get off the couch and into the Word."

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Volunteering in China as the Hands and Feet of Jesus

Nicole (Xiao) Zhang's baptism on May 10, 2009, culminated a seven-year journey that began when she met a friendly American named Jeanne Mueller.



Jeanne was part of a group of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) members who were teaching English at a university in Chuzhou, China. They had been placed through the Amity Foundation, an ELCA companion program.

A member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Cedarburg, Wis., Jeanne says she didn't go to China with the intention of converting people to Christianity. "I volunteered to help as the hands and feet of Jesus," she said. "I went to be a servant, empowered by the Holy Spirit."

While working as a translator, Nicole recalls being "incredibly moved by how naturally Jeanne and the other missionaries showed their love to students. That love attracted me to them and to Christianity."

Nicole stayed in touch with Jeanne over the years. After completing her graduate studies in the United States, she received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism at St. Luke Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, Ill., with Jeanne standing by her side as one of her sponsors.

"I felt like God had been knocking on my door for seven years and I finally opened it," Nicole said. "When the door opened, I felt like I became a new person. The faith I have now will strengthen and support me for the rest of my life."

"I'm glad I've become a member of God's big family."

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Living the Difference in Palestine

A normal day for Chelsea Mathis—helping to promote travel through the Peace Not Walls campaign of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) followed by a bit of bassoon playing in the afternoon—sounds fairly typical.



Ordinary accompanies the extraordinary in Palestine. “Palestinians are adept at celebrating life’s joys and making do with what they have. I feel as at home here as I do in my home state of Michigan,” Chelsea says.

A trip as a teenager to Palestine with her ELCA Southeast Michigan Synod inspired Chelsea to participate in ELCA’s Young Adults in Global Mission program. An area plagued by troubles has left its mark, good and bad. “The worst part has been realizing how helpless I am in regards to changing the future of the political situation for Palestinians,” she says. “The best part is that I have changed the future through my presence, support and simple acts of kindness.”

Chelsea admits her faith has been challenged. “What does it mean that a land called holy is torn with violence, hatred and fear?”

The solution lies in seeing each other’s humanness, Chelsea believes. “Our commonality as people trumps all differences—religion, race, gender, political party. Israelis and Palestinians must see the human in each other’s eyes to begin to erase the hatred and fear.”

Chelsea understands how intimidating a year-long stint in a foreign country can seem. Pack your faith, leave your fear behind and “go for it,” she advises. “Getting up the nerve to leave everything you know behind can be extremely hard. But you will grow and be fulfilled in ways you’d never imagine.”

With her Palestinian journey nearing its end, Chelsea looks to her future. “Whatever I do,” she says, “I know I’ll make time for advocating for peace and justice in the Holy Land. I learned from my first trip to Palestine that once you’ve been there, it’s always on your heart and mind.”

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Tools to Build the Church

Through your mission support dollars, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) brings many assets to its national and global mission.

In the United States and the Caribbean, the ELCA is committed to starting and renewing congregations through partnerships with the churchwide organization, synods and established congregations.

- In 2009, 159 congregations were supported with \$2,965,217, including partnership support for the strategic renewal of congregations, ethnic specific/multicultural ministries, ministries among people living in poverty and other specialized ministries.
- In 2008, a total of **49 additional new starts** were under development consisting of 33 congregations and 16 Synodically Authorized Worshiping Communities.

Globally, the ELCA supports the priorities of local companion churches as they build their ministries and their capacity to proclaim and serve:

- **Qualified, trained mission personnel** for long-term, short-term and volunteer assignments
- **Grants that help companion church bodies** support evangelism, Christian education, theological training and other ministries
- **Grants that help companion churches and long-standing partners** like the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) respond to human need through primary health care, basic education, income generation, HIV and AIDS prevention and response and other programs
- **Scholarships that have helped more than 700** companion church pastors, bishops, seminary professors and other leaders complete graduate study
- **120 Companion Synod relationships** that deepen and extend the ELCA's relationship with companion churches.

The ELCA invests about \$30 million a year in support of global mission in the world. Find out more by requesting the *2009 Global Mission Annual* from Augsburg Fortress (800-328-4648) or visiting www.elca.org/globalmission.

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

A History of Excellence in Health Care in Liberia

The tile flooring at Phebe Hospital and School of Nursing in Suakoko, Bong County, Liberia, is faded and worn, revealing pathways where healers and people in need of healing have walked for decades.



