

Good News From the Margins

Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little and Rev. Dr. Ruben Duran

Foreword by Bishop Patricia Davenport

Artwork by Rachel Gucwa



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Foreword by Bishop Patricia Davenport

I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened — or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. —Romans 1:11-12

Serving as a director for evangelical mission in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has allowed me to accompany new communities of faith on their journeys. I hear the stories of how the Holy Spirit is moving, creating something out of nothing or, in this case, out of meager means. It was through a story that I formally met the Rev. Violet Little, who told her story of a chance encounter at a train station in the Center City neighborhood of Philadelphia and how God spoke in a restroom where women experiencing homelessness were not able to rest. A new community of faith through the gift of hospitality was born. The Rev. Dr. Ruben Duran, ELCA director of new-start congregations, heard the story as an opportunity for the church to replicate this ministry for those living on the margins across the ELCA. Violet and Ruben invited leaders from across the country to a grassroots learning experience. Those unhoused people — I call them the Street Professors — participated in teaching the workshop and taking the groups on walking tours. They explained their connections to the Welcome Church, their plight, their current situations on the street or their journey to becoming housed.

This early gathering in Philadelphia grew to be the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network, a group of leaders in ministry with people living on the margins.

I am now privileged to serve as bishop of the ELCA Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. I personally know the people in the communities and the interfaith denominational leaders in this ministry, which has been replicated in many places.

The stories shared in this book represent a theological perspective of those living on the margins, their relationships with God and their relationships with others. The people in this book attest to the challenge of working through the national church and through state and local governmental bureaucracies to meet the physical, financial and mental needs of themselves and others.

For example, the Welcome Church in Philadelphia found people with a faith like that of the Indigenous people who inhabited Philadelphia — the Lenape tribe, which found God in every aspect of life. In creating a “welcome center” where all people could experience respite and hospitality, this community was laying a foundation for what would become known as the Welcome Church. As names were learned and stories were heard, relationships and trust were built. The Welcome Church leaders found that this was a deeply spiritual community from differing faith traditions.

One day, as the community members gathered for food, fellowship and Bible study on Jesus being the bread of life, someone asked the question, “Can we have some of that bread?”

To say that the rest is history would diminish the time and arduous work invested by these leaders to organize this group as an official ministry of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. Over the years, by way of relationships, information, education and inspiration, this ministry created a hunger and justice movement under a Lutheran umbrella. This umbrella encompasses theological perspectives that question a wide array of Christian doctrines and assumptions about unhoused people and other marginalized communities.

I commend this book to those who seek to become beloved communities of God together.

Introduction by Violet Cucciniello Little

I have always loved words.

I remember my grade school teacher asking each of us our favorite subject. I raised my hand wildly, saying without hesitation, "Vocabulary!"

Not spelling. Not even English, but vocabulary. I somehow knew, even at an early age, that words had power.

Many years later, as an adult commuting daily on a train into town, I tried an experiment. I carried with me a stack of different colored index cards, and on each one I wrote a "good" word — like "hope" or "joy" or "amazing." When I saw someone who looked as if they could use a good word, I gave them a card. Most people smiled, though there were a few who inched away from me. There was no question in my mind, however, that words have power, so when my good friend and colleague Ruben Duran asked me to work with him on a project he called *Good News From the Margins*, I had to understand what it meant to live on the margins and to be marginalized.

A basic definition of "margin" is an edge or a border — like the space around the body of a written page. But as I explored further, I learned that to be marginalized meant "to be pushed to the edge by not allowing a place within," to be considered "insignificant or peripheral" and "to be in a place of little or no power." In short, to be "marginalized" was to be in the place of Jesus.

In his book *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness*, Father Gregory Boyle (a Jesuit priest who founded Homeboy Industries, the largest gang-prevention program in the United States) wrote, "Arguments don't change minds, stories do." From that place on the margins, Jesus used stories not only to change minds but also to transform lives. We hope that this collection of stories, reflections and questions for discussion will bring you a glimpse of the life-changing power of love and hope offered to each of us when we walk together as people of God, a God whose heart has no margins but only a wide place of grace for all.

Ruben and Violet: Who Are We?

About Ruben

Hybrid life, hybrid lenses.

I recently had the opportunity to drive from Chicago, Ill., to Williamsburg, Va., in a hybrid car. The round trip was about 1,600 miles and took only 32 gallons of gasoline. It was my first time driving a hybrid. What an amazing experience it was to see how this new technology can adjust to driving demands and tap the appropriate energy source for the long haul.

I have been given the gift of a hybrid life, fueled by two sources: faith and anger. I am thankful for this spiritual technology. It gives me a reason to get up in the morning, look at and listen to the hurting world around me, join communities of practice, serve others and invite them to discover their gifts to change this world in the name of God.

The gift of faith was given to me by the Holy Spirit in the context of a Christian family. I grew up in Lima, Peru, with my mother, Alejandrina Mendoza; my father, Florencio Duran; sisters Ruth and Judith; and many cousins who were like siblings to me. I was baptized in the Rimac River by my pastor father, surrounded by church and family on one riverbank, with the Bethel Church choir singing on the other. In the Quechua language, *rimac* means “talking river.” Maybe this is the reason I talk so much, always making new friends, and why I love teaching and preaching the good news to anyone who will listen. I also love encouraging others to discover their own hybrid lives and to use them according to the values of the reign of God. What a gift faith is! I would not be alive without it. This is also because of the other gift I have: anger.

Can anger be a gift? This is a key experience of my life, defining the lenses I use to see the world around me today. This gift was revealed to me during a high school history class with the help of my teacher. I knew something was wrong with our country but had no way to explain it. I could see the injustices and unjust systems that created poverty for so many and their limited access to the goods people worked so hard to generate. I had no way to articulate this injustice, but I could feel it in my gut. I could see the difference in the lifestyle between people who had to work for a living and the people who had accumulated wealth through the legacy of slavery and the appropriation of land and its resources through the violent invasion of foreign powers.

I could see it in my own classroom, the difference between my classmates who came from positions of privilege and the rest of us. It was the same in college. My teacher noticed my struggle and gave me extra books to read, which gave me the tools and language to express my views. We made a connection, especially when he told me that he was the first and only one in his family to graduate from college. He had come from up in the Andes Mountains, just as my father had. He told me how, on a daily basis, he had to deal with the prejudice of city people against Indigenous communities.

Anger was brewing within me.

I read the books with great attention and curiosity. I learned that I was part of an amazing Inca civilization whose works can be seen and admired by the whole world today despite attempts to

destroy that civilization and attempts by many to discredit its wisdom and creativity. I also learned about the arrival of violent Spanish invaders, whose purpose was to colonize new lands for their empire and extract human and natural resources to fill their coffers. To do so, the Spanish empire sent mercenaries and missionaries to crush the people and culture, all in the name of discovering a new world. The riches stolen are part of what is called “old money,” which, together with the outcomes of similar violent invasions in other parts of the world, endows and guarantees the status quo of those with privilege.

What about the people whose lives were destroyed, whose lands were taken, whose children lived with no future? Who cared about them during these 300-plus years of oppression that created still-open wounds?

Angry now? I am. And it gets worse.

It gets worse because accompanying this whole violent invasive enterprise was the blessing of the Christian church, in particular the Roman Catholic Church. This was *quid pro quo* at its best: the church blesses the invasion and, in return, has the authority to force its religious doctrine upon the conquered people. As a safeguard, the Spanish Inquisition prosecuted, punished or executed anyone accused of saying or doing anything against the Spanish crown or its colonial system in Peru, including people who were considered heretics for following the belief doctrines of Jews, Muslims, Lutherans and others. As a travel agent and tour guide, I used to take tourists to the Museum of Congress and the Inquisition in Lima, where there is a listing of the first group of people executed as rebels against God and the crown. The second person on that list was a Lutheran merchant who was doing business in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Before you say I need anger management, there is even more. In 1821, the Peruvian War of Independence freed Spanish-American settlers from Spanish authority, but even as a new nation was being formed, a new way of oppression was being generated. This time, there was no need for in-person invasion; the violent oppressive systems could be maintained at a distance. The worldwide industrialization process demanded raw materials, so corporations, primarily in the Northern Hemisphere, began to acquire cheap raw materials and labor for their new profits. The idea of business expansion spread all over, and with the help of local authorities, settlers perpetuated the growth in those experiencing poverty and marginalization.

My anger got stronger.

Once again, the church — this time primarily Protestant communities — began to send missionaries to present a different version of the Christian faith. In the case of my country, Peru, these messages took a more individualistic approach to relating to God and offered a hopeful vision of a better situation, if not here, then in the world to come.

Now, I got angry at the church!

I remember playing the guitar in a house church and hearing a message that we must put up with life “as is.” There is not much we can do, but God has a special place for us in heaven, a nice condo on a golden street with no more suffering, no more pain, no more death. I didn’t treat the guitar very well.

I barely made it to the end of the service, and on the way out of the house, shaking hands, I exclaimed to the pastor, "This is the worst sermon I have ever heard!" He said, "Sorry you feel that way," and then he closed the door on me. Once I was on the street, it sank in that the closed door was to *my* house and the pastor was *my* dad! I left anyway and took a long walk. I was doubly angry because I began to realize that my dad had been trained to preach that way as part of a whole worldview that supports the status quo of oppression at a distance. I felt bad for saying what I had said.

I went back home, and my dad had been waiting for me. Before I said a word, he hugged me and began to apologize for what had happened. He said he knew better, but he was only using the tools he had at the moment. He said that he was looking for a path out of this way of thinking and that he wanted to find a niche to contribute to the well-being of all people, especially oppressed, forgotten, marginalized communities like the one he had come from. I hugged him back and told him I was also looking to deal with my anger at the reality of our country and at God. I told him that I wondered if God really cared for the here and now, and I asked why neither our church or any church did anything about fighting the oppressive systems that create injustice, poverty and alienation. We hugged and cried for what felt like forever. We pledged to search for that path together. We prayed, and I believe that God began to turn my anger into energy — energy for a quest, energy to act.

My dad found a pathway in adult education, to uproot adult illiteracy in Peru. He was trained by the Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzales Sr. in Alajuela, Costa Rica, at the headquarters of Alfalit International. Upon his return, he created a contextual system to teach adults how to read and write in Spanish. Hundreds and hundreds of church and public volunteers joined in with this new organization, called "Alfalit in Peru." My dad put a sign over the entrance of our home reading "Casa Alfalit." I learned the system, by which an adult could start reading and understanding Spanish phrases in less than 45 minutes. It was amazing to see the idea evolving into such national prominence. In 1982, the Peruvian government recognized the impact of this ministry by giving Alfalit the National Adult Education Award, because over the past two decades it had significantly lowered illiteracy in Peru. The following year, the Peruvian government sent this innovative system to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and to everyone's surprise, Alfalit in Peru won the World's Adult Education Prize Award. A small family group joined my dad in Paris for the ceremony. It was an unforgettable experience to hear him speak on behalf of all those whose lives had been transformed through this educational tool and the love and faith of volunteers who cared for their neighbors and newfound friends.

Over time, my anger with God, the church and a bad sermon turned into energy, activating gifts to do something new and good for many people.

My quest got me into situations that challenged my faith. In college I found many groups recruiting people to support their causes for change in the country, just as my history teacher had told me. I saw pathways offering some solutions to the issues that contributed to my anger. I heard the ideas of Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Karl Marx, socialists and communists, and other Christian political parties. They all had a deep concern for the nation and world. They had tools like social analysis to better understand the reality of things, but I had questions about their methodologies and their ultimate goals. Where is the church? I asked myself and others. What is the Christian posture and alternative? Why is the Christian church out of touch with reality? Thanks to the mentoring of my cousin Desiderio Cotos, a biologist, and my sister Ruth, an educator, I was able to find other young adults with better solutions.

Amid this quest, I was approached by social worker and Lutheran missionary Gary Olson. He was part of a team sent from Minnesota to invite Peruvians to plant a new expression of Christ's church. A friend of mine, David Toribio, and I connected with Gary and began to gather people as we learned more about Martin Luther and Lutheranism. Gary gave me a copy of Luther's Small Catechism, and my curiosity and interest began to rise. I couldn't believe that God's expectation for all the baptized included their being collaborators in transforming what exists into what God desires for all of humanity. I cornered Gary to learn more about the unconditional nature of God's grace and how I was invited to respond by sharing good news, making new disciples and working for justice in the world. Working for justice in the world? I was shocked to learn that God cares for all and calls us to turn things around in God's name.

Now I had found a companion for my anger, a newfound faith: faith in a God who yearns to reconcile people, community and creation with one another and with God; faith that is active in love of neighbor, faith that impels you to seek peace, dignity and justice for all people. It did not take long for me to ask Gary, "OK, what must I do to become a Lutheran?" He answered, "First you need to become a fan of the Minnesota Vikings!" I said, "Sign me up, whoever they are!" They are still my team after 44 years.

Gary also invited me to confirmation sessions and asked me to help lead youth gatherings in Brena, where a congregation, Belen (Bethlehem), was being formed, and to assist in a new mission start in the Lurin area, south of Lima.

Together my two amigos, faith and anger, saved my life and gave me a reason to live. Even today, they do this. My anger at injustice challenges my faith in God yet helps me to understand it in deeper ways. Faith welcomes anger and turns it into energy and action for the good of the neighbor and the world. Together faith and anger have become a helpful dynamic, something like a guiding principle, unique lenses through which I look at the reality around me and identify ways to serve others.

I thank God and my history teacher for giving me the gifts of faith and anger. These are the sources for my hybrid life with hybrid lenses.

About Violet

Whenever I'm asked to give a short bio as an introduction to a talk or workshop, the first thought that comes to mind is that I am a child of God, and that's enough, right? In reality, for most people asking me that question, it isn't enough. They tell me they want to know more about this particular child of God.

This particular child of God was born in Little Italy on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, not far from Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker house. This was a neighborhood that had once been filled with Irish immigrants, whose remnants were seen in the school and church I attended — St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, predecessor to a cathedral of the same name on the Upper East Side. By the time I was growing up, it was almost comical to have this nearly all-Italian student body doing the Irish jig yearly in the St. Patrick's Day Parade on Fifth Avenue. This was all before Mulberry Street became part of the now-trendy area called Soho. The five-story tenements of the neighborhood, with bathtubs in the kitchens and pigeon coops on the roofs, would be replaced by multimillion-dollar condos and rooftop gardens.

One of the greatest gifts our parents gave us was one another, though five kids growing up in four small rooms meant we usually had to take turns sitting at the large Formica kitchen table for dinner. The other gift our parents gave us was belief in a God of love and mercy as part of our Roman Catholic upbringing (and sometimes even despite it). Later, I would learn that the word for this is “grace.”

The all-Catholic girls’ high school I attended on scholarship on New York’s Upper East Side prepared me for the resistance I would encounter as part of the first graduating class of women in what had formerly been an all-male school, St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. I remember one letter written by an alumnus in 1970 who thought for sure that bringing women into the college would lower its standards, though all the women in that first class happened to be in the top 20% of their graduating high school classes. With women so outnumbered on campus by men, we often heard that we were there just to find a husband. Finding a husband was actually the furthest thing from my 1970 feminist mind; having said that, I did meet and marry my husband, Willie, in 1974, just a few months before I graduated.

Willie was one of the few African Americans living on campus at that time, a time when interracial relationships were not being featured in commercials, sitcoms or soap operas as they are today. In fact, there were places in this country where it was not yet legal for us to be married. I remember one of the Jesuits coming to visit my dorm room with concern over the relationship and a parish priest telling me that “God did not intend for the races to mix”! Fifty years later, with our two amazing sons and our grandsons, we give thanks for the God who continues to carry us through a world still divided by the hate and fear of racism.

Having grown up in a very Italian Catholic neighborhood and having attended Catholic schools for 17 years, how did I end up becoming a Lutheran pastor? The only answer is God.

Following graduation and the disillusionment of institutional racism within the church — the very place where, I was led to believe, we all existed as one people — I “left” the church. I never actually left God, and I know that God never left me. I became involved in all kinds of human services. We had two wonderful kids and lots of friends, and we moved into Mount Airy in Philadelphia County, the first intentionally racially integrated neighborhood in the United States. We moved here because we knew the richness of diversity but also because we wanted our kids to be with other kids who looked like them.

This next part is really true, though a little hard to believe. I was waiting for a trolley on Germantown Avenue in my new neighborhood with my 3- and 5-year-old boys. I turned around, and behind me was a seminary. A man was waiting with us for the trolley, and I asked him if he knew anything about the seminary. He told me he worked there. Then I asked if anyone could take classes there. The man walked us into the registrar’s office and left. I met the registrar and asked about classes. Only one was open for non-matriculating students: “Women in American Religion”! I signed up on the spot and asked about the man who had walked me in, explaining that he had said he worked there. As it turned out, no one knew the person I had described, and I never saw him again. Most thought he was coming from the mental health center adjacent to the seminary, but I think he was an angel!

Sitting in that first class, I felt as if I had found a missing puzzle piece that calmed the restlessness I had been feeling, but I had no intention of becoming a pastor. After all, it was not polite to talk about

God in public. Besides, I didn't even belong to a church! Still, I took one class after another and fell in love with the Lutheran emphasis on grace. At last, I had a word to sum up my theology!

I graduated in 1991 and was ordained a year later, taking a call only blocks away from where we lived. I served 14 years with my beloved St. Michael's congregation, whose members taught me so much about God and love and life and hope. I left St. Michael's when I felt another pull, this time to the streets of Philadelphia. But that's a story for another chapter, about a church that began in the rundown restroom of a train station — the church we now call "the Welcome Church."



Part I: Walking Together

Voices From the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network

1. Not by Bread Alone

**Rev. Violet Cucciniello Little, *Pastor-developer*
The Welcome Church, Philadelphia, Pa.**

It was a post-blizzard but still kind of snowy Sunday in Philadelphia. The “state of emergency” status had been lifted just in time for us to make it to Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the spot in the park, across from the big cathedral, that folks from our Welcome Church community had chosen for worship. Still, it was one of those rare days when even the Roman Catholic bishop absolved people from their weekly obligation to attend Mass. Since our Sunday worship always took place outdoors, where most of our congregation lived on the street, we had no worries about a building being open.

As we neared our worship space, all we could see was mounds of snow piled high above our waists. We unpacked the 1950s card table that was to be our altar, but we could barely trudge through the snow and ice. I looked at Schaunel, co-pastor of the Welcome Church, unsure of what to do. The cathedral was open, so I decided to go in and ask if we might borrow a shovel to clear a path for potential worshipers. The custodian looked at my clergy collar with some suspicion and explained that they had one shovel and needed it returned in 15 minutes.

I walked outside and began to dig, not knowing if anyone would show up for worship. After a few minutes, one of the men who lived in the park came up to me and took the shovel from my hands. He began to dig. The 15 minutes went by quickly, and the shovel was returned as promised. “You should go home,” said the custodian, and there was a part of me that agreed with him. When I went back outside, however, I noticed that a few more folks from our community had gathered.

Word was out that we were there for worship and then came the miracle that I have begun to expect every time we come together. One man got down on his knees and began to clear a path, shoveling snow with his bare hands. Soon others joined him, creating a circle for our Sunday gathering. Most had no boots, and socks were soaking through; many had no gloves, and those who had two pairs shared with others whose hands were stiff from the cold. There we were, creating a circle where we huddled together in the cold, ready to praise God and counting on the warmth of one another.

In the center, we set our wobbly-legged table, placing on it a cup, a plate and a Bible. We sang, found joy in the word of God and shared the bread of life. Afterward, we shared warm drinks and snacks.

“See, I told you,” said one of our worshipers to his girlfriend, “I told you they’d be here.” He went on to say, “This is the church that shows up!” I don’t think he knew that we were part of the Lutheran Church. I’m not even sure if he remembered that we were called “the Welcome Church” or that we didn’t even have a building of our own. To him, we were just “the church that shows up.” Not a bad thing to be known as, I thought. Not a bad thing at all.

More important, I knew that God would show up, as always, for each of us on the parkway that day.

Ruben's Reflection

A well-known theologian, Frederick Buechner, believes vocation to be that “place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” He means to say that there are various kinds of voices calling us to different kinds of work, but the key is to discern which of them is the voice of God.

I am witness to an encounter that took place between a pastor and a group of people who discovered a common calling, to form a community of faith that would minister to the unhoused in the downtown area of Philadelphia. A group of unhoused women were in a restroom at the 30th Street train station, cleaning and clothing themselves and preparing to get back to the coldness of the streets. They cared for each other but wondered what the day would bring and how they would sustain their bodies and spirits.

On the other side, Pastor Violet Little worked as a bivocational leader, serving clients as a psychotherapist and serving as pastor at an urban church. But something happened to her in meeting these unhoused women in the train station’s restroom. Something clicked, as if two hearts had come close enough to begin a dialogue and explore what they could do together to face the acute challenges being faced by hundreds of unhoused people, young and old. One voice said: We need a pastor to bring us together and create a caring community to serve our unhoused neighbors. Another voice said: As a minister, I see a potential call with a clear purpose and a real need.

Pastor Violet missed her train but found her calling. She checked with her bishop, Claire Burkat, and director for evangelical mission, Pat Davenport. They agreed that the Holy Spirit had guided her encounter with the women at the station, and now she would be sent to serve as a mission developer to create a new community of faith on the streets of Philadelphia. Together Pastor Little and that initial group of women experienced deep gladness as they began to meet the complex challenge of homelessness in the city. Their encounter had produced a common calling.

That is why this church shows up, even amid a snowstorm — because they understand people’s deep need to experience the divine presence and the connection to one another as a community of faith. In Scripture, one psalmist compares his thirst for God to a deer’s thirst for flowing water (Psalm 42:1). St. Augustine prayed, “You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

These gifted people of God and their pastors come together on the street with their small table holding a cup, a plate and a Bible, ready to worship, to share their talents and invite others to experience unconditional love, grace and a community filled with hope. They show up because God always shows up!

Violet's Reflection

The tempter came and said to [Jesus], “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But [Jesus] answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” —Matthew 4:3-4

Of the many stories I might have shared from my 10-plus years as pastor and developer of the Welcome Church, the story of folks in our congregation on their knees, digging a path in foot-high snow to worship, jumped to the fore of my mind.

The Welcome Church is a “church without walls,” which means that we do not have a building; we worship outdoors along the parkway, where many in our unhoused community sleep. But that is only one explanation for what it means to be a “church without walls.” A second and perhaps more important meaning is that, as a community of believers, we try to break down the walls and stereotypes that separate those who are housed from those who do not have a roof over their heads. One of those stereotypes is that a person who is unhoused longs only to have their physical needs met, to the point where they are almost incapable of caring about anything else. “Oh, they’ll come for the food” is what I often hear from people who try to find a reason why folks will show up for Sunday worship even on the coldest of days. We do share food at each gathering, just as hospitality would be offered in any other setting. As a friend’s Italian grandmother would say at the end of every meal, “We ate again!”

But the reasons we gather at the Welcome Church, whether for worship, Bible study or our weekly “teatime,” are the same reasons as for any other community of faith who gather. We come together to nurture our souls, to connect as one human family and to feed one another as children of the Holy One. We do not live by bread alone.

There is more. The Welcome Church began when I first locked eyes with the women who were washing their hair and changing their clothes in a rundown train station bathroom. In those early days, I thought it was up to me to provide everything for these women who appeared to have nothing. I borrowed a church hall so I could serve tea and offer a bathroom for those who had no place to rest. But I was wrong. I learned this the day I left all the snacks at home and had only tea to serve.

On that day and with great embarrassment, I had to share that our table would be pretty empty. I asked to be forgiven as we began to prepare for Bible study. I felt awful and thought folks would leave disappointed at the very least.

I watched as one person picked up his backpack, but instead of leaving, as I thought he intended, Darryl dug into his backpack and laid some bananas on the table. Another person followed, with some bread. Then another, with a small jar of peanut butter. I watched in awe as the table began to fill. I had so much to learn.

That day, I realized that it was easy to say everyone had gifts to offer. But if I truly believed this, I would have to make space on the table and in my heart to receive those gifts.

It is important that we each have all we need to live as healthy and whole human beings. As the World Hunger organization of my own denomination likes to say, “until all are fed.” The need for food, shelter, good medical care and education are important and not to be trivialized, but our needs go beyond those of the body — and that includes those who are unhoused.

When Jesus uttered the words “one does not live by bread alone,” he was leaning on words he knew from the Hebrew Scriptures. This was his response, after fasting for 40 days in the desert, when Satan tempted him to prove himself by turning stones into bread. He was hungry, but there was more to his story than physical need. And there is more to ours too.

We hope that the stories and reflections shared in this book will be a spiritual feast, offered by those who have often been excluded from the heart of society. Whether they are unhoused, addicted, coming out of incarceration or living in poverty, the list is long. But just as I had to make room for others to fill the table, you will have to be open to receiving the gifts offered. If you do, I promise you a feast. Not by bread alone, indeed!



For your reflection:

1. If your congregation were given a name based on its actions, what would it be called?
2. That day on the parkway, folks began worship on their knees. What are some of the things you do to prepare your heart for worship?
3. Can you think of a way in which God showed up for you this week?

2. Making Room for God — It's Emptying

**Rev. Matthew Best, *Pastor*
Christ Lutheran Church, Harrisburg, Pa.**

Yesterday was another Flying J evening. In many ways, it was like any other night of ministry at Flying J Travel Center, a truck stop in Carlisle, Pa. We had many different encounters. We did laundry — a bit less than normal. We ate with people. We worshiped.

As a pastor, I often end up talking with a variety of people throughout the evening. One fellow was a bit of a challenge, but we did what we could for him.

During the meal, we worshiped. We worshiped in Denny's. It's a sanctuary from the rest of the world. We are called to be a light in the darkness; our light just happens to be at a Denny's.

During worship we share the eucharist, often composed of hamburger or hotdog buns and some grape juice in a coffee mug. It's what I have available. Typically my daughter comes along to help throughout the night and then to assist with communion.

But tonight I asked if anyone wanted to help. This time our waitress volunteered — without knowing what to do. I gave her the cup, instructing her on how intinction worked and what to say, and she followed me around the tables as we gave the elements to people. Then we communed with each other.

Afterward she spoke with me and shared what it was like. She said that when she was going around, offering the cup to people, she felt something change. "It's emptying," she said. She meant that in a meaningful way: a "release from the burdens" kind of way. She felt the burdens that were around her empty away.

I thanked her for assisting. She said she was glad to, even without knowing what she was doing. She said she loved waiting on our group. "You all feel like family."

These were powerful words spoken by our waitress, whom we love and look forward to seeing twice a month. A waitress that participates in worship with us, lifting up prayers with us, taking and assisting with communion. She's as much a part of worship as anyone else. Our definition of community is unique, I guess. It includes church people, the homeless, the poor, a waitress, random other people who join in and some who just listen.

In this community, people have the opportunity to empty themselves, to let go of what they are holding on to, so that there is more room for God and what God is up to.

Ruben's Reflection

Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. —Matthew 4:23

Someday I hope to make it to the Holy Land. As a former travel agent, I have always found it attractive when I read the ads saying, "Come and walk where Jesus walked." Someday I would like to have that particular experience, to walk where Jesus walked. I wonder if that is what makes that special, faraway place holy. Wearing my travel agent hat, I would lean toward the past and provide people with the unique connection to that holy place. But as a current "gospel agent," I would lean to the present and look at where Jesus is walking today. From this perspective, holy places abound.

The Flying J truck stop in Carlisle, Pa., is one such place. I had the privilege to be there with the Rev. Matthew Best and Richard Jorgensen, director for evangelical mission in the ELCA Lower Susquehanna Synod. The truck stop is near St. Stephen Evangelical Lutheran Church in New Kingstown, Pa., where Pastor Best served. Teaming up with volunteers, neighbors, truckers, and restaurant and truck stop workers, its members created a community of love, care, healing and genuine hospitality. Why? Because Jesus shows up and accompanies all, whatever situation people are going through, whether at church, the truck stop, homes, streets, train stations — anywhere.