These aging tiles are “a very powerful testament to the longevity of the hospital and the many people it has served,” says James Gonia, program director for West Africa, Global Mission program unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Those awaiting care sit in cool dark hallways or rest outdoors on the Phebe campus. Mothers hold their babies and caregivers comfort the elderly.

They have come to receive the excellent medical care for which Phebe is known. They are served by deeply dedicated doctors, nurses, chaplains and other staff members, many of whom have worked here for years.

Children under the age of 14 comprise the majority of Phebe’s patients, with malaria, anemia, diarrheal diseases and respiratory tract infections leading the causes of visits.

Phebe has been meeting the medical needs of Liberian residents since its founding in 1921 by the American Lutheran Mission. A new facility was built on the current site in 1965. The hospital continued to serve during the civil war from 1990 to 2004, despite being attacked and looted.

Today, after undergoing rehabilitation work, Phebe still provides acute medical and surgical care on an inpatient, outpatient and emergency basis, as both a mission hospital and a government designated referral hospital.

“The role that Phebe plays as a county hospital cannot be underestimated in terms of the population it serves,” James says. “Its role in the community is absolutely vital.”

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Empowerment Takes Root in Chile

Maria lived in isolation, spending most of her time indoors cleaning houses just to make ends meet in the shantytown near Santiago, Chile, where she lived.

But after encountering Popular Education in Health Foundation, Maria found freedom and a deeper meaning in life.

Today, with a degree in social work, Maria helps those in her *población* (community): women in abusive relationships and families in need of affordable daycare. She has also become a leader in her church.

“Maria is a powerful witness to what the program can do,” says Raquel Rodriguez, program director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Global Mission program unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). “Her story could be multiplied over and over in so many places.”

The foundation works in poor, marginalized communities in Santiago and Concepción, Chile. Volunteer health promoters conduct educational workshops on a wide range of topics, including self esteem, reproductive health, mental health and gender issues. ELCA Global Mission works with the local church to provide mission personnel in support of this work.

The majority of program newcomers eventually become health promoters, themselves, after undergoing the training program. By doing so, they too become qualified to lead workshops and go on healthcare visits to homes, taking blood pressure, identifying signs of illnesses and teaching how nutrition plays an important role in preventive care.

The Popular Education in Health Foundation carries out its mission in a variety of other ways, too: organizing around environmental issues, distributing educational materials and using wall murals, marketplace displays and street theater to raise awareness of HIV prevention, domestic violence, breast cancer and other issues.

The program has grown since its founding in 1982, as women continue to go through the program and become leaders throughout other communities.

“Like a flower, the foundation blossoms and spreads,” Raquel says.



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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Public Service Rooted in Lutheran Values



For Rebekah Davis, the call to vocation came not once, but twice. The first was to ministry, leading her to earn her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School.

Rebekah was initially hesitant to answer her second call, which unexpectedly came during the 2008 Presidential Election. Watching the historic events unfold, she felt drawn to run for a seat in Nebraska's Third Congressional District.

Rebekah's residency at Alegent Healthcare's clinical pastoral education program went on hold so the 27-year-old Lutheran chaplain could campaign full-time. "I'm grateful to be a part of the public debate about our country's direction and our society's values," she says.

Her weekends currently consist of racking up miles in her 2002 Oldsmobile to meet her constituents. "I need to spend time with people to hear their insights and ideas," Rebekah says. "I can be their voice." On the rare weekend home, Rebekah attends St. John Lutheran in her hometown of Alliance, Neb.

Her experiences with Lutheran Campus Ministry as an undergrad at Indiana University proved prophetic as she communicates her platform. "I learned we don't have to choose between black and white, we can become comfortable with the grey areas." Her interaction with students and staff fine-tuned her beliefs as a Lutheran and shaped her understanding of how faith will impact her vocation in public office. "Doubt is an opportunity for growth, to understand the role of God in our lives."

During the heady days of campaigning, her roots as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) provide a moral compass. "I bring a different voice, a unique voice," she says. "I'm ever mindful of the implications of how I speak, how I spend the campaign dollars and how I bring light to the issues."