The laundromat is holy ground, and those tables at Denny's are but an extension of the table of the Lord. What happens here is a fresh and communal encounter between people and Jesus, who shows up in their stories, their struggles and the holy meal. The ministry at Flying J is an extension of St. Stephen Church, but the congregation is also enhanced by the community at Flying J. One thing is clear: there is good news in both places, stories of grace, liberation, gratitude, joy, forgiveness and release.

Pastor Best says that every gathering time is different yet inspiring; challenges and surprises abound, as well as human needs and spiritual thirst. That is exactly where Jesus encounters people, as they experience the good news in and with each other. The dynamics that divide people in society fall apart when we are in the presence of Jesus walking among the people, a community of love and mutuality in the teaching and witnessing of the goodness of God.

A gospel agent and a travel agent appeal to you to create your own tour in your community and identify the places where Jesus is walking today. Can you and your church team join in, build relationships, listen, learn, accompany, serve, receive hospitality and celebrate God's presence in a new holy place, with new holy people? There is good news coming from the margins to refresh and bless the church and world.

Someday, maybe, I will make it to that faraway Holy Land. But I am just as excited to get up every morning and walk where Jesus walks today.

Violet's Reflection

Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

—Matthew 11:28

For 14 years, this would be the Bible verse I first saw as I prepared to lead worship at St. Michael's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Philadelphia. In our beautiful, pre-Revolutionary-War sanctuary, these words were inscribed beneath a stained-glass image of Jesus standing with hands open and fingers reaching down to a crowd of people with various needs. Each week, I would take a few minutes to accept this invitation of unburdening myself to the One, who, I imagined, looked nothing like the white-faced, neatly coiffed Jesus in the window, and I would find myself somewhere in that crowd of folks, longing for a break from some trouble. I remember one of our parishioners, a faithful church mother now gone, saying she was really good at "laying her burdens on the altar" — the problem was, she was terrible at leaving them there!

This verse became even more meaningful to me when I prepared for worship with our Welcome Church, a community of folks who were unhoused and living on the street. We would open each service in the park with the following words of hospitality and welcome, spoken by Jesus and recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. They would be proclaimed amid a group of folks for whom "heavy burdens" were a real and palpable thing. Worn backpacks and overstuffed shopping bags, causing people to hunch over and fingers to blister, were matched by the extreme exhaustion in eyes made weary by lack of sleep. This was often accompanied by the not-so-visible burdens of addiction, depression, illness and the daily struggle for survival on the streets of the city.

"Come to me," says Jesus, "and I will give you rest."

In Matthew Best's story of worship at the Flying J, we hear the good news of what it means to extend and accept the invitation of Jesus to "come."

The offer is everywhere, even in Denny's, a diner-type restaurant franchise that has been intentional about correcting the racism some of its outlets were accused of in earlier years. No stained-glass windows here but a place stained with once-unfair employee practices, confessing and trying to correct the past.

Amid this messy, not-so-perfect setting, we see the eucharist being shared with the food of the diner — "the things we have," says Pastor Best.

I remember serving communion one time in the park and running out of the tiny wafers we had brought for our eucharist together. I used what I had with me — a bagel that I had packed for lunch. How clever of Jesus to share his presence with us in the ordinary things at hand!

What strikes me most in Pastor Best's story is how he made room at the table for the Spirit to enter, a lesson also taught to me at the Welcome Church.

The table was open to all at the Flying J, and each was invited to share their gifts.

When the waitress — one who had been so used to serving and “topping off” cups of coffee, offered to serve yet another cup, the table became open in a new way. This new way was so much the way of Jesus, in fact, that this server in Denny’s could actually feel a “lightening” or, in her profound words, “an emptying,” described by Pastor Best as “a ‘release from the burdens’ kind of way.”

That day, in a small Pennsylvania diner, the server shared in a meal that filled her so much, she became emptied of the things that were weighing her down.



For your reflection:

1. What burdens are you carrying around today?
2. What does it look like to place those burdens in the hands of Jesus? How might your faith community become those hands?
3. Can your ministry of responding to human need be complemented with building relationships and seeking mutuality in ministry and care?

3. The Home We Build Together

**Rev. Schaunel Steinnagel, Pastor
The Well, Philadelphia, Pa.**

"Just what I want to be doing: driving back into Philadelphia, and in the evening!" That's what I was selfishly thinking, one evening in April 2016, as I proceeded to the Well, then a wintertime shelter for women that the Welcome Church had raised funds to open for a pilot season. The women of the Well, as they had begun calling themselves rather early on, had invited their pastors for dinner, being rather insistent about it. That's the only reason I was going. I mean, it was pretty much still winter: cold and dark.

The absolute surprise awaiting me there was that the women had not just planned dinner for us; they were throwing us a surprise party, complete with presents, to thank us for their time at the Well. Each pastor who was involved (me, Violet Little from the Welcome Church and Donna Maree from Trinity Memorial Church) was given a piece of poster board covered with thank-you notes, pictures, cutouts from magazines, etc. It was definitely a surprise. The evening turned to joy, and the thoughtfulness was deep.

Now, here's the thing: the Well ultimately became a year-round shelter for women. It has been successful in helping women in Philadelphia move from homelessness to permanent housing. But then, it was just an emergency winter shelter, open for three months in its first year, February through April. Here we were, in late April 2016, about to put these women back out on the street, and they were thanking us, fully and beautifully.

The women taught me a fuller definition of the word "home." Four walls and a roof are part of it, especially if people are confronting the elements. However, a home is also about relationships and the time we spend together. The women of the Well knew this. They understood this. They came to the Well having been part of the Welcome Church. The women involved helped to shape the original rules and structure for the Well. We spoke to them regularly about how things were going. Even when no stone lays upon another stone, we will continue to have the relationships we have built, and this is what we can rely on when things get hard. The women thanked us for the time they were able to spend inside but also for caring about them and not giving up, and for giving them space to be "home."

Violet's Reflection

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." —John 4:7

Recently there has been a movement for people experiencing homelessness to refer to themselves as "unhoused" rather than "homeless." This has come from the very real situation that home can be created even when there is no house. There is a recognition that home involves a sense of connection and community that goes beyond having shelter.

When Arthur and Janet moved into an apartment after having lived on the street together for 10 years, they shared how difficult the transition was for them. The couple had loved dancing in the rain. They also took pride in the spot where they had “camped” on Logan Circle, constantly picking up any trash that tourists or other folks left behind. They knew all the priests in the nearby cathedral and were constantly surrounded by a community of friends.

While grateful for moving into their new place, Janet began to feel claustrophobic. Arthur, an extreme extrovert, missed all his friends. They complained that the apartment was too hot even though it was winter. Janet began to sleep outside, in front of their apartment; since Arthur would not leave Janet alone, it wasn't long before the two of them were sleeping outside. Eventually the couple moved indoors, but this was not easy.

Arthur and Janet's story is not unusual. Over and over, I would hear stories of loneliness that many experienced in the early months of making the move from the street into permanent housing. Folks with “keys” would come to visit their friends who were still unhoused. One person told me he would go to his window each time it snowed, restless, because he knew so many of his friends were out there in the bad weather.

I share this not to romanticize being unhoused; shelter is crucial to health and survival. But from the stories of Janet and Arthur and so many others, I have learned that “home” is much bigger than having a safe, warm building.

We see this in Pastor Steinnagel's story of the women living at the Well.

The Well was created as an alternative for women who were living on the streets of Philadelphia. It was designed by women whom the city had labeled “shelter-resistant.” Through the power of community and connection, these women, who now began to refer to themselves as “women of the Well,” created a home in the basement of a church with the most basic of their needs being met. Within this new home created by the women, hospitality and gratitude were now being offered to the pastors, who simply made the space for the women to connect.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, he asked her for a drink. Jesus didn't see this woman as one disgraced by her multiple relationships with men, nor did he see her as a member of a people who were “not pure” and were to be avoided by his own Jewish community. Instead Jesus saw this Samaritan woman as someone who had something to offer him — a drink. Pastor Steinnagel, in her story, recognizes that all people, even those whom we often think have little to share, have gifts to offer that are waiting to be received. When those gifts are recognized and received, miracles happen — including the creation of a welcoming home in the basement of a church!

The ancient poet Rumi once wrote, “We're all just walking each other home.”

I believe that hand in hand, we will get there.

Ruben's Reflection

The word got out very quickly. People in the community informed others about a local church with a large basement where immigrants passing through town could rest and stay for two to three days as they made connections with relatives or friends at their final destination. The church basement had its own entrance for easy access; however, the door was behind a small garden that hid it from the public pathways. For about a year, before a larger shelter was organized with ecumenical partners, the people at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Huntington Park, CA had the privilege of hosting pilgrims, sharing stories of difficult journeys and dreams being pursued, and sharing meals and love, even during their short stays. Many participated in moments of prayer and blessing in the basement or the sanctuary. I sensed deep faith and hopeful anticipation of a place that God was preparing for them. Though their housing place changed often, they said that their family, their home, was intact. I noticed that. These pilgrims were not on a journey of house relocation but on one of home relocation.

It all began with a haircut. I walked into the local barbershop in Huntington Park, a noisy place where it seemed that everyone was talking at the same time and not necessarily on the same subject. I sat down to wait for my turn, and to my surprise, the whole room got quiet, with almost everyone looking at me and silently asking, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" One barber pushed his client out and then welcomed me to his chair. The silence was deafening. I was impressed by the barber's attentiveness, but it all came tumbling down when I realized that I, a newcomer in town who was wearing a clergy collar, had walked into the middle of a community meeting. The barber's goal was to get rid of me as soon as possible. He succeeded.

I prayed to God for my hair to grow fast so I could return to the barbershop. I wanted those folks to get to know me as a new pastor in the neighborhood, and I also wanted to know what was happening there. The next time, I did not have my clerical collar and noticed that folks were not as nervous as they were earlier. I insisted on waiting for my turn, which gave me a chance to get some conversations started. I prayed again, and it was time for another haircut. After a few more times, people felt more at ease, especially when Hugo, now my barber, told everyone that I was the new pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran Church at the corner of Florence and Seville, and that I was OK. Now I had permission to come anytime and wear my clergy collar with freedom.

I wasted no time in finding the day and time for the next community meeting, and I cleared my calendar to be there, haircut or not. I was surprised by my discovery: the purpose of their meetings was to organize themselves for welcoming immigrants as they arrived in town in buses from the Mexican border. Most of these immigrant families had permits to work in the fields, especially in Northern California, but needed rest and time to connect with those waiting for them. Their numbers were increasing. I learned that my barber hosted people in his garage, others in their homes and apartments. This is when I realized that these neighbors were quietly and discreetly doing God's work, whether they knew it or not. Every time they said to an immigrant, "*Mi casa es tu casa*" ("my home is your home"), they were doing God's work.

I recall Martin Luther's Theory of the Two Kingdoms, an insight into how God works. He noticed that God works in and through the church but also in and through civil society. In this case, the church came in a bit late in the game but was nonetheless welcomed. I was touched by the community's genuine sense of hospitality, love, generosity and justice. This is when I finally spoke. "My church has

a large basement, which we use as a fellowship hall, with kitchen, bathrooms and things for kids to do. If this can help, you can count on it." People cheered.

Thank God for haircuts, for barbers, for neighbors who care, for communities and churches that open their hearts and their doors to immigrants, refugees, those seeking asylum. Thank God for the women of the Well, who teach us that a home is built on relationships, whether there is a building or not. These immigrant family units are actual loving homes on the move. The housing structure may change, but the relational nature of a home is there, intact, ready for the next chapter of life God has for them. Soon they too will be saying to others: "Hello and welcome. *Mi casa es tu casa.*"



For your reflection:

1. What action can you take to thank someone who has done something that helped you or that you appreciate?
2. What does "home" mean to you? How can you share with others outside your physical home the parts of it that warm you the most?
3. Has anyone ever been able to surprise you?

4. What's in a Name?

**Rev. Rebel Hurd, Former Pastor
Church on the Street, Sioux Falls, S.D.
Director for Evangelical Mission
ELCA Northwestern Minnesota Synod**

"Preacher Lady," I heard someone bellow down the road in my direction. Gary was slowly coming my way, pushing his walker, wearing slippers and a windbreaker though the temperature was around 35 degrees. He obviously had street news to share. Gary was in his 50s, but his weathered skin gave him the appearance of a nearly-70-year-old. In the years I had known him, he had been housed, had been temporarily sheltered, had resided in a broken-down pickup truck and had lived on the streets.

Many circumstances led to his being unhoused, but that is not the story I want to share with you. When you are a street pastor, there are a couple of rules — lessons if you will — that no one tells you. One is that you need to earn your own "street cred." Until you do, until you prove you are not there to change people, not there to fix a situation you see with privileged eyes, not there to be a savior, not there to stand on a street corner with a bullhorn with no respect for context or culture, then you are simply not there.

That being said, on this day, Gary had street news to tell this preacher lady. Rudy, a Church-on-the-Streeter, had been killed by a car. There would be no investigation, no family to fight for his rights and no eulogy in his honor. He was simply gone — taken to the city morgue. Folks on the streets were mourning. Later that night, I searched the local news and found a report on a "transient man." Rudy was by no means transient. He had a community, friends who loved him and a congregation that would miss him dearly.

The congregation of Church on the Street gathered to celebrate Rudy's life shortly afterward, to be reminded of his and our baptismal promises. Rudy was kind, was gentle, loved classic rock and would share anything he had with you, but he never felt as if he fit better anywhere than on the streets. He also had early-onset Alzheimer's. On good days, he would remember my name, but on bad days he would just call me "Preacher Lady." So Preacher Lady, I became. The second lesson no one tells you on the streets is that when you are given a street name, you have earned your "street cred."

Violet's Reflection

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. —Isaiah 43:1

When I meet someone for the first time, I like to ask them how they got their name.

Names are important. They are part of our story. Pastor Hurd shares how names are especially important for many on the margins, who are often identified by their situations rather than who they are. It was Rudy — not "a transient" — who was tragically killed by a car. It was Gary, a Church-on-the-Streeter, who shared the news of this loss with his pastor, and it is Rebel, given the street name

“Preacher Lady,” who reminds us of what the prophet Isaiah said so long ago: not only does God call each of us by name, but in that naming God has claimed each of us as God’s own.

My own name is a variation of my mother’s name. I am Violet, and she was Viola. My mother wasn’t crazy about her own name, but as her firstborn, I know she wanted us linked in the naming.

When I was baptized, I was given the name Mary. In the Roman Catholic tradition in which I grew up, you needed to be named after a saint. Not a forgiven sinner, as I understand a saint to be, but one who was recognized and canonized. Because there is no Saint Violet (and it looks like I won’t be the one to change that), I was given the name Mary — pretty safe since there were several Marys in the Bible.

In the third grade, I was given my confirmation name, Catherine, after my Aunt Kitty, who was my godmother. By the time I was 8, my name was Violet Mary Catherine Cucciniello. A lot of spelling for a third-grader to learn!

That was my name until I got married and the IRS made it difficult for me to just stop there, so now I added my husband’s last name — Little.

OK. Violet Mary Catherine Cucciniello Little.

But early in my work on the street, I was given another name, a street name, by Eddie, one of our Welcome Church friends. He told me I was to be called “Amazing Grace Little.”

Eddie named me that because I had introduced him to jazz musician Alex Bugnon through a free concert we attended here in Philadelphia. “Amazing Grace Little” is a jazz singer known to many. The name linked us through our common love of jazz.

With this name, I felt as if I had experienced yet another rite of passage.

But here’s the thing. Shortly after that naming, our community met for our weekly Tuesday church worship. I asked the group who they thought God saw when God looked at each of them. One person raised his hand and said, “God’s child.”

There it is in a nutshell. The name that ties us all together, given to each of us by the one who claims us as God’s own: Child of God — our most important name.

There are other promises that follow in that 43rd chapter from Isaiah, reminding us what being named by God means: the waters will not drown us, the fire will not burn us, and we will not walk through all these things alone. But for me, the best part of that text is the reason God names and claims us. We find the answer in verse 4: “because ... I love you.”

It takes a lot of work and trust to earn a street name from a community that has been wounded and abandoned countless times. We thank Pastor Hurd for this crucial reminder of the importance of knowing one’s names, but the name “child of God” is offered to us all, unearned but freely given out of perfect love. So let me introduce myself to you: I am Violet Mary Catherine Cucciniello Amazing Grace Little, Child of God.

Ruben's Reflection

God has put a comma next to my name, creating an interesting space or social distance between my given name and my last name. My parents intentionally chose the name "Ruben" from the Bible, acting in freedom. My last name, Duran, is a Hispanicized version of the French last name Durant. This last name was imposed by undocumented invaders from Spain who colonized the lands of the Inca civilization from the early 1500s to the mid-1800s. Some Spaniard citizen with French connections joined the Spaniard forces that overtook my ancestors, the Incas, and later divided among themselves the vast territories of what today is known as Peru, Bolivia, Northern Chile and Argentina, as well as Ecuador, Colombia and southern Venezuela. My ancestors lived in close communion with the land and each other, with property known only as a communal resource, not held individually. But once defeated by the invaders, they became slaves in their own land, with no help and few signs of hope for about 300 years.

My name Ruben was given to me in freedom, but my last name was imposed through a system of oppression. In my baptism, God put commas between my names and added a new identity in that space: Ruben, Child of God, Duran. This new name and identity are not there to separate or create distance between the other names. On the contrary, God says your identity as a child of God is a bridge, a catalyst, able to bring together what the world cannot on its own. This new name is a bridge of healing, a bridge of peace, an equalizer for all people.

My father came from a direct line of Indigenous communities, and my mother had lineage going back to the Spanish culture. According to the prejudicial norms of the time, there was no chance for them to find each other, much less to fall in love. But because they were part of the same Christian community, their new baptismal identity flattened the field, with all children of God standing on the same platform.

Prejudice, racism, homophobia, poverty, homelessness, violence, injustices and suffering of all types are a reality that cannot be ignored. But the reality of God's presence in the world is also a real thing. I like the image of a shepherd as described in Psalm 23:1: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Our shepherd wants the best for the sheep, the basic needs, the care, the sense of belonging to a community. But this care is not happening in a vacuum. It happens amid constant danger, in the presence of enemies, even in the face of death. In those mixed moments as children of God, we can stand tall with confidence because the Good Shepherd is with us.

In the story from Pastor Rebel, we learn that Rudy lived as a "transient man" according to society, ignored by many, left behind and marginalized. Yes, some saw only this side of the picture. But Rudy was also "Rudy, Child of God," and he belonged to a beloved community of the ELCA, Church on the Street. God used a mission developer, now director for evangelical mission, Pastor Rebel Hurd, the "Preacher Lady," and courageous lay leaders to accompany Rudy on his life journey with love, dignity and hope in God.

Can we count on you to do the same? Every community is blessed with people such as Rudy, seeking connections and looking for bridges to meet other children of God, to break stereotypes and divisions in society in Christ's name. We are the ELCA, 2.8 million people in 8,500 churches and 380 new worshiping communities. God has used commas inside your name to set off a new identity,

Child of God. As we live out that identity, we become bridges toward love, justice, equity and inclusiveness in the world. Let it be so.



For your reflection:

1. Thinking of your favorite gospel lesson, what might Jesus' street name be in that story?
2. What kind of "church cred" do you have in your neighborhood?
3. What might you do to either let go of that name or live more deeply into it?

5. Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

Rev. Maria Rojas-Bandas, *Pastor*
Unity Lutheran Church, Berwyn, Ill.

Through a phone call, God called me to serve and start a ministry with the Latiné LGBTQIA+ community in Berwyn, Ill. One afternoon, I was working at the pastor's office at Unity Lutheran Church in Berwyn, where I was doing my internship for the almost-completion of my TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) program, as well as figuring out what ministry could be needed in this particular community. Suddenly the phone rang. It was a man asking if the pastor of the church would be willing to perform a marriage for a gay couple. Unity being a member of Reconciling in Christ (a network of affirming churches), I said yes. But that was not the only request; the man on the phone asked to speak with someone who knew Spanish because their family came from Mexico and wanted the service to be in Spanish.

There was the first sign from God giving me direction. I met with the couple, and they shared their struggles in trying to find a minister and a church that would give them at least a blessing. Listening to their story, I had different feelings; their story was full of struggle but also hope, love and beautiful experiences. I was looking through their lenses at the world around them. I prayed and thanked God for the opportunity and the honor to be able to perform a marriage — my first marriage — with the support of the pastor from Unity. On the day of the wedding, seeing the faces of the couple and their family was amazing. To see the acceptance and the freedom reflected in their smiles as they received the blessing of God, and knew that God indeed loved them, was a meaningful experience.

Time went by after that phone call and that celebration, and for the second time, the phone rang. Was God calling again? What is the ministry that this community needs? Is God once again giving me direction?

This time it was a woman, and her first request was "Can I speak with someone that speaks Spanish?" I answered the phone, and she said, "I see that you accept LGBTQ people in your church. I know because my wife saw the community flag. We would like to get married in the church with a service in Spanish. Can you do that for us?" Of course, I said yes. I met this couple, who also had an amazing story and had gone through a lot of struggles to get a blessing. The more they shared, the more my heart wondered, "Is this what God is telling me? Is this the community that God is telling me to serve?" As we planned the wedding, I got the opportunity to meet so many people in the LGBTQIA+ community. I heard so many stories and requests for blessings and baptisms, and I saw the need for a place of worship they could call home, where their community could feel free to be who they were and to have a strong relationship with God and each other.

Their need to tell their stories, and to have someone to listen with no judgment, was overwhelming. After the beautiful wedding, I decided to form a committee of Unity Church members, residents of Berwyn and the LGBTQIA+ community. We met, and I learned that the Latiné LGBTQIA+ community needed a place of worship where they could be seen and heard. This was the affirmation I received from God and the community. We offered to start a praying group, but the LGBTQIA+ community wanted to have worship services at their homes. Many of them did not feel welcome in the church

building. We started a home-based church with the Latiné LGBTQIA+ community and their families and allies. Misión Luterana Unidad began in August 2019, with seven people in the first home, and by that November, 32 people were congregating in a backyard to worship together. For many, this was their first time being invited to the table to receive communion.

We moved to the sanctuary and started our services on Nov. 3, 2019. Misión Luterana Unidad was born, and I became Pastora Maria, serving the Latiné LGBTQIA+ community and their families and allies. We walk together, acknowledging that Jesus came and gave freedom to all.

Violet's Reflection

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. —Psalm 139:13-14

There is an old song that goes “Jesus on the main line, tell him what you want ... call him up and tell him what you want.” During all the years I studied in seminary, I used to pray that Jesus would call me up on the phone and tell me exactly what he wanted. After all, I was a former Roman Catholic woman who had not attended church in over a decade, taking classes at a Lutheran seminary. It was a bit confusing to many, and especially to me! But in all my time trying to figure out the call, I never did get a call directly from Jesus.

In the story shared by Pastor Maria Rojas-Bandas, it seems the telephone really did offer an answer to her question about direction. Not only was she asked to perform a marriage for a gay couple, but the couple needed the service to be in Spanish! From this simple call, a ministry of welcome to the LGBTQIA+ Latiné community was born. But really, this was not just about a telephone call from God. Pastor Maria had the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the willingness of heart to follow the lead that the Spirit had given her.

One of my favorite stories in the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of Hagar and Ishmael, found in Genesis 21. Hagar was an Egyptian enslaved to Abraham. She bore him a son, Ishmael. After Abraham's wife, Sarah, bore Isaac, Sarah asked that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. With assurances from God that they would be OK, Abraham did just that. But soon the water and food provided by Abraham ran out, and Hagar became distraught, afraid that her son would die. Then we read this:

God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. —Genesis 21:17-19

What I love about this story is not that God suddenly created a stream of water for the child but that Hagar “opened her eyes” and saw what had been there all along.

Pastor Maria could not have started her ministry if she had not opened her eyes to the beauty of all

God's people, each of us "fearfully and wonderfully made." She could see the struggles of this couple but also the "hope, love and beautiful experiences." She saw freedom and acceptance in sharing the love of God. And not only did Pastor Maria see; she also listened.

It is no accident that the word "obey" is rooted in the Latin word *audire*, meaning "to listen or to hear." But listening is not just about hearing; listening is hearing plus acting on what is heard.

I am sure that, during my years in seminary, God tried to call me many times. I am also sure that it took lots of God's reaching out before I finally heard God's voice. Despite it all, God never gave up, leading me and guiding me to where I was supposed to be. It didn't always look the way I had imagined, but it has been the best journey of my life.

It doesn't matter much if you use a fancy iPhone, a retro flip phone or one of those old things connected to the wall with a coiled cord attached; God keeps calling and is just waiting for us to pick up.

Ruben's Reflection

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being. —2 Corinthians 5:17

Pastor Maria Rojas and the people of God at Misión Luterana Unidad in Berwyn, Ill., recently received the Phoenix Award from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Phoenix symbol, which comes from Greek mythology, represents a long-lived bird with the capacity for being regenerated, reborn and renewed in life cycles. It is usually drawn with long red feathers, surrounded by fire, very much on its way to rise out of the ashes with new life. You probably have seen this symbol either in the city of Phoenix, Ariz., or in the Harry Potter movies, as Fawkes the Phoenix.

In this case, the award recognizes the leadership of Pastor Maria Rojas and the new community emerging out of the ashes of the Lutheran experience in Berwyn. Misión Luterana Unidad is like a new shoot growing out of an old stump. Swedish Lutherans once populated this area and built churches as needed. The city of Berwyn also received people of Czech, Italian and German ancestry as they broke away from the township of Cicero in 1908. Two Lutheran churches, First Lutheran and Berwyn United Lutheran, served this community for many years. Yet white flight continued westward from Chicago, and fewer and fewer people joined these churches.

In 1991, my wife, Jean, was sent to complete her internship at Berwyn United on her path to become a Lutheran minister. It was clear then that few people of northern European background were moving into Berwyn, which negatively affected both congregations. They began to dwindle rapidly. The writing was on the wall to seriously consider what most Lutherans do in these situations: when in trouble, merge! In fact, one could describe this part of the history of Lutheranism in America as "Mergers 'R' Us." The two Lutheran churches consolidated their assets and reorganized themselves as Unity Lutheran Church.

Something about Unity Lutheran was different: its vision. The vision was to open its ministry to newcomers to Berwyn, primarily the Latiné, Asian and Pacific Islander, African-descent and LGBTQIA+ communities. Its first pastor, the Rev. Julie Boleyn, began to engage these new communities with great interest and willingness to learn from them. This effort yielded an encounter with community leader Maria Rojas, who had been serving the public for more than 20 years.

Unity first attempted to connect with the Latiné community, to see how to integrate it into the inner circle and culture of northern European Lutherans. This did not work, so the next idea was to create a new Latiné mission start, cradled and hosted by Unity Lutheran Church. Each entity would have the freedom to create its own initiatives to serve and grow. The two worshiping communities would also seek to build relationships and partnerships, to develop joint initiatives in the changing community. During this time, Maria Rojas began her seminary training.

Today Maria, ordained in the ELCA, serves as pastor of Unity Lutheran Church and as mission developer of the Misión Luterana Unidad. She also serves as coordinator for Latiné ministries in the ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod. Her story confirms that God is still calling leaders to work for God's purposes. Through Pastor Maria and the people at Misión Luterana Unidad, God is doing a new thing. Out of the ashes of Lutheran history, a phoenix community is emerging. Among the people on the margins of society, amid the growing diversity of this changing city, the Spirit is birthing a new expression of being a Lutheran church, being church together for the life of the world, a world that is longing to be connected to the divine. This is why she received those phone calls that changed everything. The opportunities are right in front of us to join others in experiencing community, justice and the love of God for all.