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Lutherans Proclaim their Commitment to God's Creation

Amid a breathtaking backdrop of national forests, lakes and streams, Lutherans and people of nine other faith groups in Michigan's Upper Peninsula collaborate for one mutual cause: to care for God's creation.



On Earth Day 2009, in partnership with the Earth Keeper Tree project, hundreds of Lutherans planted 12,000 white spruce and red pine seedlings in 15 counties.

Their participation in this work is shaped, in part, by a social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*. Its words are a call to deepened responsibility: "When we act interdependently and in solidarity with creation, we do justice. We serve and keep the earth, trusting its bounty can be sufficient and sustainable."

Since 2004, the Earth Keeper Initiative has conducted annual Earth Day "clean sweeps" of hazardous and electronic waste, energy conservation programs and other environmental hands-on projects through more than 150 churches and temples. Volunteers have collected almost 370 tons of waste, including pesticides, oil-based paint, pharmaceuticals, computers and televisions.

The interfaith initiative provides an opportunity to meet on common ground, says the Rev. Jon Magnuson, co-founder of Earth Keeper, ELCA campus pastor at Northern Michigan University and executive director of the Cedar Tree Institute. "We connect, meet and work along other faith traditions. It's an interesting way that God works."

A coalition of ELCA parishes in the U.P. and Lutheran Campus Ministry helps support the initiative.

"Even though we don't have creedal connections, we do have connections to the earth," said the Rev. Thomas A. Skrenes, bishop of the ELCA Northern Great Lakes Synod. "It's a model for what can happen around the country when we focus on what we have in common."

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Standing between the Chaos of War and the Soldiers in his Care

Command Sergeant Major Tom Behrends recalls his National Guard base in Iraq as an unexpected oasis in the desert.

It was a way station for other battalions on the move, who would stop for a night's rest or to refuel.

Because the area was a hotbed of IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), the base was also a refuge for units who needed to regroup after being hit.

Chaplain Corey Bjertness, U.S. Army, and his assistant would be among the first to welcome them.

Behrends, a practicing Presbyterian, recalls, "It didn't matter to the chaplain who these people were. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine. Christian, Muslim, atheist. These were soldiers in need. And the chaplain cared for them."

After attending to the dead and wounded, counseling the survivors was the chaplain's primary task. One of Bjertness's initiatives dealt with a more basic need.

Behrends notes, "The uniforms of these soldiers would be blood soaked from caring for their buddies. The chaplain had volunteers working round the clock at the washing machines so these soldiers didn't have to wash the blood out themselves."

As a chaplain in the Minnesota National Guard and full-time pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in New London, Minn., Corey Bjertness exemplifies the challenge and privilege of serving as a "citizen soldier."

When he was deployed to Iraq in fall 2007, the chaplain left behind his wife, four children and his call at a congregation in the midst of a multi-million dollar construction project.

He is grateful to their "massive support" in recognizing and honoring his military ministry to soldiers of all faiths—and no faith at all.

For Sergeant Sadie Brehmer, Chaplain Bjertness brought a sense of sanctuary in a place of chaos. While she does not attend church in civilian life, in Iraq she found a "safe zone" in Sunday services.

Of her chaplain, Corey Bjertness, Sadie says simply, "He was there for all of us. He would drop anything for anybody."



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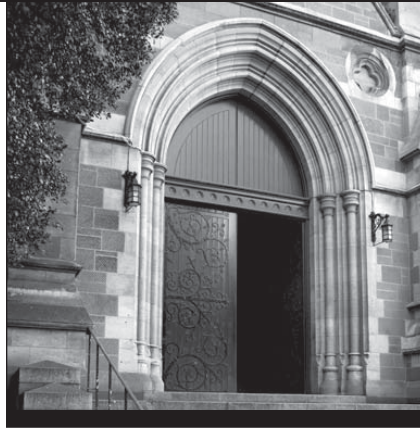
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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Acting Ecumenically for the Sake of the World

When Lutherans and Methodists head to worship on Sundays in Lavina, Mont., their destination is the same: Lavina Methodist Church, which both denominations in the town call their spiritual home.

“We’re so obliged to the Methodists,” said Doris Hansen, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). “If it wasn’t for them, I doubt we’d have a church.”



The arrangement demonstrates one of the many benefits of full communion partnerships between the ELCA and other Christian denominations, church leaders said.

Last year, United Methodist approved a partnership with the ELCA. The ELCA, in turn, approved the partnership at its Churchwide Assembly in August 2009.