For your reflection:

1. You and those around you have also been called to live among and serve people experiencing marginalization. What is your story? How did God put this desire in your heart?
2. How are you also experiencing the emergence of a phoenix community? What's new? What else can be reborn?
3. How is community coming together among the people you are with? What dynamics are helpful? What gets in the way?

6. Why Am I Here?

Rev. Tom Scornavacchi, Pastor
Common Ground Recovery Community, Wyomissing, Pa.

It was a miserably cold Sunday afternoon. Snow had fallen the previous day, and few of the city sidewalks had been shoveled. Seeking shelter, Brian walked into Common Ground Recovery Community, unsure of what he might find. His feet were cold, his coat was wet, and the warmth of the church provided some relief. He heard that we served a hot meal, good coffee and dessert. He was cold and hungry, and that was good news to him.

He didn't say much that day and sat through the worship service, impatiently waiting for the meal. As he waited, he rummaged through the gently used clothes and shoes. He found a new pair of boots that just happened to be his size, and he grabbed some Bombas socks and a knit hat. He ate by himself and ventured back out into the cold.

He came back again the next Sunday and regularly after that. He knew a couple folks and ate with them. Over time, he grew comfortable and began to share bits and pieces of his life. He struggled with addiction, was unhoused, had suffered a run-in with the law and trusted no one. He talked about the shame he carried from his past, the anger he woke up to every morning and how hopeless he was about his future. He saw no purpose in his life and talked about harming himself.

Each week he heard a message of hope, that God loved him no matter what. He heard uplifting songs, read Scripture and ate with friends and strangers. He became part of the community and volunteered to help. He was given some small jobs before and after the service. He proved to be reliable and did a great job with his new responsibilities. He took pride in making the best coffee.

He began to see meaning and purpose in his life. He gained hope for his future.

We helped him address his legal problems and his addiction, and he found a job. Now, with a steady income, he got a tiny apartment that stabilized his life. Brian continued to thrive, keeping his job and apartment. He encouraged others to come "check it out. They got good food, they got good people, and they got God."

Violet's Reflection

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ... Where can I go from your spirit? —Psalm 139:1-2, 7

There is a fable made famous by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. The story, known as "Schopenhauer's Porcupine," tells of the dilemma faced by a group of porcupines who must huddle together to keep warm in the winter. When brought too close, the porcupines feel the pain of being poked by one another's quills, yet if the animals spread too far apart, they run the risk of freezing in the cold winter chill.

As humans, we are dependent creatures. At the same time, and especially for those of us who grew up in a country where the gold standard of independence was “rugged individualism” and “picking yourself up by your bootstraps” (an image that inevitably ends with one falling flat on one’s face), the idea of knowing and being known offers a challenge. Intimacy, as necessary for our survival as heat is for the freezing porcupines, is not easy for anyone but especially for folks on the margins, who have been poked over and over by the quills of rejection and misunderstanding.

In the story shared by Pastor Tom of the Common Ground Recovery Community, we see how intimacy and purpose grow in one man as he is gently received into a place of belonging and love. Brian was met by the community with tenderness from the place where he was — cold, wet and hungry. There were no expectations placed upon him; he was simply pointed in the direction of food for his empty belly, socks for his cold feet and a hat for his chilled head. Still, something happened. I remember seeing a church sign once that read, “Come as you are but expect to be changed.” In this tender community of compassion, Brian was transformed.

I have witnessed and experienced this same transformation many times in my own faith community. Perhaps the most tangible sign of this is the crocheted wall hanging given to me by an artist. When Yuri came to us, she was literally speechless. We did not know where she came from or even if she understood English. All we knew was that Yuri sat down with us in our Bible study circle, looking exhausted and in need of a place to rest. For weeks, Yuri would show up, and despite several efforts to communicate with her, she would not speak or even share her name. For weeks, we welcomed her and did not wake her when she fell asleep.

It is our custom in the Welcome Church to lay out art supplies during Bible studies. We also provide yarn, knitting needles and crochet hooks during most of our gatherings. One day, one of our knitters walked over to Yuri with yarn, knitting needles and a crochet hook. Yuri took the yarn and hook and began to crochet. We all watched in awe as she created a series of beautiful pieces, one after another, often joining them together. Eventually Yuri shared her name and her painful story of being trafficked and going on the run. When asked what she was crocheting, Yuri said it was flowers opening up, “just like me.”

The writer of Psalm 139 speaks of the God who knows us and loves us as we are. True intimacy is knowing and being known, loved and recognized for the gifts we have been given and have to offer. We see this in the story offered by Pastor Tom and the people of Common Ground Recovery Community. The love of God offers balm to our deepest wounds, and God offers that balm to us through the hands of another, like Brian, who made coffee for a community of recovery, or like Yuri, who crocheted for me a garden full of hope.

Ruben’s Reflection

Jesus went about all cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. —Matthew 9:35

The word got out. This Jesus and his community of disciples were going around everywhere with God’s message of love, forgiveness, grace and healing. The community of followers of Jesus turned

into a magnetic force, attracting all who sought an alternative to their current life situation. All people were welcomed unconditionally and given an opportunity to bring forth their issues to the community of Jesus, especially those on the margins of society, who were victims of prejudice, oppression and neglect. The alternative offered by Jesus, then and now, is a life reconciled with God and lived in community, based on the values and characteristics of the kingdom of God.

The same word got out in the greater Reading area of Pennsylvania. The community of Jesus in this story is called Common Ground Recovery Community, and Brian went to check it out. It didn't take him long to recognize the genuine love and unconditional acceptance of the community. He also noticed that everyone there was on a journey of recovery, transformation and healing. Everyone was standing on common ground, all wounded yet totally dependent on the love and mercy of God one day at a time.

Henri Nouwen provided the term "wounded healer" to describe the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf as predicted long ago in Isaiah 53:5: "by his bruises we are healed." Then he turns to the followers of Jesus and calls them to become wounded healers in the world. He alerts them that people do not connect with the polished, sanitized, almost perfect life of a Christian but with the loving presence of God amid the vulnerabilities and woundedness of our human existence.

What a blessing it was for Brian to find and get involved in a community of wounded healers. It changed his life direction and even equipped him to become an evangelist. How can we start communities of wounded healers everywhere for people, such as Brian, who are seeking a new life? This is where Pastor Tom's leadership comes in. He is a wounded healer himself who experienced restoration by the grace of God and was called to be a living witness to others about this Jesus and his healing community.

Preparing for ordained ministry, Tom learned from various AA groups and other organizations serving people in need of restoration. He concluded that there was room in that area for developing an alternative Christian community that would supplement other organizations by focusing on unconditional welcome, attending to basic needs and trusting in the power of the word of God and the sacraments to propel people into new life with God. Thus the Common Ground Recovery Community was born with the partnership of local churches, the synod and the ELCA churchwide organization.

I have had the opportunity to visit this wounded healing community several times. There is a magnetic force, called the Holy Spirit, that brings people in and keeps them together. The sense of belonging and being loved unconditionally is evident in all the activities. In this setting of full acceptance, people begin to rediscover their humanity, their dignity, their faith in God, their gifts to share and their own sense of call to tell others about their own experience of restoration.

Pastor Tom, Brian and many other wounded healers say it so well: "Come, check out this community. They got good food, they got good people, and they got God."

The word is out!



For your reflection:

1. What does Jesus mean when he tells Peter, "Feed my sheep?" What does Jesus say about caring for the marginalized?
2. How does community bring folks into relationship with God?
3. Where were you when community brought you meaning, purpose and hope?

7. Heads Bowed and Ready to Go

Rev. Giselle Coutinho, Pastor
Bridge of Peace Community Church, Camden, N.J.
Story by Laura Sanchez with Giselle Coutinho

"I'll cut your throat with my machete and take the next plane to El Salvador. You will be dead, and no one will ever find me." These were the words, uttered by her husband, that prompted Isabella (not her real name) to call José Sanchez, council president and disciple at Bridge of Peace. José had met Isabella at a church in East Camden, N.J., while speaking about Catholic Charities, where he works.

When we got the call from José, our Bridge of Peace family went to work. We got in a car and drove to Isabella's house in East Camden. She was terrified. After prayer, she chose to leave, gathering important documents and family treasures. José got the room at the Peace Center ready and cleared the garage to put her car inside. The late Anne Krogman, then a deacon at Bridge of Peace, took a group into the church to pray for Isabella. She prayed that God would place "God's protective wings around us" and that we would be "hidden from all evil" until our return to Bridge of Peace. Isabella later shared that the prayer must have worked, because we passed her husband's car and he never saw us. Isabella finally arrived at the church with her adult child and pet. She was welcomed by a group of domestic violence survivors who sheltered, encouraged, fed and loved her until other arrangements could be made for her family's safety. Isabella survived. She was one of the lucky ones who got a permanent restraining order and, eventually, could move on with her life, still guided by a good and merciful God who kept her safe at a crossroad in Camden and now directs her on a new path filled with life and hope.

During October, the congregation educates and advocates for Domestic Violence Awareness Month, sharing stories, testimonies and information with the community on social media and throughout our region, and helping others understand domestic abuse. This became particularly critical during COVID-19, when perpetrators of abuse were using stay-at-home orders to further isolate and exert control over victims. Church leaders have been trained to identify people in need of intervention and encouraged to direct them to services. It has helped us educate and model healthy and balanced relationships. Isabella and survivors like her help us remember that God stands with us amid all things and that we have been gifted as a community of faith to seek justice, using all our gifts and talents together.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? —Micah 6:8

Violet's Reflection

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. —1 Corinthians 12:12

There is a story that I have often shared about someone I met a long time ago while doing some work in Geneva, Switzerland, for the Lutheran World Federation. I have changed her name but not the powerful story she shared with me one day as we chatted in her apartment. Lydia was in a wheelchair, recovering from a badly broken leg, but she had been in a wheelchair for many years. A tragic car accident had left Lydia paralyzed from the waist down.

Lydia explained to me that, attempting to reach something, she had fallen out of her chair. Because she could not feel pain below her waist, she was able to get back into her chair without thinking much of the fall. Several days later, however, Lydia began to get really sick. So sick, in fact, she almost died. Her leg had been broken and was causing all sorts of problems throughout her body.

We are one body; when one part of the body is in pain, the whole body is affected. Lydia taught me that not feeling pain experienced in any part of our body can be deadly.

Pastor Giselle begins her story with graphic words that might stop many of us from reading on — a bloody and violent threat made against a woman new to the people of Bridge of Peace Lutheran Church in Camden, N.J., a congregation so named because it literally served as a bridge across a racial divide. The people of this congregation, many of whom are living with poverty and violence themselves in this city whose poverty level was nearly 35% in 2019, were no strangers to suffering. Still, it was the people of this congregation who responded to Isabella's cry for help despite the danger they were putting themselves in. A part of the body was in pain, and it needed to be tended to with love.

As a family, the congregation responded with all it had to give. With hand, a member got into a car and physically helped Isabella to leave. With heart, a welcome place of hospitality and safety was prepared. With the core of faith that makes church different from any social service agency, prayers were offered, calling on God's "protective wings."

There is a story about a man who fell into a hole. A geologist walked by and said, "Appreciate the rocks and see what you can learn about their formation." A doctor walked by and said, "Let me throw down some pills to help with the pain." A sympathetic person walked by and said, "I feel for you." A minister walked by and said, "I will pray for you." The man began to despair of ever getting out. Finally, another person walked by and stopped. He jumped into the hole with the man.

"What are you doing?" cried the man who had first fallen into the hole. "Now we are both stuck here!"

To which the other man replied, "No, I've been here before, so I am here to show you the way out."

To live on the margins is to know what it means to be a body in pain. The people of Bridge of Peace did not walk away from a woman in pain; they jumped right there into the hole with her. This is what Jesus did and continues to do for all the parts of our broken and frail bodies; he jumps in to show us the way out. With bowed heads and trust in Jesus, the people of Bridge of Peace were ready to follow his lead.

Ruben's Reflection

Every September, under the slogan “God’s work. Our hands,” thousands of ELCA congregations identify a project to mobilize their leaders for service in their community. Leaders of every age find partners in their networks and in the public arena to address a felt need in their area. For the last nine years, reports show a growing interest in doing practical and specific projects that directly and positively impact neighbors and the care of creation. People wearing yellow T-shirts prepare themselves for weeks for that one day of service. Other churches take the whole month to extend their care.

I have been observing how this simple idea, over time, activates people to move out of their comfort zones and express their love and care in tangible, visible and real ways. I have seen this development grow nationwide, as I have had the privilege of representing the churchwide ministry of the ELCA at most synods and their gatherings in conferences and assemblies.

In meeting many of these September saints, I have learned of their joy and sense of usefulness in tackling some specific problem in their community in the name of a gracious and loving God. They say that it was about time to get out of the church building and do something alongside other neighbors. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many courageous Lutherans continued to venture outside the church walls to respond to human need at a crucial and difficult time. They wanted to continue serving outside those walls rather than get back to being comfortable Christians.

From the perspective of mobilizing people into action, this September idea has been and still is something to celebrate and continue. Many of these congregations have discussed and reflected on their experience and have decided to develop year-long initiatives in partnership with other churches, organizations and institutions in their area to further their commitment to serve and make a stronger impact.

In conversations with pastors and deacons, I hear a deeper longing. They are proud and happy for their parishioners who are taking on these important projects and making a difference. They are working on equipping people to live out the gospel in season and out of season. Their question is: How can we move baptized Christians from sporadic acts of generosity to seeing all of life as a means by which God is at work in the world? In other words, how can we expand the theme “God’s work. Our hands.” to “God’s work, our feet, our time, our money, our intellect, our voice, our talents, our lives, our vocation?”

I have been inspired and blessed by the ministry of a friend called Dwight Dubois. In his book *The Scattering: Imagining a Church That Connects Faith and Life*, Dwight provides insights and examples of how a church would look if the ministry of people when the church is scattered had the same importance as the ministry of people when the church gathers. Dwight states that as God’s people are encouraged and equipped to connect faith and everyday life, they will see that “who they are” and “all that they do” are means by which God blesses the neighbor and the world.

In new ministry starts and existing churches serving on the margins of society, I have noticed that the ministry of the church scattered is not an option. Churches are deeply rooted in the joys and struggles of their communities. Disconnected from this reality or any commitment to it, a church becomes irrelevant in its neighborhood, only taking up space until it disappears.

Pastor Giselle Coutinho, Deacon Anne Krogman, José and Laura Sanchez, the people at Bridge of Peace and the Peace Center, and Isabella and her adult child give us a real picture of a church that sees itself as a means of God's love, grace and justice in its service area and beyond.

What an example this sets of a Christian community, aware of its contextual reality and standing ready to respond with its internal vitality and capacity, and in partnership with others in the neighborhood! God works through people. For Bridge of Peace, this means "God's work, our church" or "God's work, our partners."

God chooses to work through people. This is quite a risky choice, but God wouldn't have it any other way. God's love becomes real when manifested in and through the lives and gifts of God's people. Besides individual experiences, Bridge of Peace shows us the communal experience of gathering and scattering. Gathering to pray, to worship, to learn, to understand, to plan and coordinate; scattering to connect, to listen, to learn, to further understand, to accompany, to love, to bless, to partner, to risk for the sake of freeing the oppressed in the name of God.

God's love was made real in the life of Isabella and her adult child. They have life and hope in a future with each other, their church, their community and their God. Domestic violence is a real thing, a real threat affecting people in body, mind and spirit, not just in inner-city areas but also in suburbs, small towns and rural areas. It is a dangerous reality.

Christ's disciples at Bridge of Peace, a ministry on the margins of society, raise their voices to share another reality: God works through people, individually and communally. God works in and through the church and in and through civil society. Nothing is impossible for God.

Dear church and people, listen to the voice and witness of your siblings on the margins of society.



For your reflection:

1. Share a time when you realized God was working through you.
2. What partnerships do you have or can you connect with to expand God's work where you are?
3. How can your church prepare itself to address felt needs in your immediate community?

8. God's Got Your Back

Rev. Collette Broady-Grund
Formerly of Connections Shelter
Mankato, Minn.

Jesus has already done it.

It was a Tuesday morning before our monthly board meeting, and I'd arrived at Connections Shelter to find that one of our families had again used abusive language toward staff, the fifth time in as many days. They had been warned that they had only one more chance, but I really didn't want to be the one to say they were losing their shelter and would have to go back to sleeping in their car while they looked for an apartment. While I waited for calls back from the school social worker and staff members who'd borne the brunt of their insults, I looked at the staffing schedule and realized that we were once again short a weekend overnight person, and that the person we'd hired had sent an email saying she couldn't start until the next weekend.

Again, a flurry of texts and calls went out to see who could cover the shift, and I turned to the financial reports for our board meeting. We were \$12,000 behind in our giving, compared to the previous year. Just as I finished lamenting this with my colleague, Pastor Erica, my phone rang.

"Your son just threw up at school. You've got to come pick him up."

Breathing out a tear-filled sigh, I said to Pastor Erica, "I'm going to get him settled in at home, and then I'll be back so we can figure out how to face this garbage pile."

All the way to the middle school, I prayed. As I tucked my son into his bed with water and his iPad, I prayed. As I waited in the Arby's drive-through, I prayed. "Jesus, we just can't. It's too much. You've got to fix it."

Armed with curly fries and caffeinated beverages, I walked back into our shelter office, ready to battle our circumstances. Before we could even start eating to fuel up, the phone rang.

"We got an apartment!" our beloved and challenging family crowed. "And we are coming to the shelter to get our stuff because we can move in today!" It was the middle of the month, and they were using rental assistance. Those of you who know public housing know how impossible this scenario should have been. Erica set down the phone, and we just stared at each other open-mouthed. Thank you, Jesus.

While we were still awestruck at this housing miracle, my phone buzzed. It was a text from our newly hired staff person: "I can actually start this weekend. Can I come in for training tomorrow?" Absolutely. Yes, please. Again, thank you, Jesus.

With two problems solved and my son still doing fine in his bed at home, I said, "OK, let's check the mail and see if maybe we can get a few more checks to make our financial picture look less bleak."

When I got downstairs to the mailbox, it was jammed so full, it took pulling and wiggling to get the whole pile out.

Every single envelope contained a check.

As I opened the letters, I added up the check amounts on my phone. When I was done, I was unable to speak and held up the phone for Erica to see: \$12,200. Just a little more than the amount we'd been behind that morning.

As we laughed and cried and breathed in a bit of new life, we realized that every one of these miracles, which had come to us within an hour, had been in the works for days previous. Before we'd ever prayed those desperate prayers, Jesus was at work on what only he knew we'd need. While we were still thinking that maybe we had this all together, Jesus was putting together a rescue plan that would be ready when everything fell apart.

"OK, Jesus," we prayed with laughter, "we get it. You've already got this. You've already done it. We will try to trust you better tomorrow."

Ruben's Reflection

Now to [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. —Ephesians 3:20-21

"Jesus, we just can't. It's too much. You've got to fix it." This is the prayer of a mission developer facing a tough day, filled with challenges at work and at home. Mission work is messy. No matter how well one plans or how confident one feels, unpredictable events will always happen and will hit you hard. This is true especially in the context of ministry among vulnerable communities. Crises are more frequent than sporadic.

In my work of training mission developers, being sent to start new communities of faith in many diverse settings, I always find a way to remind them: "Mission is messy, but the mission is God's. You can't do this on your own. I don't care how smart you are, how strong you are, how much money you already have or how charming you are. You can't do this on your own power! Let me save you about four to six months of wondering until you fall flat and you might consider quitting this enterprise. This is a God thing. God is God — that means you are not. You are being sent to a unique part of the world to serve, but you are not the messiah. We already have one, thank you. God's gonna do what God's gonna do, with or without you. The blessing for you is that you have been called to be part of God's team for this initiative; you will get to witness how God works, how God provides. You will experience firsthand how God turns things around to accomplish the work of the reign of God. You will be right in the middle of it. Together with God, you will do what seems impossible in human terms and in human power. You've got the best job in the world!"

The writer of the book of Proverbs also urges us to "trust in the Lord with all you heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge [God], and [God] will make straight your

paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6). Such wisdom! It’s one thing to recommend it or talk about it but another thing to actually experience those highly stressing and agonizing moments when we realize that the matters in front of us are way beyond our power or control. That’s where the prayers, such as Collette’s, come in. God, where are you? Jesus, don’t you care? We are drowning here. It’s too much. Do something!

After similar prayers, I still don’t know who wrote me a check for \$800 years ago so that I could pay my debt and graduate from college in Seattle, Wash., only 48 hours before graduation, just in time so that my name could be added to the list. Only a few of my friends knew I was in trouble with this debt. How did this happen? It was a gift of pure grace, so surprising, so liberating, so empowering. All I know is that God works in community and through community. God seems to work through the connections and relationships we generate and nurture, and many times through the gifts and generosity of strangers.

On that Tuesday in Mankato, Minn., within one hour of time, God secured permanent housing for a family, added a new leader to the Connections Shelter ministry, began the healing process for a child, and provided \$12,000 and more to fund the ministry’s operations into its future. This was a typical day for Jesus but an awesome, miraculous experience for Collette and those serving their neighbors through this new ministry start.

The initial prayer continues by saying: “OK, Jesus, we get it. You’ve already got this. You’ve already done it. We will try to trust you better tomorrow.”

Amen.

Violet’s Reflection

Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And [God] said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord,’ and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.” And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” —Exodus 33:18-23

As in many churches, the prayers of the people during our Welcome Church worship are often done in the form of petition with a response. One of my favorite forms of this prayer came from a member of our clergy, Paulie, who had us end each petition with the words “God’s got your back!” For the folks in our community, life on the street often means living in danger. People would pair up at night so one could keep watch while the other got some much-needed rest. Literally, “to have one’s back” meant to protect that person against unseen dangers. Even more than the usual response, asking God to “hear our prayer,” God having our backs meant that God was not just listening but acting on our pleas.

I see this in the story in Exodus where Moses asks to see God’s glory. God instructs Moses to go to a rock where he will be placed in a cleft as the glory of God passes by. Moses won’t see God face to face but only in looking back.

In the story shared by Pastor Collette, things seem to be falling apart. Her story makes me think of that old 1970s commercial for a bath product in which the baby is screaming, the dog is barking, traffic is out of control and the boss is on this poor woman, who suddenly cries out, "Calgon, take me away!" For Pastor Collette, the issues were all too common for those of us working in ministries on the margins — limited funds, limited staff, challenging and frustrated folks, and the stresses of managing our own living situations. But just as we pray on the street and in the same way God was revealed to Moses, God, indeed, had the back of Pastor Collette and the Connections Shelter.

Because most of our worship takes place outside, anything fragile used in worship is bound to break. This has happened multiple times to the lovely pottery bowl that holds our communion. Because it was a gift and sports the word "welcome," we have glued the pieces together more times than I can count. I love that broken and repaired bowl because it is a picture of our brokenness and the God who holds us together with God's own body and blood.

As the great playwright Eugene O'Neill once wrote, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."

Pastor Collette reminds us that, even when we feel shattered into tiny pieces, the grace of God is there, having our backs and holding us together in love.



For your reflection:

1. What in your life and ministry seems to be falling apart? How is that challenging your belief that Jesus has your back?
2. What signs of hope reveal that God's plan is unfolding around you?
3. What little (or big) miracles have been revealed to you this week?

9. Taking the Lead and Making Way for Those Who Follow

**Rev. Dr. David L. Madsen, *Former Pastor*
Welcome Ministry of El Cajon, El Cajon, Calif.**

When Marie laughed, you could hear the joyful noise blocks away. Her language could be rough and loud, but we never underestimated her ability to communicate with people on the street. She had assisted people on the margins since the late 1960s, when she helped people suffering from HIV/AIDS on both sides of the San Diego-Tijuana international border.

I first met Marie one Sunday afternoon in Wells Park in El Cajon, Calif., when the Welcome Church, without walls, gathered for worship. Our church includes people who experience homelessness, our Welcome Church leaders and others who happen to be in the park. At the end of our service, the altar that holds the sacraments of Holy Communion becomes a lunch table. We celebrate a church picnic for all who come — including all attending worshipers and anyone else in the park. We are the Welcome Church, and that means everybody is welcome.

At the Welcome Church we accept the Great Commission of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ holistically — body, soul and spirit. Love is not contingent on things done in the past or things to come. God loves us just the way we are, right now, in this moment. Our fellowship includes encouraging conversation, listening, sharing, praying and offering friendship. It includes helping folks find food, shelter, rehabilitation and medical referrals. It is church in action every day of the week, not just on Sunday.

Marie had heard about the Welcome Church, knew several people we worked with, and offered her assistance. It was not long before we realized what a gift she was to us. Tuesday mornings, the Welcome Church hosts our Loads of Love laundry ministry at a laundromat near Wells Park for people experiencing homelessness. Marie offered to oversee Loads of Love. She knew many unhoused people, among them those who sheltered in their vehicles. Marie often helped them find shelter, medical care and counseling. She also worked with a local animal shelter to distribute organic dog and cat food to the unhoused and had a clever way of introducing herself that led to many meaningful conversations. Her ministry was dubbed “Paws ‘R’ Us.” Marie made her rounds in Wells Park each Monday, distributing free pet food. As she did, she registered anyone for the Loads of Love free laundry the following morning.

One day this past year, Marie called me unexpectedly from a hospital. I couldn’t visit her because of COVID-19 restrictions. She had been diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and given six months to live. Marie wanted to continue with the Loads of Love program as long as she was able, which she did for just four months. After her death, we had an outdoor memorial service for Marie, and people from all over San Diego County came to celebrate her life.

Loads of Love is a success in many ways. The laundromat hired one of the first people Marie met to help oversee the business and keep it clean. In the four months before she died, Marie trained Debbie to replace her. Debbie had been unhoused, a user of Loads of Love since its beginning. Since taking on the mantle of leadership for Loads of Love, Debbie has moved off the street and now lives in an apartment.

The work of sharing the gospel with those on the margins continues, a beautiful story of succession planning.

Ruben's Reflection

Have you ever thought about God being a community in mission? Consider the Holy Trinity as a missional community that is creative, diverse and powerful, yet united in common purpose. As the famous hymn goes, "God in three persons, blessed Trinity." Together since the genesis of all that exists, each contributing from their giftedness and uniqueness, this divine community continues to create and sustain life and to move history into a preferred future according to God's purposes.

A communal view of life and leadership can give us an interesting perspective. Communities ascribe leadership identity and responsibility based on their values and contextual leadership expectations. They don't discourage individual pursuits; on the contrary, people who know each other well nourish each other's leadership traits and become a sounding board for individual pursuits. Each person finds their place in the community. By contrast, societies based on individualistic dynamics tend to fall into competition and cut-throat approaches, blocking the natural flow of leadership from one generation to another.

I live in those two worlds. I've worked in the world of business, where you have to guard against people who won't hesitate to step on anyone just to get ahead. In fact, in this win-lose worldview, people are not as excited to train another person for fear of being let go. The powers that be always prefer a cheaper labor force. I am also part of the Latiné community — in my case, a mix of Inca ancestry and Spanish European invaders. This community has been on the margins of society for centuries and has been able to endure and live through it with faith and hope, tested through time. My community identifies, nourishes, respects and supports its leaders. The authority comes from the values and communal identity, not from other types of credentials. It does take a village to grow a leader grounded in community.

Navigating these two worlds gets tricky. Sometimes it is necessary to keep a footing in each world to stay connected, and to return to your base often, to keep your sanity. If you're not careful, you can easily feel like a fish out of water in both worlds and be considered a traitor to either. To complicate things, in North America, there is a "dominant culture," which at this point in history is represented and led by the power of white supremacy and privilege.