“It’s about more than supply and demand for ordained,” said Don McCoid of the churchwide organization, who oversees the ELCA’s ecumenical relations. “It’s about our working together in unity with our Christian partners to carry out Christ’s mission.”

The ELCA congregation in Lavina closed its building long ago as membership declined. The remaining few members had been worshipping in a hotel before working out an arrangement with local United Methodists, also experiencing a membership decline.

“It makes no sense to have a Lutheran congregation of six and a Methodist congregation of four in a town of 200,” said the Rev. Cathy Moorehead, the United Methodist pastor who leads them.

In Clyde, Kan., the Rev. Anita Strommen, an ELCA pastor, leads a United Methodist congregation. She remains on the ELCA roster and reports to her synod bishop. At the same time, she’s called to foster worship in a way that respects the United Methodist heritage.

“There’s a learning curve for pastors—no doubt about that,” Pastor Strommen said. “There’s also a learning curve for the denominations. What does it mean to be in full communion? I think this is going to be an ongoing discovery process.”

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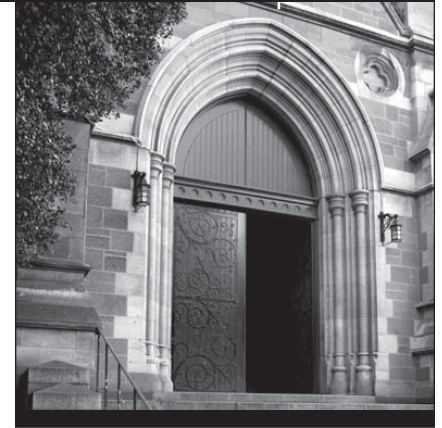
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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Acting Ecumenically for the Sake of the World

When Lutherans and Methodists head to worship on Sundays in Lavina, Mont., their destination is the same: Lavina Methodist Church, which both denominations in the town call their spiritual home.

“We’re so obliged to the Methodists,” said Doris Hansen, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). “If it wasn’t for them, I doubt we’d have a church.”



The arrangement demonstrates one of the many benefits of full communion partnerships between the ELCA and other Christian denominations, church leaders said.

Last year, United Methodist approved a partnership with the ELCA. The ELCA, in turn, approved the partnership at its Churchwide Assembly in August 2009.

“It’s about more than supply and demand for ordained,” said Don McCoid of the churchwide organization, who oversees the ELCA’s ecumenical relations. “It’s about our working together in unity with our Christian partners to carry out Christ’s mission.”

The ELCA congregation in Lavina closed its building long ago as membership declined. The remaining few members had been worshipping in a hotel before working out an arrangement with local United Methodists, also experiencing a membership decline.

“It makes no sense to have a Lutheran congregation of six and a Methodist congregation of four in a town of 200,” said the Rev. Cathy Moorehead, the United Methodist pastor who leads them.

In Clyde, Kan., the Rev. Anita Strommen, an ELCA pastor, leads a United Methodist congregation. She remains on the ELCA roster and reports to her synod bishop. At the same time, she’s called to foster worship in a way that respects the United Methodist heritage.

“There’s a learning curve for pastors—no doubt about that,” Pastor Strommen said. “There’s also a learning curve for the denominations. What does it mean to be in full communion? I think this is going to be an ongoing discovery process.”

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

On a Ning and a Prayer

Before interning at the churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Erin Daubert had never heard of a Ning. By the end of the summer, she'd helped to create one.

A Ning is an online platform that allows people to create their own social networks. The ELCA's Ning for young adults, called Imagine Yourself, encourages 20-somethings to discuss how their vocations fit in their world. "It's a place for young adults to talk about dreams, goals and hopes," Erin says. "We can meet with others to discuss God's call for each of us."

Erin hopes young adults will use Imagine Yourself as they do just that, recognizing that God's call can take them into a wide variety of career options, not limited to seminary.

The site reflects Erin's own sense of her vocation, which is still evolving. "I put out ideas and get ideas about how my faith is working, how I am consciously living with my vocation's path and direction."

Erin enjoys participating in the blogs and forums and reading others' ideas. "It can be hard to have in-depth discussions at school, but people are much more willing to share online."

This fall, when the 19-year-old moves to Brazil for the school year, she'll provide updates through a blog she'll create on Imagine Yourself. A junior at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, Erin will study in Brazil for two semesters through the Council on International Educational Exchange.

When Erin applied for her internship, she didn't imagine her own possibilities for living out God's call. Through the internship, she gained an understanding of the three expressions of this church and how they work together in ministry.



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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Inspired to a Life of Service in God's Name

As Laura Stephenson sat in a traffic jam in Denver, a billboard caught her eye.

The enormous sign featured two loaves of bread shaped like a cross and read: \$20 million to feed the hungry ... Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) ... God's work. Our hands.



Laura, a member of Atonement Lutheran Church in Boulder, Colo., had been considering mission work for some time. But after seeing that billboard and after “years and years of things adding up, I was given no choice but to follow,” she said.

In the past, friends and family had told Laura she'd make a good pastor, counselor or missionary. As Laura got more involved at Atonement, her call to mission work became stronger. She volunteered as an interim youth director, served at soup suppers and participated in a congregational mission trip to Haiti, among other activities.

After researching opportunities available through ELCA Global Mission, Laura applied for a missionary position in Indonesia. She soon found herself serving in North Sumatra, teaching English in a deaconess community and “encountering Christ” through those whom she befriended and served.

Through that experience, Laura felt called again, this time to parish ministry. Laura's journey continues today as she hopes to attend seminary “to strengthen my theology and shape my heart to be a better servant,” she said.

DID YOU KNOW

The ELCA billboard Laura saw played an important role as she discerned her call to mission work. The outdoor ad was the result of a partnership between Communication Services at the churchwide organization, which developed the advertising campaign, and the ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod, which launched the pilot ads in 2007.

In addition to billboards, the ads appeared on buses and bus shelters, postcards, posters, outdoor banners and in local newspapers in the Boulder and Denver vicinities. Two television ads were developed and broadcast nationally in spring 2009.

To learn more, visit www.elca.org/godsworkeurhands.

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

The Good Fruits of an International Partnership

At its Eighth General Assembly in January 2009, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus elected the Rev. Dr. Wakseyoum Idosa as its new church president.

Prior to his election, Idosa had served his church in different leadership positions for nearly 20 years as a seminary teacher, president of the Central Synod and as general secretary.

As always, Idosa is modest when speaking about his achievements. “Whenever God calls you to a ministry in this church, you have to pick it up and serve.”

What he does assert is that “good fruits” have come from his partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Idosa received his doctorate in ministerial leadership from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago with the support of an ELCA International Leadership Development scholarship.

Idosa is grateful for his church’s partnership with the ELCA and for the support of its congregations and synods.

“Our hope and prayer is that we’ll continue to be in God’s mission together and strengthen our partnership in mission.”

The Ethiopian Lutheran Church is currently the largest church in the Lutheran World Federation in Africa and second only to the Church of Sweden in global membership. Idosa gives full credit to the members, who work hard at evangelizing in their villages.

“Each person is committed to passing on the faith,” he observes. “Young and old Christians, women and men, are ready to share with others so that they can experience the grace of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

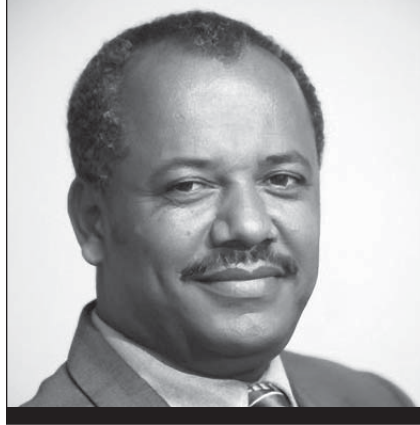
“People are thirsty for the word of God and want to be instructed in the Bible.”

He remembers the people of the ELCA in his daily prayers. “May God bless us, all of us, as we labor in his kingdom until he comes again.”

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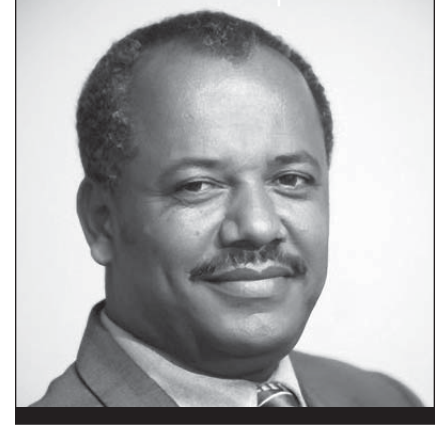
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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Frequently Asked Questions about Mission Support

Q. What is mission support? I've heard this term used, but I'm not sure what it means.

A. Mission support is the portion of your financial offering that your congregation shares with your synod and the churchwide organization, the other two expressions of this church.