Now comes the struggle of the mainline church in the United States and the Caribbean. In the case of Lutherans, church structure, governance and policy are very much tied to a northern European worldview, which tends to perpetuate white privilege by building walls of separation from ethnic and other diverse and marginal communities that are growing very quickly in this country. How long can this system stay put?

According to a demographic study from the Pew Foundation, the year 2011 was the "tipping point." For the first time in the history of this country, the percentage of babies born who were nonwhite passed the 50% threshold. It has only continued to grow ever since. You can see its effect in the crowded and diverse schools all over. One can also see multiple attempts to preserve the status quo

in all aspects of society and to keep the dominant culture dominant at all costs. It is no surprise, then, that including diverse communities in institutions and organizations continues to be a challenge because of the resistance to changing policies and procedures. Many see this change as losing power rather than sharing it, and others cannot get out of their win-lose mentality.

I believe that the future of the Lutheran church in this country lies in tearing down the walls that separate it from the marginal communities in society. Being present, listening, learning, serving and building lasting relationships can set the stage for creative ways to be church together. There is a new generation of communities of faith emerging on the margins. I invite you to connect and accompany them with prayer and support.

Pastor David Madsen tells us how naturally the succession of leadership takes place when it is done in community. Along with that, in many settings such as the Welcome Church in El Cajon, Calif., new and diverse generations are engaging and participating, not because they are looking for a church to join but because they are looking to participate in a cause and, on that journey, to reflect on the presence of the divine.

How about multiplying that dynamic everywhere!

Violet's Reflection

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. —Matthew 28:19-20

Not long ago I attended a workshop on succession planning for those of us who had created our own nonprofits. The challenge wasn't so much in finding others to fill a position; rather, it was in finding leaders who might carry on the heart and soul of what we had created while doing it using their own unique talents and gifts. For me, it was important that whoever followed me in my various positions would work toward economic and racial justice and be as inclusive and welcoming in all ways possible. These are the qualities I would be looking for in a successor even more so than the degrees or certificates they held.

I never thought of Jesus as a succession planner until I read the story from Pastor Dave in El Cajon. It made me wonder what qualities Jesus was looking for when he gave us the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations." My guess is that Jesus was looking for us to be someone like Marie, walking for decades with people on the margins, including folks with HIV/AIDS who were once deemed "untouchable." Marie made no distinction between who could and couldn't receive love; the border between San Diego and Tijuana meant nothing to her. It was natural that she would host a laundry ministry called "Loads of Love." Marie had loads of love to give and also to receive. When it came time for Marie to pass on her leadership role at Loads of Love, it was fitting that her trainee was one of the first users of the program. Marie had the eyes to see in Debbie what so many had overlooked, and this changed Debbie's life.

What things does Jesus want us to pass on to “all nations”? The word “disciple” means “student.” As students of Jesus, what do we learn?

I have been a mission developer, walking with folks who are unhoused and pushed to the margins in so many ways. It is in this community where the voice of my Teacher has come through the loudest. I have been given the gift of the blanket a woman used on the street to keep herself warm; I have watched another woman sit with a dying mouse in the corner of a church so that the mouse would not have to die alone; and I have been offered hospitality under a bridge where one man slept and eventually lost his life. Such compassion, love and hope amid suffering has been one of the most powerful testimonies to me of God’s presence.

I used to think that the Great Commission in Matthew 28 involved handing out tracts or making sure all those “pagan babies” that we learned about in the late 1950s were sprinkled with the waters of baptism. But now I believe that “making disciples of all nations” really means spreading the love, compassion and hope that Jesus showed us in his life and death.

Though I have always been an “A” student, striving to do my best academically, I am, at most, a “C” student when it comes to following Jesus, but I am eager to learn and to share what I learn with others.

Thank you, Marie, and all others who continue to be our teachers on the margins.



For your reflection:

1. Who is a leader you admire, and how have they influenced you?
2. When you look for a leader to replace another leader (or yourself) in succession planning, what characteristics should you look for?
3. What new ministry would you like to see in your church, and how would you go about doing it?

10. Bless the Children

Rev. Mary Martha Kannass, *Pastor*
Hephatha Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wis.
Story by Marie Edel Baptiste with Mary Martha Kannass

My name is Marie Edel Baptiste. I am always joined by my son, Teddy, who is a fervent little servant of God. We became part of Hephatha Lutheran Church two years ago, and it has been the best decision we have taken in our lives.

It has been an honor to serve God at Hephatha in different ministries. However, today I am here to share my experience with the “Friends of Jesus” work ministry. This ministry started 30 years ago with youth from different backgrounds. What a blessing!

In a zip code that is so troubled, keeping our kids safe and occupied is our biggest priority, but occupying them with serving God is a plus for us parents. This is one reason I got involved in this ministry as a committed adult.

Every summer, we experience another level of love through that ministry where we have our kids grow more in faith and sow their seeds in God’s kingdom. One thing I’ve learned is that a person is never too young to serve God or to plant seeds for the harvest later in life. As committed adults joined by others, we help the kids to share their faith. For instance, Angelique is not afraid to share her thoughts on the Bible reading. Skie is able to pray for the homeless. Zion shares the gospel through his drawing. Teddy is not of age to attend yet, but he is there with me and able to color pictures and share his thoughts on Jesus. Lily, with a broken arm, is able to color her cards. At the end of the week, we have our peacemaker, which encourages the kids to give their all and live by example.

Another important part of the work ministry is to help and beautify our communities. We gather in groups to clean our streets, pick up trash and encourage others to do the same. Furthermore, we call the seniors to chat with them, pray with them. I had the experience of calling Ms. Denzela with my team one day, and it was such a joy to talk to her. She was so excited to know that the other church members think of her. Some of our seniors are not able to go anywhere due to the pandemic. Just a phone call gives them the hope and encouragement they need to push forward.

At the end of most of the sessions, we get our worksheets and do some artwork for an older member’s birthday, a get-well card, a message of thanksgiving or a God-bless-you card. I never imagined that, at my age, I would be coloring cards or that those cards would have an impact on someone else’s life. It’s a way of serving and caring as Jesus teaches us in the Bible. At the end of the program, each kid gets a gift card for school supplies. They happily give tithes that benefit our mission partner, Tanzania. What a way to prove God is good!

The Friends of Jesus work ministry helps me to grow more in faith and to trust in God’s promises. I’ve learned that there is no age limit to serving the Lord and that it’s never too early to start instilling God’s word in kids, because children today will be adults tomorrow. Any day in the company of these children is a blessed day.

Violet's Reflection

People were bringing children to [Jesus] in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." —Mark 10:13-15

In my early days as a child therapist, I sat with a little one who had experienced more trauma in her six short years on this earth than most of us will experience in a lifetime. Up to that point, Leah had been very quiet and wasn't interested in playing with any of the toys I had in my office. Most of those early weeks of getting to know each other, we would just sit together, with Leah offering very few words.

One day, Leah came in and went to the art supplies that I had set up in one corner. She took some paper and crayons and began to draw a picture of the earth, being careful to color in with blues and greens and browns. I asked her if there was a story that went with her drawing. Leah looked at me, took the drawing and tore the paper into many pieces. As difficult as this was to watch, I knew it was the beginning of what would eventually lead to healing. I saved the pieces in a folder with her name on it, which she helped decorate.

Healing took many months, and Leah's art collection grew into several folders. One day, Leah asked to see her drawings. When she saw the pieces from that first drawing, she scattered them on the rug. She went over to my desk, took my tape dispenser and, using almost a whole roll of tape, began to tape the earth back together. Soon there was a new piece of art — a world that had been visibly broken but nevertheless held together.

I often think of Leah's taped-up world, especially in these past years of pandemic and political unrest. This child who had known so much suffering gave me a sustaining image of hope and the power of God's grace to hold us together even amid brokenness and fear.

What strikes me most about the story of children's ministry at Hephatha Lutheran Church in Milwaukee is the recognizing and receiving of the gifts our young people have to offer. When we speak of those on the margins, we forget that children are often on the margins of the margins. But Jesus did not forget, even when his own disciples saw them as a nuisance when they were brought to him to be touched. Good news from the margins means being open to the good news our children have to offer.

I had the opportunity to visit Pastor Mary Martha and all the saints of Hephatha Lutheran Church. The children were not an "added-on" part of the congregation but an integral part of communicating the good news of Jesus. As Marie Edel Baptiste shared in her story, "The Friend of Jesus work ministry helps me to grow more in faith and to trust in God's promises ... [T]here is no age limit to serving the Lord." As Jesus concluded, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Ruben's Reflection

Did you notice the number 30 in this story? For 30 years and more, Pastor Mary Martha Kannass and the leadership at Hephatha Lutheran Church have lifted up the ministry of children and youth through the Friends of Jesus work ministry. This is not a small thing. Leaders such as Marie Edel Baptiste and her son, Teddy, are now at the front of the community, steering the ministry with gifted children and seeking the maximum impact their efforts can have to bless their neighborhood.

Hephatha Lutheran Church is a faith community constantly being renewed by the faith of its youth, and that new energy equips the church to be a change agent in the public arena, in its zip code and throughout the city of Milwaukee. Let me tell you how it is impacting others, even at a national level.

Deanna Branch and her son Aidan were also members of Hephatha Lutheran Church. Aidan became very sick from lead poisoning that afflicts this zip code and many other urban areas in the country. Aidan was hospitalized in critical condition, but with able medical help he began to show signs of recovery. Deanna, a leader in the community, is part of a communal organization promoting public awareness to fight this dangerous lead poisoning.

Two interesting things happened almost at the same time. Aidan began to create a figure he called "the Lead-Free Superhero" and soon added drawings of this hero defeating the lead monster and helping people afflicted with this poison. Deanna was impressed and begun to turn Aidan's thoughts and drawings into a narrative. Soon it became a story that kept them hopeful while Aidan was restored to full healing.

Soon afterward, Vice President Kamala Harris came to Milwaukee to introduce a government initiative to eradicate lead poisoning in urban America. Deanna was invited to that gathering and was able to tell Harris about her son's situation and his drawings of the Lead-Free Superhero. The vice president was so touched by Aidan's courage and creativity that she encouraged Deanna to make a book out of Aidan's pictures and thoughts. "When you have the book ready," she said, "let me know, for I am inviting you and your son to the White House in Washington, D.C., to share your book with President Joe Biden and other leaders supporting this lead-free initiative."

Wow! Just like that, the faith and courage of a child from Hephatha Lutheran, an ELCA congregation, was about to impact our whole nation. We wasted no time. Pastor Mary Martha Kannass connected with Rebeca Malmgren, ELCA coordinator for economic justice, and two people from the ELCA Milwaukee Area Synod: the Rev. Matthew Short, director for evangelical mission, and Bishop Paul Erickson. Together they got the book published, and Deanna and Aidan traveled to Washington, D.C., on time to attend President Biden's State of the Union speech. In August 2024, Deanna was invited to speak at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where Harris accepted the party's nomination for president of the United States.

Marie Edel Baptiste, Teddy, Deanna, Aidan and Pastor Mary, thank you for your witness to the gospel.



For your reflection:

1. How does your congregation welcome children? How are they integrated into the life of your community?
2. Can you name a way in which a child has impacted your life? Try to share a specific story, if possible.
3. What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God as a little child?

11. Growing Sequoias

Rev. Mike Hanck, *Pastor*
Salem Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio

In the Wendell Berry poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” there is a line about investing in the millennium, followed by a line that urges us to plant sequoias. Not only are sequoias the most massive trees on earth, but the oldest known specimen is said to be over 3,000 years old. Only God ever witnesses the entire lifespan of a sequoia. I love these lines from Berry’s poem because they integrally connect with the work of Salem and similar congregations.

Arriving at Salem, I noticed that children and teenagers were roaming around the neighborhood and looking for something to do. In that early phase of being here, I found myself connecting with them and their families and thinking of what might be meaningfully done. Over a number of years, I and many others have explored various vocations and activities, meeting new people, asking questions and exploring new places. We are ever becoming enraptured by God’s massive and beautiful world and all that is in it.

Closer to the heart, we have watched children become teenagers and teenagers become young adults. “I was there the day,” as one hymn goes. In each successive verse and each successive year, we move to another stage of life. I think about how this one young man, standing before me today talking about his job at Amazon that one of our friends guided him toward, was once that relatively shy 12-year-old student. I remember how, in his teenage years, he grew and learned life lessons. I see him taking root and growing. I pray that his life will be like that of a sequoia. I wish for him to be strong, to be well-grounded and to live a long and meaningful life, which is what God, as first one, wishes for human beings. I believe, in good faith, that this young man will have that life. But he is not alone. There are many people and stories that swirl around us in this neighborhood, and because of our unique place and unique work within it, with an emphasis on knowing people and not just providing commodities alone, we witness something beautiful, something akin to the growth of a mighty forest, good for people and good for the world.

In the early years here, I once had someone stop me in the street to pray with them. I was very pleased because this was the first time that had happened. Immediately after the prayer, the person said, “Now, I need some toilet paper ...,” etc., etc., “because that is your job.” Little did they know! Years later, though we did pass out things such as toilet paper during the pandemic, I find myself praying with people not to afford them an opportunity to request commodities but because we know each other and there is some solace in our coming together before God. That’s where I really want to be.

Violet’s Reflection

We learn so much from trees! In Pastor Mike’s story and in the Wendell Berry poem to which he refers, trees become a symbol of hope for the future — indeed, a hope that there will *be* a future for this fragile, mysterious planet on which we live. But trees, and especially the sequoias, teach us so much more. It is from trees that we learn how we must live in order to survive.

I remember visiting California and standing next to a giant sequoia for the very first time. My 5-foot-5 frame was almost lost as I stood next to this majestic tree that soared over 250 feet into the air. Standing there, I assumed that a tree so large must have roots that dug deep into the ground. But I was wrong. Each tree's roots grow to be only 4 feet long!

You will never see a single sequoia growing alone; this beautiful tree grows only in groves. This is because its fairly short roots intertwine with others. Woven together, these roots support one another, allowing the trees to strengthen and grow.

Our congregation has a favorite gospel song by Hezekiah Walker called "I Need You to Survive." The song starts out with the words "I need you, you need me, we're all a part of God's body." The song continues, "It is His will that every need be supplied ... you are important to me, I need you to survive."

This concept of interdependence is even recognized in our sacred Scriptures. "Loving our neighbor as ourselves," "welcoming the stranger" and "caring for the least of these" are more than kind acts; this way of living and loving is a prescription for survival. It is the response to having been given the gift of life and love by a gracious God. Paul likes to talk about this in terms of our one body. "If one member suffers," he writes, "all suffer together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). But the verse goes on to say, "if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

People in the business world talk about succession planning, a way to be intentional about how to keep things going when we are not around. Pastor Mike reminds us that our only hope of real succession is to come together with God at the center. As with the sequoias, it's our interconnectedness, rooted in God, that will give us strength and hope for the future.

Ruben's Reflection

I appreciate Pastor Mike's interesting connection between the life of a tree, the life of an individual and the life of a faith community in terms of a long-view perspective needed to fulfill that community's purpose and generate a hopeful ecology for coming generations.

What about a tree motif for a couple uniting their lives in matrimony? Here are the words of the psalmist:

"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (Psalm 1:1-3).

Jean and I chose to use the tree image of Psalm 1 to describe our commitment to each other, to God and to our neighbors. We are so thankful to God for the gifts of love, forgiveness, patience and hope, and for creating in us the constant desire to stay rooted and nurtured in the waters of our baptism. God has always given us the gift of community to encourage us on our journey. God used the people at Angelica Lutheran in Los Angeles, Calif.; Mt. Si Lutheran in North Bend, Wash.; St. John's

Lutheran in Oakland, Calif.; St. Luke's Lutheran in Huntington Park, Calif.; Lutheran Church of the Master in Carol Stream, Ill.; Living Lord Lutheran in Bartlett, Ill.; Bethlehem Lutheran in St. Charles, Ill. and Zion Lutheran in Chicago to support us and surround us with love and purpose. Even though these communities are in different places, together they have witnessed God's work in our lives as a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in its season and experiencing life sufficiency in community.

Jean and I are celebrating 44 years of marriage now. We might not qualify as a sequoia tree, but we are nonetheless a healthy tree, yielding fruit and enjoying the companionship of three daughters and now five grandkids. It's a joy to invest ourselves in the next generation and witness the planting of a new life cycle. We pray that their lives will be like that of a sequoia tree, just as Pastor Mike and the people of Salem Lutheran Church pray for all children, all young adults and all under their care.

Not so long ago, I was given a poster from Mexico entitled *"Consejos de un Arbol, Life Advice from a Tree."* "Stand straight and proud," it reads, "remember your roots, drink a lot of water, be happy with your own natural beauty, breathe fresh air and enjoy the beautiful scenery around you." I can visualize Pastor Mike and the people of Salem walking around in their church and neighborhood day after day, year after year, listening, caring, embracing and telling kids to be like a tree, a sequoia tree, planted by streams of water. Why? Because a community of sequoia people can create the world God intended, a world where all can experience love, grace, hope, equity and justice.



For your reflection:

1. For what purpose, year after year, do we shoulder the work of setting budgets and organizing and running our faith communities?
2. What are the real reasons for the ministries in which we engage? Why do we do them? Be frighteningly honest with yourself.
3. How do you "plant sequoias"? What is the "long view" of the work you are doing today? Why does it matter to you? Why does it matter to God? Why does it matter to other people?

12. Precious, Protected, and Beloved

Rev. Elazar Zavaletta, *Pastor*
Good Trouble Church, Baltimore, Md. (formerly North Ave Mission)

On the day of my ordination, we all gathered at the outdoor lot in central Baltimore where we worship. It was dusty, and you could see the bright colors of beautiful graffiti catch the sun. We processed in from the gas station across the street, with the children leading. Guardian K and her son E carried a new cross we had been gifted by a partner congregation. Our altar was set — today was to be the day we would celebrate the sacrament of communion together for the first time. On the altar sat some sage I had brought from my time of fasting and praying in the Colorado mountains, a candle, African fabric, grape juice and challah. I knew challah was the right bread. It not only connected us to our Jewish ancestors but tasted a lot like the packaged Hawaiian rolls people in our community love. Our baptismal font was there too — a giant rubber tub, big enough for a large adult to stand in. It had been christened the year before, when Ms. T was baptized on this same spot.

This wasn't only my ordination day. It would also be a very special day for North Ave Mission (NAM), the new grassroots community of unhoused people, formerly unhoused people, food-and-housing-insecure people and people who use drugs, which came into being in Baltimore during the pandemic. We call ourselves "Christ-rooted and faith-expansive." On that day, the leaders of North Ave Mission would also be consecrated and anointed to their ministries as deacons, shepherds, evangelists, guardians and elders. Our Scripture for the day was the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39), which spoke so clearly not only to me, a trans person, but to us — a community of people marginalized and left out of church — of how God was present with us in such a mighty way. We were affirming that we don't need to be let inside. We have found God out here.

The service continued, and even though we were nervous — the whole lot was filled with people, and both I and the leaders of NAM participated in the whole service, with our bishop presiding over the rite — we felt the whispers of the Holy Spirit as we sang "We've Come This Far by Faith" and "Thank You Lord." At the end, the children of the congregation, several of whom are unhoused, came up to the front with me and raised their hands, and we bestowed a benediction upon the assembly together. After the applause and a group photo, people went over to the other side of the lot to enjoy the reception. I'm so glad that, in that moment, I caught the eye of J, one of the older kids. He was standing next to the font, holding on to his little brother, and motioned for me to come to him. J pointed down at the water and asked, "Is that Holy Ghost water?" I said, "Yes, it is." Then he said, "I want a blessing!" I knelt down, cupped some of the water in my hand and poured it over his head, saying, "Child of God, you are precious, protected and beloved." With a smile on his face, he said, "My brother wants one, too." I joyfully continued with his little brother: "Child of God, you are precious and protected and beloved."

Violet's Reflection

Several years ago, my 10-year-old grandson commented on how many insurance commercials there were on TV. I never thought about this, but I soon noticed that he was right. Usually, along with the numerous commercials advertising different pharmaceuticals, there were ads for insurance companies telling us that we would be “in good hands” with them, that when things went wrong they could “make life go right” or that they were there for us “like a good neighbor.” There is even one commercial that plays the beloved “Silent Night” in the background, assuring us that if we go with them, we will “sleep in heavenly peace”! There is no doubt that, in this world of danger and unpredictability, we long for safety and protection.

For unhoused folks living on the street, life is especially dangerous. Whenever we leave one another, we rarely say good-bye but rather “stay safe.” At night, folks will often pair up so that while one sleeps, the other might keep watch. Over the years, folks have shared many stories with me of backpacks, wallets and even shoes being taken while they slept. Even for folks who have houses, night can be a time of vulnerability and unrest. I know that folks in hospitals have an especially difficult time sleeping, some of them fearing that they might not wake up.

But just as those living on the street pair up for safety, we have the promise of a God who, as the psalmist reminds us, “neither slumber[s] nor sleep[s]” (Psalm 121:4). A painting over the bed in our guest room depicts Jesus holding someone in his arms and proclaims, “Night holds no fear for me safe in my Savior’s arms.”

Pastor Elazar’s story of his ordination and the children’s blessing that followed speaks of the protection only God can give. This protection comes despite the fear, because we are precious and loved by a lover from whom we can never be separated. Commercial insurance companies might offer alarm systems or cash to compensate for lost property, but they can never offer the relationship that God extends to each one of us. This is what the children in Pastor Elazar’s story saw when they asked about “Holy Ghost” water — not water that was magical but water that tied them to the God who stood with them on the margins as Pastor Elazar made his ordination vows.

Ruben's Reflection

God shows up.

God showed up in real presence, to bless young children, to install older children into leadership and to ordain another child of God into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. An extraordinary day, an extraordinary, blessed experience, an extraordinary divine presence becoming a reality through the ordinary means of bread, wine and water.

God shows up.

God showed up among the people living on the margins, affirming their value and human dignity in God’s eyes. Society ignores them and puts them down, but God lifts them up and grants them leadership in this emerging community of faith on North Avenue in Baltimore.

God shows up.

God showed up to confirm the call and ordination of Pastor Elazar to shepherd this growing community, promoting a dialogue between the voices of people and the voice of God, assuring people that God walks with them and accompanies each of them in all the joys and struggles of life.

God shows up.

God showed up in a moment of pure grace. A child called J, feeling the weight of a hard life and responsibility for his younger brother, and looking at the baptismal font filled with water, expressed his deep need for a blessing. Through Pastor Elazar's quick invitational reaction, God troubled the water and both children received pure grace, love and release from whatever they were going through. What a moment of grace and healing, of hope and belonging.

God shows up.

The longings of marginalized people and their cries for life with dignity and justice are never ignored by God, who is known to say, "I have observed the misery of my people" (Exodus 3:7). God shows up, always, especially when society and the institutional church ignore their cries. Father Gustavo Gutierrez, while serving among marginalized and neglected people in Lima, Peru, experienced the real and radical presence of God in the community on a daily basis. His reading of Scripture among the people led him to conclude that God has a preferential option for the poor in the world and that, standing alongside those who face oppressive systems, God invites all to experience a liberation that only God can give. It is a gift of true freedom, freedom from sin, death and the evil one, and freedom to love our neighbor and seek their well-being.

God shows up.

God showed up among the people being oppressed and enslaved in Egypt and led them through the Exodus journey into a better future. God showed up also among the disciples filled with fear, disappointment and sadness on the road to Emmaus, restoring them to a hopeful reality based on the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

God shows up.

Good Trouble Church (North Ave Mission) is an instrument in God's hands, bringing people together to receive God's grace and hope and to experience a community of freedom, justice and love. Extraordinary things will happen on any ordinary day because our extraordinary God shows up. Every day is filled with grace.

Will you show up?

The invitation is for you to participate in and support Good Trouble Church or a similar ministry where you live. God is already out there. Your passion and gifts are needed now.



For your reflection:

1. What would a day filled with grace look like in your life? How does God show up in your midst?
2. What things keep the church in bondage? Where is liberation needed? What can be done now?
3. How can the church be renewed through the faith and witness of people on the margins?

13. Accompaniment

**Rev. Linda Manson, *Director for Evangelical Mission*
ELCA Southeastern Synod
Former Mission Developer
LIFE Ministry**

I am offering two examples to convey why the ministry of accompaniment is so important for our brothers and sisters who return to our communities after a period of incarceration.

One morning, I received a call from a young man who had been a participant in LIFE Ministry off and on for two years. He told me that he had been using drugs and was ready to get help but did not know what to do. We agreed to meet at the ministry office an hour later.

When he arrived at the office, it was clear that he had been using even though he said that he had not used anything for two days. At any rate, we talked for about 30 minutes about what treatment might look like and the challenges he would be facing as someone with an addiction and a criminal past. Despite being high, he affirmed again and again that he was ready to get clean and discover what a life without drugs could be like for him. After making some calls, I found a place that would give him an immediate assessment and intake for inpatient treatment. I accompanied him to the center for his assessment, and he received the help that he so desperately wanted and needed. He called the ministry frequently to let us know how he was progressing with his treatment. After three months of inpatient care, he went to a recovery house and continued to work with us at LIFE to find employment. He quickly found gainful employment and today, 10 years later, he has become a manager at that same workplace.

Another story: I had a young man in my office who had recently been released from 22 years of incarceration. His offense was not a violent one. There are many more things that I could say about him, and they are all positive. However, a very brief exchange during that meeting broke my heart and affirmed the ministry we do at LIFE.

We were talking, and I saw a puzzled look cross his face. I asked if he was OK or if I had said something he didn't understand. He looked at the fan in my office (an oscillating tower fan). Then he looked at me and asked, "Is that a fan?" I said yes. Then he said, "How do they expect me to make it out here when everything I used to know doesn't exist anymore?" He did make it, but it took him many months just to feel a little comfortable in this new world he was trying to navigate.

I share these stories as examples of what happened repeatedly at LIFE Ministry. We began corresponding with these young men while they were still incarcerated. We assisted them with their prerelease planning, and we welcomed them at LIFE once they were back in our community. This ministry was one of the few places they could depend on being a safe space. They knew that they would be treated with dignity and respect and that we would do our best to get them the help they needed and desired. Because of the relationships we've had and the trust fostered through those relationships, these young men have remained in our community and are supporting others on their journeys.

Violet's Reflection

Blessing the Dust
For Ash Wednesday

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—

did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

These opening lines from the poem “Blessing the Dust” in Jan Richardson’s *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* were first introduced to me by the Rev. Linda Manson, founder and developer of LIFE Ministry. Pastor Manson read these words during our Ash Wednesday service, held in the train station where many unhoused folks took shelter on that chilly winter day. For folks living on the margins and often being treated like dirt, the feeling that they are dirt is hard to counter. This includes folks coming out of incarceration, where our criminal justice system has often treated people without the compassion, dignity and respect each child of God is due.

LIFE Ministry offers accompaniment and hope to those whose humanity has been stripped away by the criminal justice(?) system. I remember one time being on a trip shortly after I had torn cartilage in my knee. I was forced to walk slowly, dragging my bad leg (and everyone else) behind me. I felt as if I were holding everyone up and encouraged the group I was with to move on without me, but there was one man who stayed to walk with me even though I slowed him down. He rode the elevator with me when I needed it, and his pace mirrored my own. I truly felt and appreciated his presence alongside me.

In Pastor Manson’s stories we see what accompaniment looks like — walking with one person as he took that first step to recovery and stepping back to join the pace of another whose lengthy incarceration left him confused by even the technology of a tower fan.

Richardson's poem ends with these words:

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world is made.

Let each of us be the one to proclaim what God can do; let each of us be the one to hear and rejoice in the wonders of what God can do as we walk together with God.

Ruben's Reflection

There is power in community. The networking and collaborative spirit of committed leaders caring and aiming at the full restoration of people's humanity and dignity is an effective antidote to the isolating and dehumanizing dynamics at work in society, especially for people returning from a period of incarceration.

Two lives were fully restored thanks to Pastor Linda's efforts to surround them with a caring community of people and gifted professionals. Without a supportive network, these two and many others would not be able to experience full restoration of their lives.

I am a witness to a similar approach that takes place in Mandan, N.D., in connection with the Heart River Correctional Center. A growing concern has been the high number of youths getting in trouble again after they have left the facility, primarily due to the lack of support systems for them and their families. Many end up returning to the correctional center.

A unique feature of this story is that a community of faith in Mandan, Heart River Lutheran Church, is able to worship in the chapel of the North Dakota Youth Correctional Center that serves people inside and outside the facility every week. The Rev. Renee Splichal Larson was called to serve this church and to be a mission developer, exploring ways to generate holistic ministry in the area. She worked on strengthening the partnership between the Lutheran Church and the North Dakota Division of Juvenile Services, connecting with other churches in the synod to provide basic needs and with college students from a nearby college to engage in youth-with-youth peer mentoring.

The church was packed when I got to visit, with more and more young people wanting to start a new life back in society. But the challenges of reentry remained, so Pastor Renee partnered with the ELCA and other civic organizations to create a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation called Heart River Bridges of Hope, an outreach and reentry ministry to serve and provide resources for youths and their families after they left the correctional facilities. Trusting and believing that God heals and creates new life, this community of care aimed at accompanying and empowering youth toward a future with hope. This caring community ensures that each youth counts on a mentor to stay connected to their goals. The Rev. Gail Hagerty now leads both the church inside and the Bridges of Hope center outside the correctional facilities. Pastor Renee now serves as associate to the bishop in the ELCA South Dakota Synod.

There is power in communal approaches that promote wholeness and well-being in people as they reenter society and try to restart their lives with dignity and integrity. Pastor Linda created a network of caring people sharing their expertise, gifts and connections to accompany and surround people in the name of God. She now uses the same communal spirit and practice in her new role as assistant to the bishop and director for evangelical mission in the ELCA Southeastern Synod.



For your reflection:

1. Share a picture of accompaniment in your own context.
2. What is your experience with the criminal justice system? How might it be improved?
3. Have you ever felt like dirt? How do you think God sees you?

14. Changed

Waverly Alston The Welcome Church, Philadelphia

On this particular cold fall day, I was in the sanctuary of the Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion, preparing to rehearse music for an upcoming worship service. On that day the strangest thing happened to let me know that I was where God had called me to be. My rehearsal was with the Welcome Church Choir. The Welcome Church is a church with no walls that serves Philadelphians who experience homelessness.

That day was a little frustrating because I didn't know what music I was going to prepare for the upcoming worship service. It was my third month volunteering to work with the choir, and though I had been teaching traditional choirs for about 20 years, serving the Welcome Church community had its own set of challenges. Consistency and sometimes a lack of focus are issues that plague our Welcome Church community as well as many others. Even with all the challenges, some significant people impacted my life. Darren was one of those people who made a true impact on me.

During that rehearsal day, Darren asked for a specific song, Michael W. Smith's "Let It Rain." I told him no. For those who do not know, the Welcome Church is a church that meets 12 months throughout the year, *outside*. Whenever we would sing "Let It Rain," God would answer our prayer, literally. Yes, when we sing that song, it rains! Darren then said something to me that would forever change my life: "This song helps me sleep at night."

When you know Darren's story, it adds perspective. Darren lived under the 30th Street bridge in Philadelphia and was battling an addiction. He was HIV-positive and had lost several toes to frostbite and neuropathy. Darren kept coming to rehearsal. One day, after I had visited him in the hospital, he said to me, "I want my life back. I want to stop living on the street." And Darren did just that.

Turning himself in to authorities, he got clean and found a stable living arrangement. Darren's transformation made me see that once God gets hold of you, there's no limit to what he can do through you. Yes, Darren struggled with his demons, and the very bridge that he left was the very bridge under which he was killed.

Darren's story inspired me to push past my own personal fears and struggles of not being enough and to become what I could be through God's healing. Darren's story ignited me to allow God to heal me as well. My feelings of abandonment, low self-worth and past guilt were given to God. God assured me that he could heal me. Ultimately my transitions led to my transformation. My pain made me discover my purpose. My pain from past traumas was hidden in plain sight.

I used to wonder why God would allow me to endure so much pain. Then I realized that God trusted me with it. The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

The very thing that brought a miracle in Darren's life brought change in my life. Darren reminded me that music is a source of healing that can change lives. When God does miracles in your life, you can't keep it to yourself. When you know you've been helped, you can't help but to help others. The Welcome Church and Darren empowered me. Music is no longer a formality — it is threefold. It's a conversation, a healing balm and a weapon.

It's a conversation with God, people and nature.

With God: Music can be a prayer.

With people: Music can be a love that's shared.

With nature: Music can be a reminder from God that the sounds of creation are greater than anything you or I could ever conceive.

Music is a healing balm: It can reach places in our minds, hearts and bodies where no human hand could ever gain access.

Music is a weapon: It has the power to break the yokes of bondage that hold our minds and hearts captive with fear, shame, doubt, hatred and depression.

Courage and creativity have worked hand in hand in my life. My creativity gave me the courage to overcome obstacles that would hinder me from sharing the gifts God gave me. My courage gave me creative ways of sharing my gifts with the people around me.

Violet's Reflection

There is a balm in Gilead, but we also find one under the bridge ...

I know Waverly, and I knew Darren. I say "knew" because, sadly, Darren died under the bridge where he once had lived. We believe that he was murdered, though the police never did follow up with an investigation.

Darren was never "cured" of the addiction that ultimately led him back to living under the bridge after years of recovery and having his own place, but I believe he died a "healed" man. Darren's healing came in the form of knowing he was loved and cared for by his Welcome Church community but also by the God who sits with us under the bridge, even at our lowest moments.

I remember hearing a story told by psychologist Dan Gottlieb. In 1979, Gottlieb had been in a terrible car accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down. During the agonizing weeks and months following the accident, folks would come to cheer him on, anxious to talk about the "light at the end of the tunnel." Folks meant well, but Dr. Gottlieb shared these wise words: "The most difficult and the most generous part of love comes when someone you love suffers. Be with them. When I find myself in a deep, dark place, I want to be with someone who loves me enough to sit there with me, not a cheerleader to tell me there's light at the other end. Sit with me in my helplessness, and then I will feel your love."

Whether it be in the tunnel or under a bridge, these are the words of hope that people of faith can offer with the blessed assurance that comes with the love of God. No matter how impossible the situation, God sits with us as a “light shining in the darkness,” the light that no darkness could ever overcome. Then God tells us, “You, beloved, are the light of the world!” Addicted, broken, sad or afraid, the one who sits with us gives us the power to shine for others. This is what true healing looks like — even when there is no cure!

When a group of mission developers came for a meeting in Philadelphia to learn more about those living on the margins, being unhoused, Darren was the first to offer himself as a teacher and guide through the city. He also offered to be the first to have his feet washed during our Maundy Thursday service, despite his shame over his toes having been amputated due to frostbite while he was living outside.

At Darren’s memorial we lit a single candle. It was enough light for each of us present to see one another as we celebrated his life, enough to let each of us know that God was sitting there with us, even in our grief, offering a balm of healing and love.

Ruben’s Reflection

Brother Waverly is a witness that music can heal and change lives. As choir director at the Welcome Church, he connected with many people in the choir, and the music they sang moved people as they worshiped God on the streets of Philadelphia. But one experience affected him more than any other: Darren’s journey toward transformation and well-being. And it began through an interruption. Waverly was interrupted by Darren requesting a particular song that was meaningful to him. That interruption triggered within Darren the courage to face his own issues with the help of God, a community of support at the Welcome Church and Pastor Violet Little.

Music is a big thing in my family. It brings us together and lets us express our values and inner longings. Even interruptions to music have affected our journeys. Let me share one of those times.

A young man had formed a music team to lead worship at Bethel Evangelical Church in Lima, Peru. One day he was interrupted. The hymn had begun and he was playing the melody on his violin in front of a packed place when suddenly he stopped. He had lost his place in the music. After an apology, he started the hymn all over again. What had happened? What went wrong? He was doing just fine until he noticed a beautiful young woman in the second pew who winked at him! He went bananas, and that caused him to make a mistake.

As it turned out, those two became my parents. So one can say that I am the result of a musical mistake!

When I graduated from Trinity Lutheran College in Seattle (formerly Lutheran Bible Institute), I joined a music team called Kindred, sponsored by the Lutheran Youth Encounter organization in Minneapolis, Minn. Seven young adults were selected to travel for 15 months in Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru, as well as through several states in the U.S. I was chosen to lead the team and be the primary preacher. The team performed more than 500 times in churches, schools, prisons, parks, homes and seminaries, as well as on radio and television.

I met Jean through this musical journey. She was the soprano on our team. I believe the music ministry brought us to envision a life together to serve the world with the proclamation of the gospel and a commitment to pursue justice and equity for all. Music runs through our veins. Our three daughters are professional music educators in churches and public schools. Sara leads children's choirs in a school, Rebeca leads children's choirs and theater productions in a church, and Anna leads children's mariachi bands in a school.

All this began with an interruption, all because of a wink. Lives were changed, transformed and used by God for new purposes. Three generations were impacted by music. One song impacted Darren and helped him sleep at night and be calm. Darren's interruption and witness moved Waverly into the deepest sounds of his soul, longing for healing and a new beginning. Waverly now welcomes the sound of the rain, especially when what comes down is refreshing drops of grace, forgiveness, liberation, healing and hope.



For your reflection:

1. Can you think of a time of deep pain in your life? What was the feeling?
2. What/who helped bring you to a place of healing?
3. Can you name a time when you were a light for others?

15. Enough

Rev. Stephanie Smith, *Pastor* Cathedral in the Night, Northampton, Mass.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus asserts that *who* you are (a person beloved of God) is more important than *what* you are (rich or poor, successful or struggling, powerful or unseen).

Cathedral in the Night (CITN) is an outdoor ministry in downtown Northampton that conducts its services on a public sidewalk to be accessible to all God's beloved, to literally meet people where they are. There are no doors to walk through, no proper clothes to wear.

My family has been involved with CITN off and on, in various ways, for the past 10 years, and our favorite parts are those that subvert the usual idea of belonging, of insider versus outsider. "I like that everyone has a chance to be heard," says Lila, "not just the people in charge."

"It's really important that we have things like tampons, socks, toilet paper and jackets for anybody at the service," says Malie. "Nobody has to explain why they need those things; they're simply there."

Anybody can be part of the service. You simply show up a few minutes early to get a prayer, blessing or welcome, printed on a laminated sheet, to read as part of the service.

"You don't have to worry about what to say or being shy in front of people," Lila explains. "You can just read from wherever you're standing — you don't have to go to the front."

There is a scheduled sermon as a starting point, but it is followed by a time of public response during which the microphone is passed to allow for the message to be enhanced or taken in a different direction. Stories, poems, agreements and digressions — all are welcome.

"For the offering, we don't ask people for money," Malie says. "Instead, we ask them to choose a blessing, like a rock or a shell or a wooden ornament with a word on it, and plant it in a cross filled with sand. It's about how they're feeling."

For me, the best part is when the worship service transitions from communion to actual dinner. Each week, a different organization — usually a church in the area — signs up to provide food, anything from shepherd's pie to lasagna to chili.

The meal is for everyone: the people in the service, the cooks, the servers, the passersby. Just as Jesus ate fish and bread with the crowds, and just as he shared a last meal with his friends, eating together brings us closer to the kingdom of God. "The food is always made with love and is delicious," Malie declares.

Every week at CITN is different. You never know exactly who will show up or what the weather will be like or whether there will be loud motorcycles in the street behind you. But there is always enough. Enough food, enough help, enough love, enough Holy Spirit. That's why we go.

Violet's Reflection

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. —Psalm 23

According to one definition, a cathedral is the center or the chair from which the head sits. What better place is there to find our Creator sitting than “on a public sidewalk ... accessible to all God’s beloved”?

Powerful testimonies are offered in the story of what it is like to be part of the Cathedral in the Night community. Who you are as a child of God is at the center of this cathedral without walls.

I have shared earlier that when asked to provide a biographical sketch for a project, I wrote, “I am a child of God.” The editor replied, “That’s not enough.” Though I know she wanted more details about my personal life (which I subsequently gave her), being a child of God really is enough. Lila, part of Cathedral in the Night, knows this, and when Malie describes how this community offers everything from tampons to toilet paper, we experience the incarnational God who became flesh and really does dwell among us. There is no distinction between the table that serves shepherd’s pie and the one that offers the bread of life; the sacred and the secular merge into one even as the divine and the human became one in Jesus. There is enough because God is enough.

At Cathedral in the Night, there is also the recognition that everyone has something to give. This is shown through the offering of the self, symbolized by rocks, shells or wooden ornaments. Worship becomes a place where seekers become finders of self, one another and God. It is as author Wayne Muller says in his wonderful book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*:

“When we are trapped in seeking, nothing is enough. Everything we have mocks us; we see only what is missing, and all that is already here seems pale and unsatisfying. ... The time for seeking is over; the time for finding has begun.”

Again, in the words of Malie: “There is always enough. Enough food, enough help, enough love, enough Holy Spirit.”

Ruben's Reflection

Jesus spent more time teaching, preaching and healing on the streets and in people’s homes than in formal and elegant sanctuaries. I have nothing against sanctuaries, because they have their purpose, but the aim of Jesus was to meet people where they were, listening to and addressing their life issues head-on, turning every place into holy ground and a street cathedral. Jesus and his followers turned everything into a moving altar where people could find rest for their souls and a community of care.

This is what is happening in Northampton, Mass., at Cathedral in the Night ministry. A busy street becomes an altar, and the worship is the work of the people creating a caring community where everyone is welcomed as they are. Grace and love are made real on this street. It is a place and moment where the spirit of God ministers to all according to their needs.

This community reminds me of another one I had the privilege to visit, years ago in Central America. During the violent and oppressive years of unrest and civil war in El Salvador, many Salvadorans fled

and took refuge across the border, in Nicaragua. Our Lutheran bishop, Medardo Gomez, noticing the trend, assigned one of the pastors to accompany these refugees and find ways to be in ministry with them. The word got out across the border that Pastor Victoria Cortez was trying to bring people together to pray and support each other. In addition to Salvadoran refugees, local Nicaraguans also got interested in seeking God's word in worship.

With no places to gather, the community thought of a unique idea. One family suggested worshipping on the street across from their humble home. They placed their dinner table in front of their house and prepared it for the eucharist. People brought their own chairs, others sat on bricks, but all brought wide-open hearts, yearning to receive a word of hope and healing. Pastor Victoria and a team of lay leaders shared the good news in Jesus and built relationships among the people so there would be ways to hear of the situation back home.

Later, another family offered their home and street to gather, then another and another. By the time I got to visit, the ministry among Salvadoran refugees and Nicaraguans across the border had embraced a model of developing street churches. Eventually many Salvadorans returned to their country, though some stayed. Nicaraguans decided to form the Lutheran Church of Nicaragua and elected Pastor Victoria Cortez as their bishop in an historic event.

Bishop Victoria died recently, and the people expressed gratitude for her leadership, determined to grow and impact more lives with the gospel. The street churches continue even today. Just as in Northampton, Mass., there are many street cathedrals in Nicaragua. Wouldn't it be great if leaders from these two distant places could someday meet and worship together?

I always remind people that some look at the church as a gas station. They come only when they are empty, and they complain about the price. But the church is more like a wellness center where you get to find and develop your spiritual muscles to be the person God wants you to be out in the world, in daily life, on the street, in the public arena.

Thank you, Pastor Stephanie Smith and Bishop Victoria Cortez, for modeling this unique way to be a church in the world.



For your reflection:

1. What is the difference between being a seeker and being a finder?
2. Why do folks come to your faith community? Why don't they?
3. What does the table look like in your place of worship?

16. A Place at the Table

Rev. Mary Wolfe, *Former Pastor* Hope's Table, Reading, Pa.

Everyone has a place at the table at Hope's Table, and everyone contributes to the richness of the community simply by being who they are.

Often, on Tuesday afternoons, John and Kathy arrived early to set up tables and chairs, making sure to place clean tablecloths and centerpieces on each table. After enjoying a hot meal and worship, they would clear the plates, always staying until the last dish was dried and the trash was taken out. One evening, before they returned home to their car, another of our regular guests arrived late. Stanley sometimes joined us with his two sons, but lately he had found work that kept him out until the meal and worship were finished. We had been particularly busy that evening. The few leftovers were already boxed and given away. John didn't miss a beat. He walked to his car and got his container of food and gave it to Stanley to take home to his kids.

Worship at Hope's Table is an interactive affair. While folks finish their meals, we begin singing. Larry, who works as a crossing guard in the neighborhood, is our most enthusiastic song leader. The children love greeting him here as they sing songs such as "This Little Light of Mine," complete with motions. A short piece of Scripture is read, and then we talk about it together.

One Tuesday evening, the text was Luke 6:20-23. As I read Jesus' words "Blessed are the poor," I thought about those who had gathered for worship. Some were homeless, unable to work; others were working as hard as they could just to survive.

Looking out at the assembled people, I said, "Jesus tells us it is a blessing to be poor. How could being poor possibly be a blessing?" Tobias, a shy young man who rarely spoke, replied immediately: "Pastor Mary, it's a blessing to be poor because being poor makes you humble and when you're humble you realize everything you do have comes from God!" Keith added, "That's right, it's a blessing to be poor because when you have nothing, absolutely nothing, only then can you experience the peace that God alone can provide."

Another evening, the reading included Jesus' rebuke of Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). This elicited a lively conversation about the evils in participants' lives that were getting in the way of their well-being. We called out these things one by one, responding with a hearty "Get behind me, Satan!"

Prayers for the community are part of every worship experience. Requests are rarely for personal needs but rather for the children of the neighborhood or for people struggling to find jobs or homes. Communion follows, with the children of the community jostling to be the helpers who serve the grape juice or hand out cups.

During the pandemic, Anita, the neighbor who prepared most of the food each Tuesday, was not able to risk being out, but other folks stepped up. Vanessa, a long-term member of the Hope's Table

community, made sure to check in on Anita, who had helped her secure safe housing. Rather than shutting down during the pandemic as many other churches did, Hope's Table made the transition to takeout meals. We also added a second evening to our schedule each week. We served over 10,000 meals in 2020, reaching many new people with the love of Jesus.

Violet's Reflection

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. —Jeremiah 29:11

I first met Michelle when she was a resident in our women's shelter, "the Well." Her husband, John, was in a local family shelter. Their daughter, Anna, had been placed in foster care while her parents received treatment for their drug addiction. One of the first things I noticed about Michelle was a tattoo on the inside of her arm: "Jeremiah 29:11." She told me that when she and John got married, they got matching tattoos. She said that whenever either of them began to lose hope, all they had to do was to look at their arms to be reminded of the good that God intended for them. For Michelle and John, hope was literally skin-deep.

In Pastor Mary's story of Hope's Table, folks are invited to taste and see the hope offered to us by a God who intends only good for us. The table is created in community, and each person makes sure there is enough for everyone. A safe space is created where even the tough questions can be asked and discussed. I have often struggled with the text from Luke that reads, "Blessed are the poor," not wanting to believe that God would have anyone suffer or that economic poverty in our midst can be rationalized as a good thing. When I heard the responses given by the folks in Pastor Mary's community, I was reminded that, though not all things in this world are good, in all things there is God. Not God causing the poverty or even wanting us to be poor, but God standing right there with all who suffer in any way.

Months after I met Michelle and John, they received housing and were reunited with their daughter. Sadly, John died during the early days of COVID. When I saw Michelle not long after John's death, I asked how she was doing. She was sad but pointed to her arm. In her grief, she could not speak, but she didn't have to, because her arm said it all.

Ruben's Reflection

Every culture has rich wisdom that reflects its life and communal experience. Growing up, I heard lots of sayings that were generated and then passed on to the next generation in the community. "*Donde comen dos, comen tres*" was a popular phrase, meaning "Where two eat, three can eat." In addition to the literal meaning, this saying points to the value of sufficiency even when there might not be abundance.

More people coming to eat? No problem. *Echale mas agua al caldo!* ("Just add more water to the soup!"). This was not a joke. It was an actual practice, demonstrating a confidence that what was available was enough to meet the need.

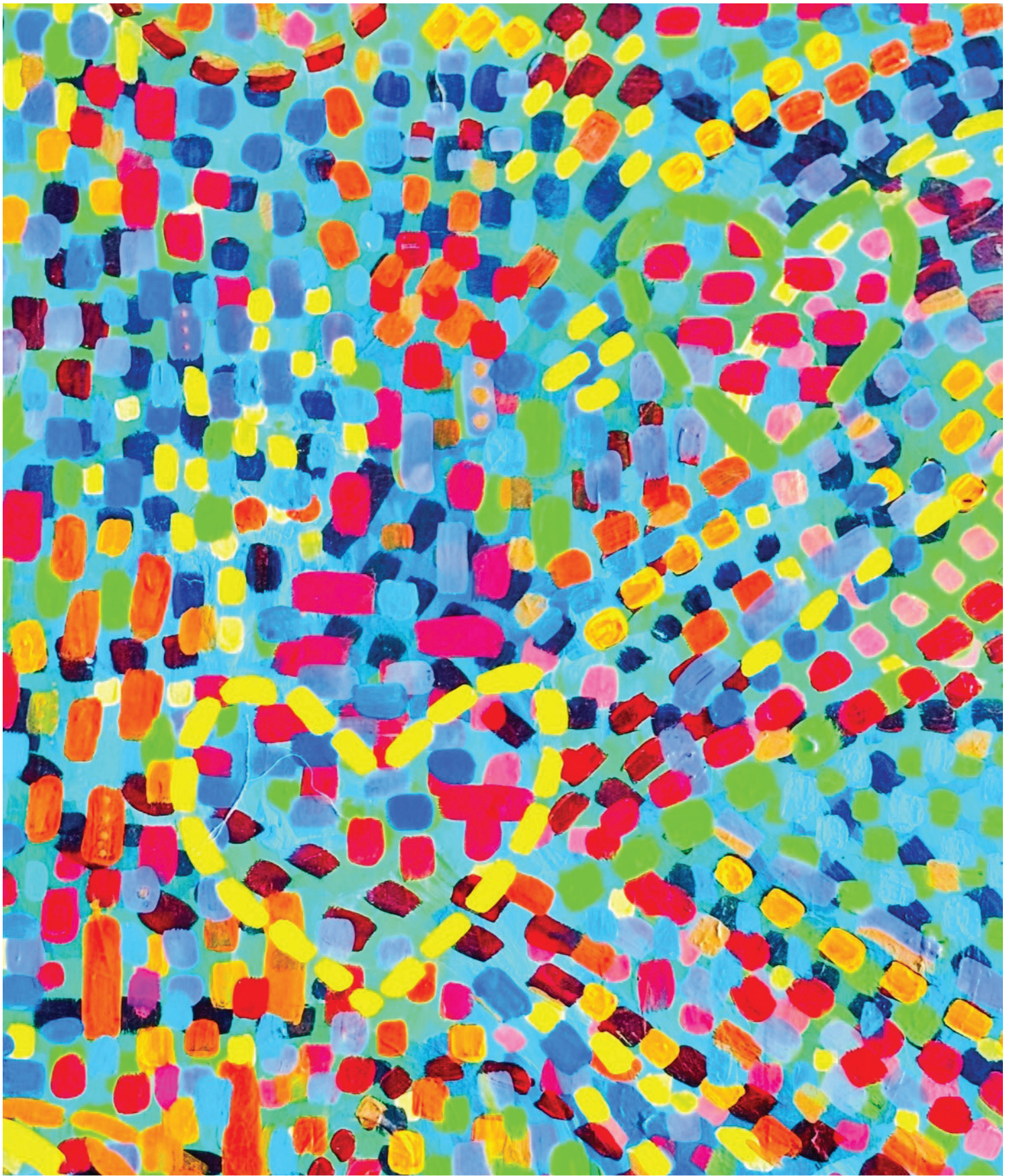
The key element in marginalization is the depth of communal thinking and communal life. Daily challenges are best met in community. There is wisdom, creativity and energy in community. As people find each other and share what they have, a sense of hopefulness grows. During critical times in Peru, when violence and unrest affected the availability of food, resources and jobs, communities organized themselves by city blocks or neighborhoods to support those who were able to work and were looking for work. At Villa El Salvador (a community on the coast of Peru living in extreme poverty), families took turns cooking out on the street with large pots and pans. When people returned from work or their search for it, when kids came back from school, and when elders came out after keeping their households going, there was a community meal waiting so no one would go hungry.

All over the world, challenges keep coming, hunger is all around and economic poverty is real, but so are the resilience, faith and hope of the people. Can you imagine the powerful stories told when a community gathers around another welcoming table, God's table? "Everyone has a place at this table," says Pastor Mary Wolfe. God's love is made real with the presence of Jesus. He once said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). God's table connects all other tables and gives them meaning and purpose. God's care is manifested in the love, grace, giftedness, generosity and hospitality of all our gathering tables, always in community.



For your reflection:

1. Do you have a phrase in your cultural background that relates to life and caring in community? Bring it forth and share it with your group.
2. Share your findings as you explore the connection of your various tables with God's table.
3. How do people in your community know that you have an open table with room for all in your church?



Part 2: Living the Dream

Voices of Immigration

Introduction by Ruben Duran

From the very beginning and throughout the Bible, God instructs God's people to care and serve three special communities: orphans, widows and immigrants in their midst. No questions, no exceptions, no excuses. It was and still is God's expectation that these marginal communities count on the presence and compassion of people of faith to accompany them on their life journeys.

Repeatedly, biblical stories of widows, orphans and immigrants reflect God's concern and interest in their well-being. Many times, they appear not just as recipients of care but as protagonists of God's action for others, as in the stories of the widow's generous offering, the child sharing food with Jesus to feed thousands and the parable of a foreigner showing care and hospitality to a hurting neighbor.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus experienced migration. They had to flee for safety, crossing the southern border into Egypt. Jesus, the son of God, creator of the universe, became an undocumented immigrant, seeking refuge from violence and life-threatening forces back home. Jesus was born in Bethlehem but learned to crawl, walk and run in Africa. His best friends were kids in an Egyptian neighborhood. Though part of the minority, the Holy Family adapted quickly to cross-cultural relations in a new land and learned to cope with a new language and calendar of events. How amazing it is that Egypt, once an oppressive nation that turned God's people into slaves, now welcomed God's Holy Family with open arms and with respect for human dignity. Only God can make this happen.

God understands migration and, despite its painful reality, can turn it to good purposes — God's purposes. Today is no different. Migration is a global challenge, with millions forced to move for unjust and unpredictable reasons. This is an opportune time to join God's care by extending love, hospitality and dignified welcome to migrants throughout the world.

As an immigrant myself, I invite you to find ways to be in solidarity with migrant people and families, responding to need and supporting just laws to serve all people. The ELCA has an immigrant history and identity, and you can play a key role in making our church commitment a reality in your community. I also invite you to hear the voices and stories of immigrant friends in the next pages for your reflection and spiritual refreshment.