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), we do mission together through our financial giving. We do God's work in ways that no individual, congregation or synod can do alone.

Q. Is mission support different from my weekly offering?

A. Mission support is a small percentage of your weekly offering. It's best defined as that part of your gift that moves on to the other two expressions of this church—your synod and the churchwide organization—to fund the work of the broader church. Many synods set a goal of 10 percent from each of their congregations.

The rest of your offering (about 90 percent) remains within your congregation. You help pay for local ministries, outreach, salaries, utilities and the building, ensuring your congregation's vital presence in your community.

Q. Does mission support do more than fund the work of ELCA missionaries in other countries?

A. Yes. Mission support is the lifeblood of the work that God does through the ELCA, providing over 80 percent of the resources for our ministries.

"Mission" is a broad term used to describe all the ministries of this church, not just those relating to missionaries. "Support" is the financial backing that covers the costs of delivering these ministries (including administrative costs, materials and more) here and abroad.

Supporting our missionaries through the Global Mission program unit is an example of one of the many ways mission support enables us to do God's work with our hands.

Q. How does my congregation benefit from mission support?

A. Every congregation benefits as an active partner in the ELCA's mission to share God's boundless love with the world. Stories of Faith in Action is filled with powerful examples of how lives have been changed because of our members' generosity.

More specifically, some mission support funds may return to your congregation in the way of grants, services, programs and resources. Check with your pastor for concrete illustrations that apply to your congregation, as well as opportunities to explore for the future.

STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Frequently Asked Questions about Mission Support (cont'd)

Q. Sometimes I write a check to ELCA World Hunger or to Lutheran World Relief. Is that the same as mission support?

A. When you designate your gift to one of the many ministries within the pan-Lutheran community, this is not mission support.

Mission support is, by its very nature, an undesignated gift to the broader church. It enables the churchwide organization to respond to ministry opportunities as they become available and ensures the ongoing financial stability so essential to our future.

We applaud your designated support of such programs as ELCA World Hunger, a ministry of this church, and Lutheran World Relief, a partner ministry with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. But we recommend that such gifts are above and beyond, and never in place of, your commitment to your regular offering in your congregation.

Q. What guides the churchwide expression in its decisions regarding mission support?

A. The members of the ELCA and its various expressions and institutions share a calling. We proclaim in our mission statement that, "Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we have been claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world." This vision shapes all decisions and activities of the churchwide expression, especially budget planning.

More specifically, the churchwide expression looks to the churchwide assembly, the highest legislative authority of the churchwide organization, for direction and guidance. The ELCA Church Council functions as the board of directors of this expression and acts as the interim legislative authority between meetings of the churchwide assembly.

In April 2003 the ELCA Church Council adopted five strategic directions to guide the churchwide organization through 2012:

- Support congregations;
- Grow in evangelical outreach;
- Step forward as a public church;
- Deepen and extend our global, ecumenical and interfaith relationships; and
- Bring forth and support faithful, wise and courageous leaders.

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

A Financial Expression of Faith

A budget accounts for the resources an organization uses to fulfill its vision. But for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), our budget does something more. It begins to tell the story of peoples' lives transformed, of God's boundless love shared with the world. It's the financial expression of our faith.

Guided by five strategic priorities, the churchwide budget sustains our work as we: support congregations; grow in evangelical outreach; step forward as a public church; deepen and extend our global, ecumenical and interfaith relationships; and bring forth and support faithful, wise and courageous leaders.

The ministries featured in *Stories of Faith in Action* are not funded by a single line item of the budget. Rather they are made possible by many programs supported by the budget and carried out through partnerships among the three expressions of this church.