1. Accompanying Raul

Mary Campbell, Director

ELCA AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities)

Raul and his partner fled Venezuela as a result of threats of violence in their community. They made the arduous journey through Colombia and across the dangerous Darien Gap, arriving, exhausted, in Costa Rica, where they were received by the shelter run by the Iglesia Luterana Costarricense. Though Raul's partner decided not to continue the journey, Raul felt compelled to persevere. He made it to the U.S. and was immediately detained and transferred to a facility in Florida, where he was accompanied pastorally by a member of the AMMPARO network. When Raul was finally released, he made his way to Toledo, where he had a family member. Because of the important connections he made with Lutherans on his journey, Raul asked for accompaniment in Toledo. He was connected with a local congregation that had strong ties to the Venezuelan migrant community in Toledo, and within days, he was able to find spiritual support and employment.

Violet's Reflection

The body is one but has many members. —1 Corinthians 12:12

A number of years ago, I began to experience a variety of strange symptoms. I'd be walking and my legs would get weak; I would try to lift something and suddenly couldn't. My eyes began playing tricks on me, and I was seeing double. One day, as I was drinking iced tea through a straw, the drink came back up through my nose and my swallowing wasn't working as it should. Eventually I was diagnosed with a neuromuscular autoimmune disorder known as myasthenia gravis. Over the years, I learned how to manage the symptoms, and I have done well, but the process of getting diagnosed wasn't an easy one. I saw a variety of specialists who were good at examining the part of my body that was their specialty, but not until someone was able to look at my whole body and how everything worked together was I finally able to get diagnosed and treated.

AMMPARO is a holistic, whole-church commitment by the ELCA to accompany children and families who are forced to flee their communities. This long acronym stands for "Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities" — long because the founders of AMMPARO knew that accompanying someone means being with the whole person and understood what it meant for that person to be part of a family.

Mary Campbell, program director for AMMPARO, shares with us a brief story of Raul and his journey from Venezuela to the United States. Though the transition seems simple and seamless in the telling, we can only imagine Raul's trauma and fear at not knowing what was to happen. AMMPARO not only cared for Raul's safety but also connected him with his family, a faith community and a job to ensure that his needs would be met.

In Philadelphia, where I live and work with a congregation mostly of unhoused people, the programs most effective at helping folks achieve long-term success are those that are holistic and not so specialized that they overlook some part of the person or their experience. Project HOME (Housing, Opportunity, Medical and Education), founded by Sister Mary Scullion and Joan Dawson McConnon, is now in its 35th year of operation. During that time, it grew from a small emergency shelter for men into Project HOME, with 24 housing, educational and medical units across the city. Sister Mary and Joan knew early on that accompaniment means more than just offering a sandwich and a blanket. As a community of faith, the Welcome Church offers spiritual support based on the hope of the gospel, but we stand with folks in our community through advocating, sharing food, assisting with shelter and employment, and even creating art together.

The apostle Paul had it right when he offered us the analogy of one body with many parts. I know I quote him often, but until we see one another as whole and beautifully made in the image of God, our efforts to “walk with” just won’t work. AMMPARO offers us a beautiful picture of accompaniment, and we have much to learn from all involved.

Ruben’s Reflection

“Jump, man, jump!” said my boss. “That net, it’s for real. Jump, check it out. Do it now that we’re not too high.” I hesitated, but he insisted. “Jump! The net is strong, it works. It can save your life.” We were on the fourth floor of a new building being built in downtown Minneapolis. It was a hot summer day, and I had been hired to help those constructing the steel frame for this new building. This was to be a short-term summer job to raise money for my international music group, Kindred, sponsored by the Lutheran Youth Encounter organization. Through their contacts, this job was offered to me.

To my surprise, one reason I was chosen for this job became clear when my boss asked me to try out the safety net for those working on the steel beams above us. “Jump!” he said, adding, “It should be no sweat to you. After all, Indians are not afraid of heights.” Without thinking, I jumped, and the net worked well. “All right,” he said, “let’s go to work, clean these bolts and take them to the guys up there.” The work began, heavy-duty work. I didn’t mind. I had the muscles to do it. Though some of the time I had to work inside a shop, I looked forward to getting out there, checking the net and walking on the beams two floors up without much support.

My mind was intrigued with the comment my boss made that “Indians are not afraid of heights.” I am descended from the Inca culture in Peru, and I have the features to prove it. The Inca civilization designed and built amazing cities, sanctuaries, towers and fortresses, such as Machu Picchu and the whole city of Cuzco, way before uninvited Europeans arrived. Those buildings were high in altitude, and the land was high in elevation. But I had never heard that Indians weren’t afraid of heights. I was afraid, still am. Maybe I wasn’t Indian enough.

One day, walking the steel beams on the seventh-floor level, I found out that the workers at the top, waiting for the cranes to bring the new steel beams to be bolted in, were all American Indians. I was surprised and happy at the same time. “Hey,” they said, “look who’s here, new kid on the block.” “Be careful, kid. If you have to fall, fall to the inside of the building. That net really works.” I delivered the bolts and got back to the elevator quickly. Later, during a break, I got the guts to ask them if they

were afraid to work at the top, without much support. One of them said candidly: “Shh. Don’t be too loud. We know that not that many people would do this job. If we fall, only our family will miss us. We don’t know where that line comes from, but to us it means we have steady work and that is what matters.” Then I knew they were as afraid as I was, with very few networks of support.

In our story, Raul ran out of support and options in violent Venezuela and was forced to leave. He jumped into the world without assurance of finding nets of support. He was afraid, but there was no other pathway to survive and start over. Thanks be to God, he received shelter with the Iglesia Luterana Costarricense, part of the network of Lutherans in the region, and with the ELCA AMMPARO network. Despite some challenges, Raul learned that this net really works, and with the help of the people of God, he’s now able to build a new life.

I am thankful to be part of the executive board of AMMPARO, accompanying migrants who have been forced to leave their homes and advocating for just and humane policies. One important part of the work is counting on more than 250 local churches that are committed to welcome and have become a safety net for migrant children and their families. If this is impacting you or your community, I invite you to connect with Mary Campbell, whose contact information is available at the end of this book, along with links to videos and other resources. As Lutherans in this country, we have deep roots in immigration life, and we understand the dynamic it creates.

I hope you can involve your congregation in extending the net for welcoming, caring, learning, accompanying and exchanging faith stories with migrant communities. As God promised blessings to God’s people, inviting them to “enlarge the site of their tent” (Isaiah 54:2), so we are invited to enlarge the nets of support for migrants today.

We pray that thousands of others, like Raul, will be able to say, “This net really works.”



For your reflection:

1. In Mary Campbell’s story of Raul and his partner, what were some of the many things they might have needed on their journey?
2. Can you name an experience in which you were treated in a holistic manner?
3. How do you welcome a stranger in your congregation?

2. Migration Ministry of the Mexican Lutheran Church

**Rev. Moises Perez
TK
Iglesia Luterana Mexicana**

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived one month after work began in the Migration Ministry. All the ministry's plans, projects, objectives and goals had to wait.

What to do? How to reinvent or redirect the work?

Among many other things, we learned that migration is not stopped by viruses, closed borders or the confinement we were forced to endure.

On the 45th day of quarantine, I received a voice message in WhatsApp. I didn't recognize the number, but when I played the audio, I heard the voice of a Cuban man. "Pastor Moises, the migration ministry of the Costa Rican Lutheran Church gave me this number. Can you help me? I am in Tapachula, Chiapas."

"Of course I can support you," I replied to the message. I had already been notified by a sister church in Costa Rica that I would be contacted.

Thus began a pastoral accompaniment to a Cuban who I will call Chuchi. The accompaniment consisted of our greeting each other daily, my listening to him, our praying for him every day and my sending money when it was necessary.

Through him, I learned the process of obtaining a humanitarian visa, which allows people to enter Mexico without being detained, to work and to rent a living space. I accompanied him virtually in the hundreds of kilometers he traveled in my country, until he arrived in the United States. I suffered with him, felt his hardships and pains. I accompanied him in illness, frustration, pain and joy.

I had the opportunity to meet Chuchi in July 2020, when he on his way through Mexico City and preparing to board a bus that would take him to the northern border of Mexico. He was very thin, and I could see all the roads he had traveled in the tiredness of his face. I prayed for him insistently for the two interminable days that the trip lasted, praying that God would free him from all the dangers posed by organized crime in many states of my country.

I celebrated with him when he arrived at the border, and I was tense during the 10 days he spent in a Texas immigration station. I cried when he told me he was already on a bus to Austin.

Since we first offered help, a ministry of accompaniment to Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, Cubans, Haitians and Nicaraguans has started. How do they get my phone number? I don't know. Some tell me that another migrant gave it to them, others that their churches gave it to them. Others are recommended by the church.

The migration ministry of the Mexican Lutheran Church has accompanied many people over these two years. Though we have met less than half of them physically, we have forged deep relationships with all the women and men we have accompanied.

Each morning begins with a good-morning greeting, a wish for blessings and a prayerful accompaniment for those who need it. The day progresses, and each of them comments on their processes, their fears, their despair. Some continue to greet me from time to time even though they are already in their processes in the United States. Others have said goodbye with much gratitude.

We have spoken with their families who stayed behind and those waiting for them in the U.S. We have listened to them and given them words of hope.

Every year, 450,000 people of 47 different nationalities cross through Mexico. Our country is a crossroads, a destination for immigrants and a recipient of returnees. Governments see the migratory crisis as a security crisis. That is why they militarize, detain and deport migrants; that is why they want to build walls to close their borders.

The migration ministry of the Mexican Lutheran Church, together with many Mexican civil society organizations, look at the migration crisis as a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people need food, rest, hygiene and legal, medical and spiritual accompaniment.

In Matthew 25:35-36, Jesus says:

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

That is our humble work, to accompany some people in migration with listening, prayer and patience. In this way, we fulfill the command of Jesus to love our neighbor, welcoming the stranger and feeding him but, above all, listening and praying.

Violet's Reflection

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. —Romans 8:38-39

As I reflect on the words of Pastor Moises, I am quarantined with COVID for the second time. Though I sit in strict quarantine due to the vulnerability of a partner awaiting a transplant, I have felt neither isolated nor alone despite beginning this quarantine on my birthday, a day when I was to be celebrating with family and friends. The calls, texts, video chats and many acts of love that I have received from them these past days have filled me with their presence even when we could not physically be together.

Pastor Moises writes of a ministry born during a time of severe isolation. He names the process of accompaniment as greeting, listening, praying and sending money. I see you, I hear you, I pray for

you — what do you need? All simple but powerful gestures we might easily incorporate into our daily lives.

I see you!

I grew up in a city where people rushed by you on the street. We were instructed not to make eye contact for fear of unwanted engagement with dangerous strangers. I now live in a community where folks not only look at one another but also greet one another, whether they know each other or not. Instant connection and care.

I hear you!

To listen is to offer a space where people can drop words but also a place where their feelings might be held with tenderness. Listening is not just about what happens with our ears; true listening involves opening our hearts to things we might not necessarily want to hear. It means allowing ourselves to be with the other person even if that means standing in a place of pain. It means being with the other person even if we cannot stop their pain.

I pray for you!

Each time we pray, we acknowledge that we alone are not enough. Even with all the amazing advances of vaccines and science, to pray is to implore this higher power for help. I find that higher power in Jesus. For me, to pray is to ask Jesus to walk in those places where I cannot go. For Jesus, there is no quarantine; there is no risk Jesus won't take to be with us in all places.

Even in death.

Finally, the question: *What do you need?*

Pastor Moises acknowledges the physical needs that go along with accompaniment. When money is needed, he sends money. We cannot see, listen or pray while ignoring the practical needs that come with our living together.

In my ministry with the Welcome Church, I walk with those who are part of the unhoused community in Philadelphia. We greet, we listen, and we pray, but if someone is hungry or needs clothing, we share food or point them to the proper resources. For me, the beauty of the incarnation is that Jesus made our bodies holy and that their needs were not to be ignored.

Pastor Moises shows us that not even a pandemic can separate us from the love of God or from one another. His words teach us how to protect those sacred bonds of connection, even during the most challenging times.

Ruben's Reflection

These days, I have the honor to accompany and coach several leaders of various denominations in preparing their churches to welcome and support the migrant people passing through or staying in their communities. These leaders are taking a virtual, six-month certification course at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., called "The Church's Response to the Immigration Crisis." As they begin their classes, they are expected to form an immigration ministry team in their church or organization, including young people, to prepare and equip their church to be involved in a ministry of service to and accompaniment of immigrants in their context.

They study the history of and shifts in U.S. policies regarding immigration, they develop their own grounding for this ministry in biblical and theological foundations, they study the life experiences of immigrants (especially the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental effects on them and their families), and they learn about the legal pathways available to assist immigrants with their cases. To finish their course, they are expected to develop a ministry plan or project that involves their team and their congregation or organization. One of these groups, with experience in family reunification cases, has noticed the growth in asylum cases and will get further legal training to open a care center for people in those situations. Another leader, who works in the theater world, has begun to develop a theatrical production to raise awareness of the immigration crisis. Another is leading her church to create an immigration center that will provide free consultations and a visa process with pro bono lawyers for those who qualify, responding to immigrants' basic human needs and creating a system of referrals to nearby partner organizations.

The most important thing to learn is that migration has become a worldwide issue. This has always been so, but for various reasons, it has reached unprecedented proportions these days. Thus, we cannot think of immigration primarily as an issue between the U.S. and Mexico, or the U.S. and Canada. The whole world is in constant movement, with people seeking refuge from hunger, violence, persecution, life-threatening situations and oppressive regimes.

It is no longer unusual for Pastor Moises to be asked to accompany and serve migrants from Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, China, Haiti, Ukraine and other countries as they pass through Mexico. Were you surprised that he said about 450,000 migrants from 47 countries pass through Mexico every year? This is a global phenomenon that needs to be treated as a humanitarian crisis and not only as a political matter.

What can we do — or better yet, what can we do together? Part of the answer is right here, with the things we already know and do. What if we map out centers and outposts that are currently welcoming, accompanying, assisting and caring for immigrants in their life situations and legal cases? I will connect my students with Pastor Moises in Mexico, with the Lutheran Church Costarricense and with the whole network of AMMPARO, which now serves worldwide. What about the many organizations that advocate on behalf of migrants, that actually deal with their legal cases, or the churches, groups and individuals who help people at the southern border? There is so much more that can be done together. The word will get out globally. There are people who care and are willing to help.

Can we count on you and your church? Let us know.



For your reflection:

1. Can you think of a time when you felt really heard? What was it like?
2. During times when you felt most alone, what broke the isolation?
3. For whom do you pray this day?

3. In Pursuit of the American Dream

Oscar Cid del Prado
Oak Park, Ill.

My pursuit of the “American Dream” began the day after my eighth birthday. My mom had left Mexico a few weeks prior to prepare for our arrival in the United States. I was too young to understand what was happening at that time. All I knew was that my *abuelitos* (grandparents) were my favorite people in my life — and still are today, even from heaven — so I remember I was happy to stay with them for a while.

My sister, 6 years old at that time, was heartbroken to hear we were leaving behind everything we knew: friends, the house I was born in and my *abuelitos*. I remember waking up very early on April 29, 2002. I hugged my *abuelitos*, and we made our way to Mexico City International Airport. An uncle escorted my sister, Yadi, and me to Tijuana, where he handed us to the “coyote” to whom my mother had paid a large sum of money to help my sister and me cross over into the United States.

We waited until nightfall in a very small room along with four to six other kids. Yadi and I were the last kids in the room. A friendly man and woman escorted us to an office. The woman said, “You come with me, and she will go with him.” I had no idea what was happening. I cried and cried, missing Yadi, my *abuelitos*, my hometown, my old life — just as millions of immigrants living in this country do.

As we neared the U.S.-Mexico border, the coyote said to me, “If anyone tries to wake you up, you just cry, OK? And if they ask you any questions, you tell them you are very sick.” He sat in the passenger seat. Another man was driving, and a young girl around my age was sleeping next to me in the back seat. I fell asleep for the remainder of the ride. When I opened my eyes, we were in a Walmart parking lot. Then the coyote pointed behind me, and I saw Yadi running toward me. No words can describe the feelings we experienced in this life-changing reunion.

Later that night, we met up with my mom at a nearby Denny’s (our favorite diner now). The horror story ended, but that was just the beginning.

Unable to get a full-time job anywhere, my mom began to clean houses. Then she started nannying and caring for elders overnight. My mother is the hardest worker I know. She is the most resilient, dedicated and loving person I know. She worked three jobs to pay the rent for a small closet we called home for several years. My sister and I would fall asleep each night looking out the window, waiting for my mom to come home, but she often did not. This went on for a while. I took care of everything my mom would do at home, including raising my 6-year-old sister. She was, is and forever will be my best friend. Yadi and I had to navigate a new culture, a new language, making new friends and going to school on our own while my mom was out working. While every other kid was playing and enjoying their childhood, Yadi and I were at the library, doing our ESL work. While other kids were playing with their food and throwing it away because they didn’t like it, Yadi and I had to be smart about our meals. We quickly learned the value of money many years ahead of others our age.

High school was a turning point in my pursuit of the American Dream. My family quickly learned that living undocumented in this country meant living in the shadows of society. While friends were getting part-time jobs at local restaurants, obtaining driver's permits and other similar milestones, I had to work full-time along with my mom, picking tomatoes, rosemary, basil and other staple items under the scorching Southern California sun. I had to prioritize work before school to bring income to my household.

College was never on the horizon. Undocumented students are not eligible for any type of federal financial aid. However, I knew I didn't want to continue living the life I had. Every time we were about to check out at the grocery store, my mom instructed us to put the essentials on the belt first, and she'd tell the cashier to stop scanning once we reached a certain amount. There were endless times we had enough to eat only beans, rice, eggs and milk all week. We ate Thanksgiving dinners at homeless shelters; we were weekly members at various food banks. I wanted to find a way to show my mom that her decision to come to this country was worth it. I wanted to show her that the American Dream was real and attainable. Gratitude, resilience, love and family became my four cardinal points in life.

God blessed us during my high school senior year with the approval of our green card request just before college application deadlines. I quickly started applying, not knowing what I was applying to but knowing that God had a plan for us all. I could not have done this without the guidance of many teachers along the way but also, most importantly, my biggest fans in life — my mom and younger sister. Then I purchased a one-way ticket to O'Hare International Airport in Chicago and left everything and everyone I knew behind to start my undergraduate studies at Valparaiso University in Indiana. I had not even visited the campus.

Millions of marginalized people living in this country are looking for a better life. Undocumented citizens often risk their lives to be here. Many of them are Dreamers, people like myself, who were brought to this country as minors, wishing for the opportunity to go to school, seeking to be in the shadows no more and hoping to simply be part of the texture of society.

God has a plan for us all. It's clear to me that his plan for me at this point in life is to advocate for, educate and help marginalized college students so they can find their dream job. God has blessed me with my dream job as a lead technology and financial consulting services recruiter at one of the top five financial services firms in the nation. It's not surprising that racial diversity is lacking in the corporate world. It's my goal to give those marginalized by society a seat at the table — the opportunity to realize their dream and God's plan for them.

Violet's Reflection

You are the light of the world. —Matthew 5:14

According to one definition, resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficulties. It's a trait we highly regard in those who possess it, yet my heart especially breaks when I hear the term applied to a child. Perhaps along with recognizing the strength and resilience shown by so many children, we might ask, "What can we do to be a world where children don't have so many difficult situations to face?" Yet Oscar Cid del Prado did not allow his suffering to be wasted.

Separated from the people and places he loved, not knowing if he would see his sister again and needing to be one of her primary caretakers, Oscar had many worries. He describes the difficulties of being undocumented as “living in the shadows of society.”

A shadow appears when the sun’s light is blocked. What if, rather than blocking the light of society, we found a way to receive the light that is around us?

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

Somewhere along the line, Oscar was given the opportunity to shine his light on those around him. With that light, Oscar was able to guide other Dreamers out of the shadows.

I once heard a friend say that the only documents she ever needed were the ones given to her in her baptism. I take it a step further to say that God doesn’t require any papers. That’s the definition of grace — unearned and freely given. A simple yet most complex concept for us to grasp.

Often, taking on unjust institutional situations can seem overwhelming. I like to think of the Christmas Eve tradition that many of us know in our churches. At the end of the service, the lights are dimmed and the congregation sits in darkness. It is a comforting darkness, one that centers and calms. But then one candle is lit, and another, and another, until all hold a piece of the light.

Everyone has a piece of the light to share in this world where we can sometimes be so lost. For people who are migrating, young and old, let us find ways to be a community of welcome together.

Ruben’s Reflection

Give someone a fish and you will feed them for a day, goes the popular wisdom; teach them to fish and you will feed them for a lifetime. The saying is true, but something is missing. If someone teaches me to fish, I also need access to the lake.

Who has access to opportunity in life? Not the ones living on the margins of society but rather the ones benefiting from a culture of privilege. This is the harsh reality in societies with a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots; marginal communities are being left behind.

Migration is a global issue. Millions of people — children, youth and adults young and old — have no choice but to leave their familiar places for an opportunity to rebuild their lives in dignity and peace. Hunger, injustice, oppression, violence and war are some of the main reasons behind this.

Remember the biblical story of Joseph, Mary and infant Jesus as immigrants, forced to flee from Herod’s violent threats? The holy family crossed the southern border into Egypt, seeking refuge. They had to learn a new language and adapt to a new and different culture. Jesus’ infancy took place in a foreign land. He played with African friends, ate Egyptian food and became bilingual very fast.

How interesting: Egypt, which hundreds of years before had oppressed the people of God, was now welcoming these immigrants from Nazareth and protected them from violence back home for the time they needed.

Back in Old Testament times, Jacob and the people of God were facing an imminent famine. News was received that there was plenty of food and resources in Egypt. So Jacob sent his sons to check it out, explore the opportunity for assistance and even consider migrating there to stay alive. Little did they know that their brother Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery, had become a high-level government official and would be waiting for them. Joseph, who had gone through a terrible ordeal because of his brothers, chose to forgive and open the door to assist his people with dignity, genuine hospitality and generosity.

In both cases, Joseph and the holy family did not see their migration as an end in itself but as a means to respond to God's desire to bless their neighbor. Every immigrant has a dream and lots of energy and gifts to pursue it. They just need access to an opportunity. When that happens, they become instruments of peace and transformation for others. So it is not just their dream; it is also God's dream.

This is what happened to Oscar and his loving family. His human need led him to go after the American Dream, known as the pursuit of happiness. Through the generosity of the people of God and a renewed hope in life, a bigger dream took over — God's dream. Oscar is now a blessing to many other immigrants and those who live on the margins of society. Sometimes he gives someone a fish, sometimes he teaches someone to fish, but most of all, he is giving people opportunities to experience God's dream, to restore their community with God and one another. Like Joseph in Egypt, Oscar is helping people find God's dream in the United States of America.



For your reflection:

1. Throughout the Bible, God instructs God's people to care for three special communities: orphans, widows and immigrants in their midst. No questions asked. What is your experience in your church and community? How is this happening today?
2. As you and your church care for people on the margins, responding directly to immediate needs, what could be done to supplement this with access to opportunities for building or rebuilding lives with dignity and generosity toward others?
3. In your own words, how would you articulate the similarity or difference between the American Dream and God's dream for people and creation?

4. I Am an Atheist

Rev. Haydée Colón Hernández, Pastor
Pan de Vida Mission, Passaic, N.J.

Alberto (that's what we'll call him) came to our community luncheon, an activity of our Pan de Vida Mission. Before we started the Word and Sacrament service, he sat with me and told me, "Look, girl, I'm an atheist." I smiled and told him, "Fine, I'm Pastor Haydée, and I believe in Jesus Christ, who loves you."

Alberto came to our activity with the community leader Johanna Cisneros. Our mission, Pan de Vida, works with Johanna and other community leaders to provide food to those who need it most. Alberto lives on the streets and hangs around the Home Depot in Passaic, N.J. There are people looking for work, and the vast majority of them are immigrants. Around Home Depot, you can find people sleeping on the street, many of them with alcohol or drug addiction problems.

I began the community activity with a service of Word and Sacrament. During the sermon, I spoke about the humility of Jesus, who, being God, was born in a manger and always taught his love for those in need. I also talked about our Bread of Life ministry and why it is called that. The leaders who run this mission bring physical food to the workers, and I accompany them to bring the spiritual bread, the bread of life.

Communion time arrived, and I explained that everyone is welcome at the Lord's table. Alberto was second in line on the way to the table. I told him, "This is the body and blood of Christ, given for you." He answered, "Amen," crossing himself in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

After the service, the community sat down to eat, and I sat down to eat with Alberto and two other people who slept on the street. He told me, "Pastora, I feel good because you showed us love. Forgive me for coming here drunk." I told him: "We show the love that God puts in our hearts." He told me, "Could you play the song that goes like this ... *cansado del camino* [tired of the road]?" I went to YouTube, searched for the song and put it on for everyone to hear.

When the community had finished eating, I went with some of our mission leaders to deliver hot food to the day workers in the Home Depot parking lot who were looking for job opportunities. One of them asked me, "Is the food free?" I replied, "Yes — God sent it to you through the Lexington Lutheran Church." There were many of them looking for their daily bread.

After giving out the food, I returned home and thought about Alberto. I thought of him taking communion with the rest of the community. I thought about the song he asked me to listen to, and I remembered the part that says, "Tired of the road, thirsty for you." I thought about the name of the Pan de Vida Mission and understood that there are many people, like Alberto, who are thirsty and hungry for food but also for the true bread of life. I also thought that Alberto was a strange atheist because he believes in Jesus as the one who loves him, accepts him and challenges him to a dignified and good quality of life.

Soy Ateo

Alberto (así lo llamaremos) llegó a nuestro almuerzo para la comunidad, una actividad de nuestra misión Pan de Vida. Antes de que empezáramos el servicio de Palabra y Sacramento se sentó conmigo y me dijo: “Mire muchacha yo soy ateo”. Le dije: “Okay, yo soy la pastora Haydee y creo en Jesucristo quien te ama”.

Alberto vino a nuestra actividad con la líder comunitaria Johanna Cisneros. Nuestra misión Pan de Vida trabaja con Johanna y otros líderes de la comunidad para dar comida a quienes más lo necesitan. Alberto vive en la calle y se mantiene en los alrededores del Home Depot de Passaic, NJ. Ahí se encuentran personas buscando trabajo, y la gran mayoría de ellos son inmigrantes. Alrededor del Home Depot también puedes encontrar personas que viven en la calle, muchas de ellas con problemas de drogas y alcohol.

Comencé con el servicio de Palabra y Sacramento y hablé sobre la humildad de Jesús, quien siendo Dios nació en un pesebre y siempre enseñó su amor por los más necesitados. También hablé de nuestro ministerio Pan de Vida y porque se llama así. Los líderes de esta misión llevan comida física a los trabajadores y yo les acompaño para llevar el pan espiritual, Pan de Vida.

Llegó la hora de la comunión y expliqué que todos y todas son bienvenidos a la mesa del Señor. Alberto fue el segundo en la fila camino a la mesa. Le dije: “este es el cuerpo y la sangre de Cristo dados por ti”. Me respondió: “Amen” (mientras se persignaba en el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo.)

Después del servicio, la comunidad se sentó a comer y me senté a comer con Alberto y otras dos personas que dormían en la calle. Me dijo: “Pastora, me siento bien porque ustedes nos han dado amor. Perdóneme por haber venido borracho.” Le dije: “Damos el amor que Dios pone en nuestro corazón.” Me dijo: ¿Podría usted poner la canción que va como así... cansado del camino?” Busqué la canción en YouTube y la puse para que todos y todas escucharan.

Cuando la comunidad terminó de comer, fui con algunos líderes de nuestra misión a llevar comida caliente a las personas que estaban buscando trabajo en el estacionamiento de Home Depot. Uno de ellos me preguntó: “La comida es gratis?” Le respondí, “Si, te la envió Dios a través de la iglesia Luterana de la Lexington”. Había muchos de ellos buscando el pan de cada día.

Después de dar la comida, regresé a casa y me quedé pensando en Alberto. Pensé en él tomando la comunión con el resto de la comunidad. Pensé en la canción que me pidió escuchar y recordé la parte que dice: “Cansado del camino, sediento de ti”. Pensé en el nombre de la misión Pan de Vida y entendí que como Alberto hay muchas personas sedientas y hambrientas de comida, pero también sedientas y hambrientas del verdadero pan de vida. También pensé que Alberto era un ateo extraño pues él cree en Jesús como aquel que lo ama, lo acepta, y le desafía a una vida digna y de calidad.

Ruben's Reflection

The first stanza of a well-known gospel spiritual goes like this:

"Precious Lord, take my hand / Lead me on, let me stand / I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. / Through the storm, through the night, / Lead me on to the light. / Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home." The music and lyrics were created by Thomas Dorsey in 1933 upon the death of his wife in childbirth and the death of their baby soon afterward. In the depths of grief, overwhelmed by pain and loneliness, Thomas also expresses his tiredness of body and soul and his need for God's presence and direction.

Alberto's life story is not described in Pastor Haydée's reminiscence, but the effects of his life journey are clearly expressed in the song he asked to be played at church during their breakfast time. "Cansado del Camino" is a Christian song, written by Jesús Adrián Romero, that reveals the experience of a person going down a rough road, recognizing one's tiredness and deep thirst for God. Even in his unbelief, Alberto trusted Pastor Haydée's ministry of love and grace and received living waters and bread of life in the context of a community of faith in Jesus.

Two instances come to mind in the Bible that connect with Alberto, with me and with many others. One comes from the author of Psalm 42, who tells of a person going through dark moments and beginning to doubt their faith under pressure from others and from within, questioning whether God exists. The psalmist says that this person's daily food is nothing but tears and their deep longing for the living God is like the longing of a deer for flowing streams (1-3).

The second instance is the quest for healing by a woman during Jesus' time. She is very ill and has tried many physicians. She is at the end of her rope, tired in body and spirit but with one last hope, Jesus. She knows how hard it would be to push through the multitudes and ask Jesus to take her hand, much less to meet him and request living waters and bread of life. Her idea is to get close enough to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, believing she will be healed, and that is exactly what happens. Jesus notices, acknowledges her healing and blesses her as she goes on her way (Luke 8:43-48).

There is a common saying: When you are at the end of your rope, hold on to the hem of Jesus' garment. Ministries on the margins recommend that every church, every expression of the body of Christ ought to intentionally place visible hems of Jesus' garment for people to touch, so that they might connect and be a part of a community of healing, love and justice. We thank God for Alberto, Pastor Haydée and the courageous leaders at Pan de Vida Mission. And we thank you for making your ministry a healing hem where you are.

Violet's Reflection

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. —John 6:35

The story of Pan de Vida Mission, or Bread of Life Ministry, in Passaic, N.J., touched me in a personal way.

When I began what is now the Welcome Church in Philadelphia, Pa., my only intention was to serve tea and offer a place where folks might rest. In fact, I wanted to name the ministry “the Rest Room” — a name I was discouraged from using, despite the fact that the Welcome Church began in a train station public restroom.

It didn’t take long for folks who stopped by the church hall where we met to learn that I was a pastor. Soon folks asked if we might have Bible study as we shared tea and cookies. Of course, I agreed, and the first text we studied was John 6.

In the middle of the study, one person asked, “Can we have some of that bread of life?” With that, I grabbed a roll from the kitchen and some kind of juice, and together we shared our first eucharistic meal.

Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of a “hunger for the holy.” She uses it as an alternative phrase to describe those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” I think this “hunger for the holy” can be applied even to those who claim to be atheist, to the many who have not seen God in the church but who, nonetheless, still hunger and thirst for that which is holy.

Like the people in the Pan de Vida community, most folks in the Welcome Church are unhoused and face economic poverty. Because their needs are so great, people assume that they come to our gatherings just for whatever meal might be served. But to deny the spiritual hunger in our community is to deny part of who we are as children of God. This is what we see in our story.

Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard speaks of a “God-shaped void” or “God-shaped hole” that exists in every person. Jesus offers the bread of life to each of us. All we have to do is “take and eat.”



For your reflection:

1. What are you most hungry for?
2. Where have you seen God in others this week?
3. How have you been the light of God for those around you?

5. An Immigrant Story — Kindergarten Memory

Rev. Giselle Coutinho, Pastor
Bridge of Peace Community Church, Camden, N.J.

My mother and father shared the story of my arriving from Portugal at age 5 and playing house in our backyard with two neighbor children. I spoke Portuguese, and they spoke English. Somehow, we understood each other and were happy. I was confident and outgoing. Days later, I started school, where I was unable to communicate with those around me. How do you even understand the rules or ask to go to the bathroom? How do you learn letters and numbers when you don't understand? Lunch was strange, and expectations were different. School was frightening, and teachers were intolerant. I became withdrawn, I felt incompetent, other children laughed at me, and I never felt safe. At age 5, I had trouble explaining to adults in school that my entire world had been turned on its head, especially when the adults made no effort to understand, care for me or allow me to share about my culture or where I came from.

I didn't succeed academically, but I realized I needed to learn English and figure out how it all worked, to watch and teach myself, to get picture books from the Brooklyn Public Library and connect the Portuguese words with new English words. The following year, I was enrolled at a Society of Friends school (a Quaker school) with a very different philosophy of education. Since then, I have always advocated for those who are different.

To be an immigrant is hard and confusing. The reality is that many of us have not chosen to come. Others have been forced to come because of violence or inequity in their homelands, and others come searching for the American Dream, but many of us never imagine how difficult it will be. American society expects us to lose part of ourselves and assimilate. The problem is that to truly love ourselves as beloved children of God, we must embrace all of who we are and be embraced by others in that process. If we belong to a multicultural, multilingual, multiracial church that is truly willing to embrace all of who we are, then we will flourish and grow as God's children. We will learn that God loves us and supports us in all life's needs. We will begin to believe that we are beloved just as we are and that we are made whole.

Violet's Reflection

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. —Psalm 139:13-14

When I was in college, there was a popular poster that many of us had in our rooms. Usually the poster depicted a child, with the words "I Know I'm OK Because God Doesn't Make Junk."

The psalmist said it differently, but the intent was the same — we are, as Pastor Giselle so beautifully says, "beloved" just as we are. To hear how a happy and self-confident 5-year-old child had her spirit chipped away until she withdrew, feeling ridiculed and incompetent, is painful.

But once again, as noted in Oscar Cid del Prado's story "In Pursuit of the American Dream" (page 85), Giselle's resilience carried her through to become the compassionate and welcoming pastor she is today. Once again, I ask, why should a 5-year-old need to be resilient at all? What might we do as a church and as people of God together to welcome the stranger in our midst? How do we teach hospitality and welcoming the stranger to our children, maybe even to the point where no one is a stranger?

So often our communities of faith will say, "All are welcome," but are we also asking people to leave a part of themselves at the door? One church sign said, "Come as you are and expect to be changed" — a beautiful invitation to the transformation that can occur when we worship together as one body. But do we really mean "Come as you are and expect to be changed into someone like me"?

Again, as Pastor Giselle says, only when we "believe that we are beloved just as we are" will we be made whole.

Ruben's Reflection

Two of my grandchildren turned 5 and started kindergarten this year. As a first-generation immigrant, I couldn't be any prouder of their fast journey to get to this point. Their first day was a bit rough because they were nervous, but they made it through and are beginning to build friendships these days. Their parents are closely monitoring their experience and ready to attend to any need for adjustments. One thing different from Giselle's experience as a child is that my grandchildren grew up here and speak English fluently. I can only imagine the daily agony Giselle went through as a first-generation immigrant child entering school without the time to adapt to a new culture or language and without adult advocates trying to understand and help her in her difficult situation.

First-generation immigrants face challenging and ongoing situations that generate turning points in their experience. In Giselle's situation, due to her age and linguistic challenge, she internalized the message that she was different, that she didn't belong, so she withdrew and felt incompetent. Thank God, her situation changed and she could grow and demonstrate her God-given value, sharing her talents and gifts with others. Today she is pastor of Bridge of Peace Community Church, an amazing Christian and prophetic community in Camden, N.J.

Other immigrants get stuck in the internalization of those negative messages and go through life feeling less worthy than others. This is one method still used to justify and preserve the colonization systems at work in the world. The message sent is that certain people, primarily people of color or people indigenous to a place, are not fully human and ought to be submissive and subservient to those taking over their land and life. In other situations, the current message is that one must leave behind one's cultural identity and assimilate with the ones in control.

I remember going to college in the Seattle area 46 years ago and being invited to several Lutheran churches to speak about the church in Peru. I used my broken English and shared about how we were starting and organizing the Lutheran Church of Peru. I told them that I was sent from the south to the north to thank them for their initiative in getting this mission work started. People applauded. But as the service was ending and we processed back for the blessing and postlude, I was approached by one of the older ushers, who asked: "Where are you from again?" I said, "From Peru." He said, "Go back

home, you are not from here.” I was surprised and didn’t know how to respond. Then it was time to smile and greet people on their way out. That encounter is still fresh in my memory.

Just recently, my wife and I were ordering coffee at a popular place in downtown Hendersonville, N.C., enjoying our vacation, when a white man stood behind me, almost breathing on my neck. I moved several times, and he continued to intimidate me. When we got to the main area with lots of people, I finally turned to him and said, “Excuse me sir, is there a problem here? What are you doing?” He looked angry and said, “You don’t belong here. Better get back to where you came from.” He had a German accent, and he was pointing to the mountains, so I gathered that he was referring to the Cherokee reservation. This time I responded quickly and loudly so others could hear: “Sir, stop this. I am a citizen of this country. I belong here. If anyone needs to leave, it is you.” He got nervous and left the place without his coffee. I was not comfortable walking around the streets for fear of violence, so we left the town.

How quickly we forget that this is a nation of immigrants, primarily European colonizers, who believed they had the right to take over the land from American Indian or Alaska Native communities based on the principles of the Doctrine of Discovery. In their perspective, that series of documents gave them the authority, even the religious authority, to invade non-Christian lands, subjugate their people and claim their resources. This document also advanced the idea that European culture, religion and people are superior to others.

Many churches, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Roman Catholic Church, have officially repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery as well as the mindsets and worldviews that gave rise to that way of thinking and acting. They also repudiate and renounce the mindset of cultural and racial superiority that damages the dignity of every human person.

Sounds good, but we have a way to go to experience true justice and the creation of new systems that bring equity and opportunity for all. I wish I could talk with those men in Hendersonville and Seattle to seek understanding so that we might see each other as people of God and maybe join others to design a better tomorrow for our children. No child should go through what I have been through. No child should experience what Giselle went through.

I truly believe that the answer to racism and prejudice lies in our understanding of baptism. In baptism we are forgiven, given new life and received as members of the same family. God covenants with us to make that happen. Baptism, then, is the equalizer of all people. Is there a place where you can see that in action? Yes, and you are invited to come and see, as I have. Come over to Bridge of Peace Community Church in Camden, N.J. Experience radical hospitality from the people and Pastor Giselle. Language is not an issue. The common language is love.

Come and be a child again!



For your reflection:

1. What do you remember from being 5 years old?
2. How do we teach our children hospitality?
3. If you were to post a sign outside your church that described its personality, how would it read?

6. Santa Isabel Ministry With Immigrants in Detention

Rev. Ramon Collazo, Pastor
Santa Isabel Lutheran Church, Elizabeth, N.J.

This ministry began from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia Contextual Education and Internship Program. As part of the internship experience, there was a project that could be started, and once the internship ended, the sponsoring congregation could continue the project as a ministry.

During my internship, one of our visits was to a vigil in front of the Elizabeth Detention Center, a converted warehouse in the middle of an industrial park. Once a month, a Lutheran congregation took the lead in the vigil.

Elizabeth Detention Center is a minimum-security facility opened in 1997. The facility holds approximately 305 people. It has males and females. There are no minors or families. There are other detention centers in other states that have facilities for minors and families.

At the start of the ministry, I thought that I was going to receive resistance from the detention center officers. Then they started asking me questions that were an opportunity to spread the seed of the gospel. What is the Lutheran Church? Then they became so enthusiastic about the Bible studies that they participated or asked questions and told me their theological views while escorting me to the front.

On some occasions, your primary expectations and the routine of ministry may bring doubt. Was it really God who called you to this ministry? Then God answers your question. Sometimes he answers through the theological knowledge of those who surround you, and sometimes a door is opened to allow you to see God's plan and work.

We are called to love God and neighbor. One experience I will never forget is that, during worship and specifically during the prayers of the people, one man asked me to pray for another man. I did a prayer for him, trusting that God in God's infinite love could grant his petition. After worship, it is typical for some to come and ask for a specific prayer, and these two men brought another man, stating that he was the person they asked me to pray for. He was a Latino man who had received notification that his sister had committed suicide when told that his bail was \$7,000. I listened to him, and we prayed together before I left the facility.

Since the ministry is God's mission, there is always a plan that allows us to face the situations that we will encounter in the future. Recently a new assistant to the warden began working at the Elizabeth Detention Center. He was the kind of person who is always proactive. The first thing he did was to begin a relationship with the religious services volunteers. He gave us his contact number and email. I had spoken to him and knew he was trustworthy. When I got home, I immediately sent him an email

with the name of the man who had lost his sister, his immigrant identification number and a report on the situation. He needed psychological assistance and permission to attend his sister's funeral. The next week, I went back to the Bible study at the detention center and inquired if the detainee had been granted the two petitions. He answered in the affirmative. This is the way God answered my doubt of the purpose of the ministry with immigrants in detention.

The positive experience doing this ministry is the opportunity to open doors for others. Master of Divinity students have been able to worship with immigrants in detention, to write a paper for a class or to have the experience. A seminary professor and her students were able to share the religious service with the women detainees. ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, Bishop Tracie Bartholomew of the ELCA New Jersey Synod, Episcopal Bishop Mark M. Beckwith, Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) Maristella Freiberg and others have visited the Elizabeth Detention Center. It has been a great tool for education, spiritual formation and service. What was born from a seminary project turned into a continuous educational opportunity for other seminaries and the ELCA.

Among the detainees was a woman from El Salvador. She must have spent a couple of years at the center until, one day, she was sent to a prison in upstate New York (at least, this is what the other women told me). Then she was brought back to the detention center, confirming what the other females had told me. She said it was totally different. Women at the prison had long sentences, and she did not feel secure at the prison. During Bishop Eaton's visit, she was crying. She received communication from family members that her brother had been murdered. The bishop and others prayed with her, but we had to leave the facility. The next week, I came for the religious service, and we planned a life celebration for her brother. She explained that this was her second brother to have been murdered by an international gang. She said that she was going to be deported and feared for her life. These are the situations where there is an unknown. What happened to this woman when she arrived in El Salvador? Is she alive and well? Is she a slave of this gang?

One night, around 9:30 p.m., I came out from the Friday night worship service with the men and encountered a man who told me he had been released. It was below zero degrees outside, and there was snow. The man told me that friends were coming from Philadelphia to pick him up but were fearful because they had no naturalization documents. I told him to follow me and took him to the parsonage to wait for his friends. While my wife was asking him if he wanted something to eat, I focused on his clothing and noticed that he wore sweatpants, a sweatshirt and slip-on sneakers. He was holding a manila envelope. I asked if he had any clothes, and he answered, "I have no clothing." We took him to the store to buy him boots, a coat, some clothing and a bag. His friends came to pick him up and came back on Sunday because that Monday he had a court hearing at the detention center. When he came out of the court hearing, he said he was going to Texas, where his fiancé lived. We took him to a local lawyer to make sure he would have no problem in getting there, bought him a train ticket and left him at the train station. Once he arrived and was at his fiancé's house, he called us and said, "*Todo está bien* [everything is fine]". This is the ministry of God.

Violet's Reflection

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" —Psalm 13:1-2

As I write this reflection, my heart is heavy. I have just spent the afternoon with a man recently released from prison after spending 34 years on death row. He grew up in a rough part of Philadelphia where schools had few resources. He had a difficult family situation, became involved in a gang and made many bad decisions. Nevertheless, he took full responsibility for his crime and paid dearly with over three decades of his life. After reading about the Santa Isabel Ministry with immigrants in detention, my heart broke because in this minimum-security detention center, many folks were paying a price for seeking safety and a better life for themselves and their families. I kept thinking of a verse from Paul's letter to the Romans:

"Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words" (8:26).

Before going to seminary, I was a social worker. I became a social worker because I wanted to walk with people through difficult times and find concrete ways to help folks get their needs met. I went to seminary because I wanted to proclaim the hope offered to each of us by a loving God who claimed us as God's own. But as we see in the story of this ministry, accompaniment means not only speaking the good news but also showing the love of God with our hands and feet.

This story shows us that, first, we must be able to hear and feel the heartbreak of others, hold their painful stories and know that the Spirit indeed groans with anyone in pain (Romans 8:26 KJV). Our pain cannot keep us from finding tools for healing. In the case of the woman who was to be deported and in fear for her life, food, clothing and safety were offered as well as a listening ear and prayers, but I believe that what made this ministry so special was the hope offered to those being detained.

Hope means that, in everything, God is present. I don't believe that God causes everything — like having innocent people killed, or wars, or terror — but I do believe that in all these things, God is present, holding us and carrying us through.

What started as a seminary school project became a thriving ministry. When the world is seen through the lens of God, anything can happen. Prison wardens can become allies, detention centers can become church sanctuaries, and school assignments can become spiritual practices. The heartbreak, listening and deep groans are important. The food, clothing and safe places are important. And most important of all, the God we know in Jesus loves us through the pain.

Ruben's Reflection

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10, Jesus teaches his followers, then and now, how to be a true neighbor. While the initial question may be “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus turns it into a different question: Who acts as a real neighbor? In the parable, two religious leaders see a wounded person in need but choose to ignore him for their own reasons, based on their convenient profiling systems. Jesus highlights the love-in-action expressed by a foreigner, one with a questionable profile, a second-class citizen from the other side of the tracks. A Samaritan becomes the hero of the story. Jesus asks: Who acted as a neighbor toward the wounded man? The lawyer who is testing Jesus responds: The one who showed mercy and compassion. Jesus tells him to go and do likewise.

I was honored to offer support and partnership on behalf of the ELCA churchwide offices to the ELCA New Jersey Synod as it launched a new ministry start called St. Elizabeth, to be led by Mission Developer Ramon Collazo. One key goal was to involve people who were committed to creating a vital and growing community of faith, one that might become an organized church of the ELCA. Pastor Ramon and his wife, Marisol, worked hard with local church leaders and reached their goal of becoming an organized ELCA congregation in 2023, joining the other 8,500 churches in the ELCA roster nationwide.

From the very beginning, the question “Who is our neighbor?” was central to Pastor Ramon’s methodology for connecting with people in the community. I remember going to visit and evaluate the ministry’s work. One night, leaders of over 16 organizations and ecumenical partners gathered to share their appreciation for the way this ministry was developing and to pledge to work together in the public arena. Beginning with a creative use of their building by the community and continuing with the sharing of time and gifts, Pastor Ramon had only one agenda: we will love our neighbor in action, with mercy and compassion, just as Jesus said.

It is no surprise that the mapping out of community assets and needs included the immigration detention center in plain view. Pastor Ramon detailed how the ministry had opened its doors to share the gospel with those being detained for immigration issues. His wisdom and strategy led us to define the ministry as a new synod-authorized worshiping community, connected to and operating out of St. Elizabeth Lutheran Church. This is important to notice because, like a loving parent caring for a newborn, the whole church committed to pray and support the new ministry among those at the detention center.

These detention centers are not like regular prisons or jails for those who have committed crimes. Many are minimum-security places where people wait for their cases to be dealt with, referred to other offices, and approved or denied. If they’re denied, then the people are deported back to where they came from. Still, they are places of isolation and little communication with family or people who can help. I know this. I was detained when I first came to this country. My destination was Seattle, Wash., but first I flew overnight to Miami, arriving at 6 a.m. The officers noticed that my student visa application had a mathematical error, and I was short by \$500. I made things worse by saying that I was a hard worker and would easily make up the difference. The officer said that it was illegal for a student to work, so they sent me to the detention center at the airport to wait for the next flight back to Peru, 15 hours later. The place was semi-dark, with lots of people breathing deep, many being quiet, others sobbing, others repeating their story and sharing their lament. I felt lonely around a big

crowd, sometimes sad, sometimes mad, angry at myself, angry at God, questioning God's call, even picturing myself looking defeated and embarrassed at returning home so quickly.

Every two hours or so, a different officer would come down to call some people for questioning. I tried to engage them in conversation, but they always said they knew my case and there was no change. After 14 hours, an officer came and called my name. All I could see was his cheeks, quite red, and a friendly demeanor. After the same questions they had asked earlier, he added: "What are you going to study in Seattle, anyway?" I said I was going to study the Bible and become a pastor to serve many people. Then I reached down to my bag, where I had a bilingual Bible, given to me by Lutheran missionaries Gary and Carol Olson. I opened it to John 3:16 and began to read: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son—" He tried to stop me, but I got louder as other immigrants surrounded us in curiosity. As I kept reading, he opened the gate, pulled me out, took my passport, stamped it and said, "OK, Pastor, go, get out of here, study hard. Your plane to Seattle leaves in one hour." I ran to get my luggage, gave a fellow all the money I had in my right pocket and later remembered it was all Peruvian currency. Too late to go back! No one was waiting for me in Seattle because of my time in detention. But being a former travel agent, I knew I could take free hotel shuttles to get to a place close enough to be picked up.

This was my entry into this country as a first-generation immigrant, not as dramatic or complex as the stories of many at the Elizabeth Detention Center. I can only imagine the agony and desperation they are experiencing. Each of them has a dream, a sense of calling for a new life to serve and benefit others in the world. They are our neighbors, lonely neighbors needing accompaniment, a friendly ear to share their stories and prayer requests.

Thank you, Pastor Ramon and Marisol Collazo. Thank you, people of God at Santa Isabel Lutheran Church and its local partners. Thank you, New Jersey Synod and ELCA churchwide organization, for the support you give to these ministries, so we can all be active in love among our immigrant neighbors.



For your reflection:

1. When have you known pain so deep that there were no words? Have you sat with anyone in such pain?
2. What is your definition of hope?
3. How can your church move from the question, "Who is my neighbor?" to the question, "How can we show active love to our neighbors, especially immigrants in our midst?"

7. Bridge to Building Community: ESL

Phoebe Smith

St. Andrew/San Andres Lutheran Church, West Chicago, Ill.

In 1988, my white family of four first walked through the doors of St. Andrew Lutheran Church, a typical Midwestern ELCA congregation, made up of friendly people mostly of northern European heritage. We had spent months shopping for a new church home after having spent the previous five years in Mexico City.

Our congregation in Mexico City was a mix of U.S. and Mexican parishioners, with a depth of faith and a richness of cultural sharing that we longed to carry over when we transferred to a new church home in the United States. We didn't hold much hope for this to happen in this predominately white Chicago suburb in 1988.

Despite the apparent absence of anyone not of European descent, we felt a strong and immediate pull to St. Andrew. My heart jumped for reasons I could not understand. I felt as if a force had led us to this place, and we never imagined the wonders that lay ahead for us.

Over the next few weeks, the young and perceptive pastor took an earnest interest in the unusual journey that had led us to this church. He actively listened to our story, taking note of our gifts and yearnings. After a time, the pastor asked if I might be interested in becoming a global mission advocate for St. Andrew.

"What's that?" I responded and quickly threw myself into learning what this meant.

I came to understand that advocating global ministry in one's church means intentionally strengthening people's awareness of a greater community of believers beyond our borders. As an advocate, I would call attention to the beauty and richness of all cultures that existed in God's world, stressing that we are both givers and receivers, which causes us to grow spiritually when we connect on any level. An example would be how our mutual faiths are strengthened just by listening to one another's stories. Promoting global ministry also reminds us all to love one another. Thinking and acting globally brings with it great joy; it also brings a great responsibility for care of one another.

After 10 years of global ministering, we had a Global Mission team, building enthusiasm with colorful presentations and narthex exhibits, international potlucks and sermons preached by missionary pastors on furlough. As a congregation, we focused on various countries and cultures, providing hands-on support for Bosnian and Cuban refugee families, and we organized an educational trip for 14 congregants to the Lutheran Center in Mexico City. This trip led us to focus on the needs of the growing Latiné community in our city. We invited Latino leaders in the area to speak about their daily lives and the challenges they faced. Our congregation was learning to become active listeners.

Those 10 years were a tremendous time of learning, of changing preformed opinions and of softening hearts at St. Andrew. I had an ever-present feeling that the Spirit of God was working

within and around us, because when things go smoothly — without you pushing — you kind of sense that the Holy Spirit is leading. I eagerly followed.

That was the 10-year warm-up for the most amazing things to come including the development of an extensive adult English as a Second Language (ESL) program that served a thousand students over 14 years. Out of this program and with the support of Pastor Pedro Suarez and Pastor Ruben Duran came a Spanish worship service, requested by the ESL students themselves.

Violet's Reflection

No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him. —1 Corinthians 2:9

If I had to title the story of St. Andrew/San Andres as told by Phoebe Smith, it would be called “Surprised by God.” This story speaks of the God who breaks down stereotypes and goes beyond what even our most creative minds imagine. I know this firsthand. The old saying warns us not to judge a book by its cover, but my shelves are lined with many unread books purchased for their most beautifully designed covers.

My first field education site in seminary was a church situated in a part of Philadelphia that was predominately working-class white folks. At that time, the neighborhood was known as somewhat unwelcoming to anyone who didn’t look like them. This was not a congregation I would have considered joining, especially with my interracial family. I even tried to get the seminary to change my placement, saying I most likely would never accept a call in such a place. But God had other ideas — or surprises, as I now like to think of them — and not only did I serve my first year of seminary in that congregation, but I fell in love with the people, who not only taught me but also loved and welcomed my family.

Phoebe Smith describes being “led” into St. Andrew and taken to a place that went beyond her imagination. The pastor noted her interests and gifts and introduced her to being a global mission advocate, and Phoebe responded with curiosity and openness to learning that ultimately led to the formation of an active Global Ministry team, people who were enriched by expanding their world.

When I first stumbled into seminary after realizing there was a seminary right behind my bus stop, the registrar said that if I wanted to take classes, ancient Greek would be a requirement because it was the language of the New Testament. Having grown up in a faith that didn’t focus on biblical literacy, I balked at this, saying, “Why study Greek when I haven’t even read the Bible in English?” Four years later, I was the teaching assistant for New Testament Greek, having fallen in love with the language. I could see God smiling and saying, “Surprise! I can do more than you ever could imagine.” Now every time I protest or resist something, I just wait for God’s next surprise. It always comes, making my life fuller and richer in ways I could never imagine on my own.

Ruben's Reflection

If you are left-handed, can you sign your name right-handed with equal accuracy? If you are right-handed, can you sign your name left-handed with equal accuracy? If you can, then you are ambidextrous. That's a great gift to have.

What about God? Is God ambidextrous? Describing how God works in the world, Martin Luther came up with the idea of God using both hands, known as the Theory of the Two Kingdoms. Luther taught that God works in and through the church, and in and through civil society. Dr. Craig Nesson, my good friend and a professor at Wartburg Theological Seminary, also points out in one of his writings that God is ambidextrous.

In the story shared by Phoebe Smith, one can see the two hands of God bringing people together. God was accompanying immigrants on their journey to the West Chicago area and mobilizing organizations and institutions to support their journey. At the same time, God was preparing St. Andrew Lutheran Church to open its doors to the new, growing groups of neighbors and eventually become St. Andrew/San Andres Lutheran Church, an ambidextrous community of faith.