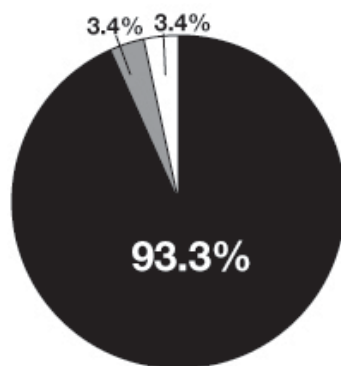
For example, a new congregation doesn't begin within a groundbreaking ceremony. It starts much earlier with the development of leaders who are formed by a strong, healthy educational system from preschool to seminary. Early research and training conducted by churchwide and synod staff are the ground work needed to pick the right location and leaders. Relationship building among leaders of congregations, synods and the churchwide organization provide a firm foundation. And a commitment for ongoing funding from the three expressions ensures a successful future.

Simply put, our ministry starts with a promise that, in collaboration, we will do God's work together. Thank you for your continued support.

Mission support funds more than 80% of the churchwide budget revenue, and it continues to be the single most important source of income for our shared ministry.

In 2008, members of 10,396 ELCA congregations gave \$1.94 billion to support God's mission and ministry through the three expressions of the ELCA.

- \$1,811,907,802 (or 93.2%) remained in congregations to fund local ministries
- \$65,211,572 (or 3.4%) was shared to support synodical ministries
- \$65,286,926 (or 3.4%) was sent from synods to support churchwide ministries



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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

A Financial Expression of Faith (cont'd)

Support Congregations and Grow in Evangelical Outreach **29.54%**

- Proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ
- Receive, establish and renew congregations, ministries, organizations, institutions and agencies necessary to carry out God's mission through this church
- Nurture congregations by word and sacrament to be empowered for bold engagement in the world through witness and service
- Expand youth and young adult ministries
- Recognize and promote the gift of diversity

Deepen and Extend Our Global and Ecumenical Partnerships **16.91%**

- Accompany churches around the world (includes sending mission personnel)
- Strengthen inter-Lutheran and full communion relationships
- Relate to other communities of faith

Step Forward as a Public Church **5.68%**

- Respond to poverty, hunger, violence, disease and disasters around the world
- Develop commitments to serve creation and humanity through study and deliberation
- Develop and exercise the vehicle of leadership and engagement
- Serve in response to God's love through social ministry organizations

Bring Forth and Support Leaders **15.41%**

- Provide leaders for the life and witness of this church
- Support our educational network from preschool through seminary
- Prepare, recruit and support leaders
- Support retired church leaders

Steward Resources to Further God's Kingdom **4.67%**

- Grow and encourage financial resources for ministry

Support Governance of this Church **2.12%**

- Provide for the biennial churchwide assembly
- Make decisions through Church Council and advisory councils

Coordinate and Support Ministries **25.67%**

- Support mission through research
- Plan and evaluate the work of this church
- Provide communication and technology efficiencies
- Provide organizational and administrative services
- Coordinate relationships between the churchwide organization and synods

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

Where Your Offering Goes

Your offering supports the mission of the whole ELCA doing God's work in the world.



YOUR SYNOD provides ministries that support congregations and rostered leaders within a synod.



YOUR CONGREGATION shares a portion of your offering—called mission support—with the other two expressions of this church. Mission support is the lifeblood of the work that God does through the ELCA.

In your congregation, you support:

- Ministry within the congregation
- Local outreach in the community



THE CHURCHWIDE EXPRESSION responds to ministry opportunities here and around the world to further the mission of this church.

Thank you!

Together we do God's work in ways that no individual, congregation or synod can do alone.

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STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

What We Accomplish Together in Mission

A portion of your financial support will travel through the three expressions of the ELCA and, together with the offerings of other members, fund the following ministries:

- Approximately **204 congregations** under development
- **49 new starts** under way in 2008, including **33 new congregations** under development
- **159 existing congregations** intentionally focused on renewal
- **260 missionaries** in 50 countries
- Support of ministry and projects in **over 90 countries**
- **8 seminaries**
- **28 colleges and universities**
- **187 campus ministries**
- **1,530 Lutheran early childhood education centers**, includes birth to age five
- **267 Lutheran elementary schools, K-8**
- **147 outdoor ministries**
- **Health and pension benefits** for retired clergy, missionaries and lay church workers
- **Long-term community development**
- **Advocacy** with the United Nations, federal and state governments and corporate development
- **Partnerships** with The Lutheran World Federation, World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches in Christ

This is only a snapshot of the work being done by this church in God's name, thanks to the generous support of members like you.

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