The unique encounter took place through Phoebe's initiative to develop an ESL class. This connection became a bridge across which people could learn from each other's worlds and build strong and trusting relationships. Then the crucial moment came, a moment I see happening more and more these days; a moment when people on the margins of society, having gained confidence through friendship and trust, dare to ask questions — not the actual questions Phoebe got but questions such as: *Are you a church? You look like a church, you sound like a church, and you act like a church — are you a church?* I can picture Phoebe's surprised face as she received such bold questions. Of course, her response would be yes, we are St. Andrew Lutheran Church. Her jaw probably hit the floor at hearing the punch line: *Well, if you are a church, why are you not inviting us? We need God too!*

I remember the phone call I received while serving as associate to the bishop and mission director in the ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod, with responsibilities for the West Conference, which included the West Chicago area. I responded that the language barrier could be addressed easily if we could create a team of bilingual partners to work at this. During those initial years, the Rev. Pedro Suarez, now bishop of the ELCA Florida-Bahamas Synod, was planting a new church in Aurora, Ill., called San Francisco De Asis. I called him to help lead the Saturday noon Spanish worship services for our neighbors. I remember Pastor Pedro bringing a van with children from Aurora to serve as *monaguillos* (acolytes) for the service. I invited Jorge Cortes, one of the ESL students, to join me with the music. I gave him a set of quick lessons to play guitar for the liturgy. He still plays today at church, every Sunday, along with a music team he has formed. His lovely wife, Teresa, helped with preparing the altar, which she still does today after 26 years.

The day of the first worship service in Spanish arrived — Saturday, Dec. 12, 1998, the feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe. I wasn't the only one nervously wondering if people would show up. They did.

We sang, we cried, we prayed, we heard a powerful message from Pastor Pedro, and we received the eucharist together, joining hands and singing the Lord's Prayer. Then we knew this was to be something special. The two hands of God had made this happen.

The word got out, and more people joined worship on Saturdays. They also joined the ESL classes with Phoebe and her team. We recognize other colleagues who helped build this ministry, the Rev. Antonio Cabello and the Rev. Neris Cabello. Then the church called full-time pastors to take this ministry to even higher levels and stronger impact in the community at large: the Rev. Jaime Dubon, the Rev. Josh Ebener and the recently-called Rev. Alex Molina. These leaders are held in high esteem by people in the church and in the city of West Chicago.

Today St. Andrew/San Andres Lutheran Church is one church with two expressions, not two separate entities. This is a real witness to what God can do, bringing diverse people together in a common purpose amid a society experiencing divisiveness, fear and suspicion. Over the years, this church has generated many partnerships with key leaders, organizations, other churches and institutions in the public square that strengthen a collaborative approach to serve immigrants and established Latine neighbors. These alliances have made it possible for this church to serve thousands of people with basic needs as they come every other Saturday.

As you can see, with the leadership of Phoebe, Jorge and Teresa; pastors Ruben, Pedro, Antonio, Neris, Jaime, Josh and Alex; and many alliances in the community at large, the two hands of God have come together to build an ambidextrous church.

How about your church?



For your reflection:

1. Have you ever been surprised by God? What was your response?
2. Phoebe Smith says she “held the door open” to the work of the Holy Spirit. Can you share a time when you have done this?
3. What is a gift of diversity in your life?

8. From the Fields to the Pulpit

Rev. Miguel Gomez-Acosta
Senior Director for New Ministry Development and Evangelism
ELCA Christian Community and Leadership

I was destined from birth to be a Lutheran. I was born in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, to a young mother who got pregnant out of wedlock. This was a major no-no in 1970s Mexican society but especially in a Pentecostal household. The church pressured my grandfather to banish my mom for her grievous sin, but he refused to shun his youngest daughter, noting that his love for her was greater than her “sin.” Thus began my journey of grace.

My parents came from two different faith traditions — my father was Roman Catholic and my mother Pentecostal. Though these young parents tried to make their marriage work, they divorced when I was 8 months old. I grew up with a single mom and rarely saw my father. I was secretly baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, with my aunt pretending to be my mother. My baptism would be a source of concern for me later in life because I could not accept how I was baptized. Finally, my Lutheran pastor reminded me that what matters in baptism is not what people do but what God does. My baptism was a farce in my eyes, but in God’s eyes, I was God’s child.

When I was 7 years old, my mother left me in Mexico so that she could take a chance in the United States, since our prospects of a good life at home were few. She worked as a maid for a family in Los Angeles until she was able to join her older sister in Salinas, Calif., where they both harvested lettuce. After a year, she felt secure enough to return to Mexico to bring me back with her. Undocumented, we settled in Salinas, where I would start school and join my family in the lettuce fields on weekends.

My mother remarried two years later, and we moved to Guam, then to the Bay Area, until she and her second husband divorced five years later. We moved back in with our family in Salinas, but the trauma of the divorce sent me into a downward spiral of several risky behaviors. During this time, my little Lutheran church, Iglesia Luterana El Buen Pastor, would be stable ground on which I could stand. This little church was started by a mission developer for the Lutheran Church in America who had made a connection with my family when my mother was settling in Salinas. My mom, aunt and uncle were charter members of this ministry. When I was in Mexico, I was a Pentecostal, but as soon I arrived in the United States, I became Lutheran.

I was 16 years old when I truly accepted God’s grace and mercy, letting go of the pain of my mother’s second divorce. I started making healthier choices. I spent my junior and senior years of high school participating in a youth group with our sister ELCA congregations and going on mission trips to share the good news of God’s love with as many people as I could. During this time, I felt the call to full-time ministry. I thought I would be a missionary overseas, so I chose to attend the Lutheran Bible Institute of Seattle (now Trinity Lutheran College) in preparation for my vocational call.

LBIS was a great place of growth for me. Not only was I challenged to consider my call to Word and Sacrament, as encouraged by mentors and academic advisers, but I met the love of my life, Rachel,

who would become my bride after graduation. We remained in the Seattle area, where I finished my M.Div. from Fuller Theological Seminary and started a family.

My first call was in the ELCA Grand Canyon Synod (encompassing Arizona and part of Nevada) as a mission developer for a Spanish-speaking mission start. After seven years as a mission developer, I was called to First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mesa, Ariz., where I served as senior pastor for three years. In 2016, I was called to serve as Director for Evangelical Mission in the Grand Canyon Synod, which allowed me to live my passion for evangelism and mission in a greater context. In June 2023, I started my current role as senior director for new ministry development and evangelism in the Christian Community and Leadership home area of the churchwide organization.

I believe my life's journey has prepared me for where I am today. My formative years in Mexico as a Pentecostal gave me a sense of urgency for the gospel, to which I still fervently hold. My immigrant experience allows me to see the world much differently from some of our siblings in Christ. My ministry experience has equipped me with a deep passion for evangelism and a clear vision for the future of the church. I have been blessed for knowing the hard work of the lettuce fields and preaching in the pulpits of the privileged. For that I am thankful!

Violet's Reflection

Nope, nothing can separate us from the love of God (my interpretation of Romans 8:31-39)!

In Pastor Miguel's powerful telling of his life story and call to ministry, there is a phrase near the end that draws me. Pastor Miguel speaks of his sense of "urgency for the gospel." According to the Cambridge Dictionary, urgency is "the quality of being very important and needing attention immediately." The word has become more popular with the recent rise of urgent care centers, walk-in clinics that are more accessible, for a variety of health-related issues. In some ways, this makes me think of churches as urgent care centers for our souls — places and communities of healing that should be easily accessible but sometimes cause pain and division. For Pastor Miguel, however, the "little Lutheran Church," Iglesia Luterana El Buen Pastor, became a place of grounding that reminded him who he was as a beloved child of God, an urgent message indeed.

I have often been asked, "Why be a pastor?" especially when I have been trained as a psychotherapist with years of experience in social services. All my work has had a common thread of trying to bring hope and healing into a world that seems to be shattered and groaning with pain. I never believed that you needed a certain degree or even a specialized field to make this happen. We can create goodness anywhere: I remember how my co-worker at a fast-food restaurant always greeted customers in a way that made them stand taller as they waited for their burger and fries. But the message of the gospel is what drew me into the ministry — a message so powerful that nothing, not even death, could destroy it. I feel this same urgency to spread the good news in all places, especially on the street with folks who have been told so many other things that make them feel unloved and worthless. This is the privilege I have as a pastor — to do this in the name of a faith community as my life's work. In fact, this is the privilege given to each of us as children of God, to share a message so wonderful it can change the world.

I remember one woman, Barbara, telling me the story of her childhood. When she was young, her mother was so depressed that she nearly drowned her in a bathtub. I can barely write these words without viscerally feeling the terror that young child must have felt. Even as an adult, Barbara struggled to tell her story, still so fresh in her mind. As a result, she grew up thinking she was unlovable, a “throwaway.” In her mind, the message was clear: if her own mother didn’t want her, then she must be unlovable. Barbara turned to drugs to ease this unimaginable pain, but over months and years, with much support and love from our community, Barbara began to realize that she really was a beloved child of God.

Miguel’s experiences helped shape him to be the strong and compassionate pastor he is today. Though God doesn’t eliminate the hard things that happen as part of our life journeys, God does give us the opportunity to use every bit of our lives to bring hope and healing to others. This is the urgent message of God’s grace and mercy that we need to share with one another each day that we are given.

Ruben’s Reflection

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way.” —Luke 10:1-3

My family and I were driving from Chicago to Estes Park, Colo. As we entered the state of Nebraska, our maps showed the proximity of a national park site in a small town called Beatrice. At first, I was reluctant to deviate from our route, but we had a U.S. National Parks souvenir passport book that needed to be stamped. We drove there, and I’m glad we did. I had no idea of the significant learning that awaited us.

Two important historical facts displayed at this site made the trip worthwhile:

1. Known as the Homestead National Historical Park, this site commemorates passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed any qualified person to claim up to 160 acres of federally owned land in exchange for five years of residence and the cultivation and improvement of the property. The act eventually transferred 270 million acres of land from public to private ownership. This followed the U.S. government’s displacement of American Indians, the legislating of westward expansion, the migration and immigration of European people and the emphasis on agriculture. All of this emanated from the Doctrine of Discovery, a set of documents signed by European monarchs and religious leaders such as the Pope that authorized the takeover of land and resources from non-Christian communities in God’s name.
2. In this national historical center, I found several maps of the southwest territories, especially one that showed how landmarks of the United Mexican States once reached up to the Denver area and even further north into the Twin Sisters Peaks. This was a real surprise. Here I thought we were going to Colorado when in fact we were really going to Mexico!

I was shocked at the implications of these historical facts. These maps are real evidence of the massive strategy of the United States of America to take over lands and populate them with new

immigrants from Europe. Over time, the territories known as Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, California, Florida and Texas became part of a new nation with a new language and new owners. This, in my opinion, explains why many people say, “We did not cross the border — the border crossed us.”

The colonization system created new realities that benefited European immigrants at the expense of the dwellers who had always been there. Now local dwellers had to work extra hard just to survive while the privileged people filled their coffers. There’s a popular saying attributed to South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had our land.” Similar dynamics have been experienced in other parts of the world where strategies of Christianizing and colonizing were interconnected.

Despite the harsh reality of oppression and marginalization experienced in the southwest area of this country, people have not given up. Their resiliency and courage, sustained by their spirituality and a faith tested by centuries, have kept hopes alive. Working together in family units and in a communal way has also provided a base for organizing farm workers to fight for their rights, as Cesar Chavez did in Northern California and beyond.

In this historical and geographical context, Pastor Miguel and his family had to work hard and be constantly on the move. Thank God for the presence and ministry of Iglesia Luterana El Buen Pastor in Salinas! What a place of grace, hope and Christian formation it became for him and his family. This Christian community articulated the faith with great relevance, became a training ground for Miguel’s leadership and propelled him into the future.

Our paths crossed as he headed north to study at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Seattle and later at Fuller Theological Seminary, institutions I also attended. During these years he was able to confirm God’s call in his life with a deep passion for evangelism and a solid commitment to work for justice and the well-being of all people, those in vulnerable communities and those in places of privilege.

I am a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in Miguel’s life. Just as Jesus called and sent fishermen to become fishers of people for God, so the Spirit has called Pastor Miguel from harvesting lettuce into a new harvest. He is harvesting new leaders, coaching them and sending them forth into the harvest of the Lord.

Thanks be to God for Pastor Miguel’s leadership in our church.

The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few, so pray to the Lord to send more laborers into his harvest!



For your reflection:

1. The Iglesia Luterana El Buen Pastor in Salinas, Calif., was crucial for Pastor Miguel’s healing and growth. How are you experiencing your community of faith today?
2. In what ways do you see Pentecostal and Lutheran churches complementing each other? Some leaders describe themselves as Luther-costal. Why do you think that is?
3. Jesus says that the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. How do you see your community raising leaders and praying for new ones?

9. A Second-generation Latina Connection Story

Anna Duran Cid del Prado
Oak Park, Ill.

I remember my first experience being embarrassed for not knowing Spanish. My fourth-grade teacher asked me if I knew how to pronounce the word *gracias* in a book she was reading aloud to the class. I didn't recognize the word when I saw it, but as soon as I heard it out loud, I was ashamed of my Spanish skills and angry at myself for not being able to read even the simplest of words. Later in life, I pursued Spanish as a minor in college and got all A's. However, I was always worried about making mistakes. For example, I couldn't even go to a Spanish Club meeting because I was too nervous to speak to other people in Spanish. It can be a lot of pressure to learn a new language, and I always wanted to learn because I was proud of my Latiné culture; however, not everyone considered me Latina because I don't speak Spanish and because I am half Peruvian. With perseverance and hardship in learning a new language, I still struggle at times, but I continue to try my best.

I tell these short stories because I know many others can relate. Most recently, Disney's movie *Encanto* has everyone talking about first- and second-generation Latinos. A celebration of Latino culture, *Encanto* reveals many truths. The family Madrigal has many members, but the main characters are the three sisters, Luisa, Isabela and Maribel. They are second-generation Latina women with very different personalities. Being one of three daughters myself, I immediately was drawn in. There's one sister who carries the family's burdens, another who strives for perfection and another who breaks with tradition. The story emphasizes generational expectations and family division. The main theme is self-acceptance and being proud of who you are.

Where is God in all this, you may ask? Throughout my life, God has guided me and accompanied me through the hardest of times. God was there when I felt alone or felt like I didn't belong. Ultimately God accepts who you are to the core of your being. We are all part of God's family, and God yearns for us to accept who we are as children of God. We can be proud of our heritage as second-generation Latinas, but we can also be proud of being unconditionally loved as God's children. God asks us to throw all shame away and truly embrace our purpose to grow the family of God instead of creating divisions. When I feel anxious for not understanding Spanish or guilty for breaking family traditions, I remember that God accepts me no matter what. I am proud to be Latina, and I am proud to be a child of God.

Violet's Reflection

"Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" —Luke 13:16

When I read Anna's moving account of what it was like for her to find her place and her identity as a second-generation Latina American woman, I thought of the story in Luke of the woman who had been bent over for 18 years. Anna was bent over by the many demands of a society that tries to tell us who we are, what we should look like and even how we should speak. So many times we try to fit within the norms set by a dominant culture because we want to fit in, to belong — literally

a longing to be, to have others see us! What's more, Anna speaks of "generational expectations and family divisions." Where is the balance that allows us to celebrate our heritage while at the same time making space for each of us to be who we are meant to be?

In the story of the "bent-over" woman, part of the healing Jesus gives her is that he calls her a "daughter of Abraham" — a title that instantly ties this woman to the generations before her. The significance of this title might be hard for us to fully appreciate today, but in her bent-over state, this woman, who is not given a name in the story, would have been considered untouchable, someone to be "canceled," as we might say today; instead, Jesus connects her as a direct descendant of the ones who were chosen to be part of salvation history.

Though Anna carried some of the burdens placed on her by a society whose vision, at best, is blurred when it comes to diversity of any kind, Anna can stand tall, proud of who she is, because she is connected "at the core of her being." Her deepest identity is being a child of God, a God who links us together but blesses our differences.

I remember finding an old string of pearls in a basement someone was cleaning out. One day the string broke, and I expected the pearls to spill all over the place. Instead just one pearl came loose. I was told that these were "good" pearls, because, even though they were linked together to form a beautiful piece of jewelry, each pearl had its own separate knot holding it in place — connected but also on its own.

In the end, our identity as children of God is what carries each of us through any difficulty we might face. This identity allows us to use the amazing gifts each of us has been given for the good of the world.

I live in a row house, which means the houses are built very close to one another. On my neighbor's deck, I noticed a tiny solar light that she had placed next to each of her plants. I love sitting out at night, watching how this little light highlights the subtle beauty of these plants that I so easily miss during the day. The light of God shines on each of us, highlighting the beauty of what we each bring. We just need to open our eyes.

Ruben's Reflection

How courageous of Anna to share her life journey with openness, transparency and vulnerability. She invites us into the world and worldview of children of immigrants. Her struggles are real, as is her determination to deal with them and overcome them with faith and family values. The road is not easy; it is complex. But she is not alone in her quest for her own voice and identity. No matter where in the world immigrants come from, their emerging generations will experience similar dynamics on our soil.

In her journey as a second-generation Latina, Anna has been influenced by three things. First, her family, with its history, interracial dynamics, Latiné cultural values, deep faith and immigrant spirit. Second, mainstream society in the U.S., with its values, opportunities and expectations, forces for adaptation and integration, and the social tension between growing racial diversity and deep-seated racial prejudice.

The third and most important influence is the dialogue that second-generation Latiné people have within themselves. This is the ongoing challenge: the carving of their own space, the creation of an identity that honors their uniqueness while welcoming other worldviews and expressions of diversity. Anna and others like her are weaving new and unique tapestries daily, tapestries of many colors, images and shapes that express the varied, complex and beautiful stories of their generation and how they connect with others.

Why is this journey unique? If you recall, new generations of northern European immigrants who came to this country were told and were expected to leave behind their language and cultures to be a part of the American experiment known as the melting pot, creating a white, monocultural society. This expectation has affected all areas of life, even how one would be welcomed into a church. The Rev. Virgilio Elizondo of San Antonio, Texas, once observed that the U.S. can no longer be described as a melting pot but rather as a stewpot that preserves the unique identity of each ingredient yet still produces a delicious and nutritious meal. This is a hot issue even today, the friction between the two visions creating fear and dividing society. One thing is clear: a monocultural society has no future here.

Anna is not alone in this journey of changing the social landscape in the U.S. Just look at the Latiné community, 66 million people in the U.S. and Caribbean (that's 1 in 5), comprising immigrants, established families and new generations. At least 40% of this growing population are new-generation Latiné, or NGLs. Others call them Latiné Millennials. There are 26.4 million NGLs, born on U.S. soil or here for at least 15 years, between the ages of 14 and 34. They are mostly urban, are English-language dominant and lead bilingual-bicultural lifestyles. They have deep ties to parents and grandparents, and deep roots in faith.

Anna's generation is a new, contributing force in the emergence of a multiethnic society of people who struggle to break stereotypes and live into the full diversity, equity and inclusion of all people. This force will only get stronger. Just 14 years ago, in 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau declared a tipping point when, for the first time, the majority of babies born (50.4%) were of Latiné, Black, Asian and mixed-race ancestry. That figure is growing annually, with clear evidence in every local school.

What an amazing opportunity this presents for you, your church and your social networks to engage this emerging generation of people. First, consider watching the movie *Encanto* that Anna references in her story. I also recommend the 1971 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Second, consider building relationships with Latiné families that include this emerging generation. Third, invite this emerging generation of leaders to create avenues of service and spiritual connection with the greater community. Remember that they are weaving a new tapestry, so the more relationships the better, and that includes you.

These second-generation Latiné leaders are an unopened gift to the church and society, key players in God's mission in the world. I recall how the apostle Paul saw the gift in a young adult disciple called Timothy. Paul reminded Timothy that his gift of faith had been passed on to him by a previous generation, by his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5-7). Then Paul called on Timothy to entrust that gift to other disciples who would then be able to teach others (2 Timothy 2:1-2). True disciples of Jesus are natural evangelists, using their diverse vocations in life.

I pray that your church will connect with, bless and send out this emerging generation of Latiné leaders into a changing world.



For your reflection:

1. Are you carrying anything that weighs you down?
2. Can you name a time when you helped carry another person's burdens?
3. Can you share about an intergenerational relationship you have experienced?

10. Against All Odds

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras, Pastor
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Wausau, Wis.

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." —Genesis 12:1

Since I was a little girl, I have been fascinated with the story of Jesus Christ. My Sunday school played a significant role in shaping my faith. God's grace and the people God put into my life have made me who I am today.

I grew up in a Palestinian Christian family that embraces ecumenical relationships. My parents planted the seed of faith in me and have supported my call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. I encountered one obstacle to achieving my call — there were no single, Palestinian female pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). No one believed that God called Palestinian women to ministry, only men. Despite this, my parents and a Lutheran religion teacher named Ferial Oasis believed in God's call for me.

In 2001, I went to Egypt to earn my first master's degree in biblical studies, yet the ordination of women was not accepted in Egypt either. Though my professors and colleagues discredited my call, I never doubted it. I returned after graduation to serve in the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, as director of Christian education. After three years of seeking ordination in the ELCJHL, I realized that I needed to pursue ordination through the ELCA. In 2008, I left my family and country for the United States and attended the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) to earn my Th.M. (Master of Theology) and Ph.D. in the Old Testament, and to seek ordination.

Even though I was surrounded by female colleagues preparing for ministry alongside me, I still encountered people who discredited my call and encouraged me to finish my Ph.D. and go home. One staff member went so far as to inform me that I would never get a scholarship for an M.Div. Despite discouragement, I never lost hope. Eventually God led me to the Rev. Ruben Duran, senior adviser for new ministry development in the ELCA, who affirmed God's call for me. He played a major role in bringing me to what I am today — a Palestinian minister in the ELCA. Rev. Duran heard me speaking at the ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans in 2009. He approached me and asked if I was interested in ministry. I said yes, but I didn't know where to start. He met with me many times, helped me win a scholarship and even traveled to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) to advocate for me. After I completed my internship, he arranged for me to serve in a church in Minneapolis to remain legal in the United States. Rev. Duran worked hard to meet the requirements of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) regarding my religious visa and green card. He graciously communicated with Bishop Jerry Mansholt to find a church for my first call.

Finally, in 2016, I was ordained and began to serve Immanuel Lutheran Church of Wausau, Wis. It didn't take me long to discover the cultural differences. These pertained not only to my Palestinian culture but also to representing a new generation of pastors. My generation is not hesitant to talk about social issues from the pulpit and is interested in critical readings of the Bible. Some of my

parishioners were critical of my sermons and Bible studies, and some are still critical. It took me a year to realize that the church is impacted by a partisan divide; members bring their political party values to church. I had to read about Democratic and Republican principles to understand my congregation and my community. I reached out to my synod for help as well. Bishop Mansholt sent two people to speak to my congregation several times. It took my congregation and me almost four years to understand each other.

One major challenge I faced was when my religious visa expired before I received my work permit. I had to stop serving my congregation for four months. Rev. Duran, my synod and my congregation never left me in those difficult moments. Some people stepped in to lead worship services, and many others were generous toward me.

I rejoice in my ministry despite all challenges and enjoy serving my congregation and serving with them. There is no joy or honor comparable to those of serving Christ's church. I will always be thankful for those who accompanied me to be who I am today.

Ruben's Reflection

Have you had the opportunity to attend an ordination service? It's a great celebration. There is a special moment when all movement ceases. The candidate has been charged with commitments to be kept and has responded affirmatively. Then the candidate kneels before the altar, and every movement stops for a few moments. There may be some musical background, or one of the most beautiful canticles may begin with a cantor, a choir or the whole congregation singing and repeating this prayer in a solemn way, some even just humming. The words are: VENI SANCTE SPIRITUS, VENI SANCTE SPIRITUS! This is Latin for "Come, Holy Spirit, come, Holy Spirit!"

This solemn, precious moment acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the ordinand, before this day, on this day and in the days ahead. The Holy Spirit is what creates faith in the believer, endows all with gifts, brings forth a sense of vocation, accompanies all as a counselor and issues calls to all as ministers, lay ministers and rostered ministers.

I remember this special moment on June 26, 1986, at St. John Lutheran Church in Oakland, Calif., with Bishop Stan Olson leading the Rite of Ordination for me. I remember my wife's ordination service on Aug. 23, 1992, in Chicago, with our beloved Bishop Sherman Hicks, and I remember the ordination of our friend and colleague Dr. Niveen Sarras in Minneapolis in 2016 with Bishop Gerald Mansholt of the ELCA East-Central Synod of Wisconsin leading that joyous celebration.

I marvel at how the Spirit of God uses people and communities to tap us on the shoulder and show how and when to move forward. God used the encouragement of Captain Escobar, a retired military officer and member of my church in Peru. I thought he was trying to recruit me to the military until I realized he was pointing me into pastoral ministry. I believe that God used the conversations I had with my wife, Jean, while washing dishes. I noticed a clear sense of call within her, but she was coming from another branch of Lutheranism that didn't allow women to be in leadership, much less to be a pastor. Everything changed when she realized that the door was wide open in the Lutheran Church in America, a predecessor church to the ELCA.

God used a casual encounter and dialogue between Dr. Niveen and me at the ELCA Youth Gathering in New Orleans to confirm her sense of call to serve as a pastor. That desire was already there for years, discouraged by some at times. But then, with a simple invitation, some coaching and connections with other leaders and church communities, her leadership and gifts became evident to members of the Synod Candidacy Committee, who approved and endorsed her for ministry in the ELCA. With the help of colleagues in synods, seminaries, congregations and the churchwide organization, Dr. Niveen was able to navigate all processes successfully. We even appealed to our colleagues at the Augsburg Lutheran Seminary in Mexico to invite her to give some lectures in Old Testament studies so she could leave the country and, on the way back, renew her I-94 entry form, which was expiring prior to her getting a residence visa.

Bishop Mansholt was very supportive, as was his successor in the East-Central Synod of Wisconsin, Bishop Anne Edison-Albright. Bishop Anne has been instrumental in Pastor Niveen's transition from serving Immanuel Lutheran in Wausau, Wis., to a new call at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Neenah, Wis. Pastor Niveen's gifts and talents are taking off, leading parishioners deep into the study of Scripture so they'll be better equipped to live out the good news in daily life and invite others to experience a community of love, hope and justice. As a Palestinian leader, she invites church and community to pray for the world, especially for ceasefire, peace and a resolution to the violent conflict in the Middle East. Dr. Niveen is also a frequent lecturer in colleges, universities and seminaries.

For me, a highlight of Dr. Niveen's graduation ceremony was the opportunity to meet her mother, Catherine Silvia. Catherine expressed deep appreciation to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America from their family and their church in Palestine for accompanying her daughter in the U.S. so she could fulfill the call she had received at a young age. I saw their embrace, their tears of joy, the look of pride in a loving mother's face and their firm confidence in the work of the Holy Spirit for things yet to come.

God is still calling and sending leaders of all kinds to do God's work. Abram and Sara were told to go to another country, another culture, another place that God would show them. God promised that as immigrants in a strange land, they would become a blessing to others. They did, and we know the rest of the story. I see the same movement in the life and ministry of this servant of God, the Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras, a Palestinian minister in our midst. I hope you see it too.

God is still calling. There are people around you who wonder what the Spirit is trying to tell them. Can we count on you to engage them in dialogue, in relationship, in prayer?

God is still calling.

Violet's Reflection

I am because you are ...

The words above beautifully express the Ubuntu concept that none of us can live in isolation. Others have said, "It takes a village ..." and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all

indirectly.” The story of Dr. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras shows how so many hands and hearts have helped her to live out her life’s calling as a pastor and proclaimer of the good news.

Her early fascination with the stories of Jesus led her to a hunger for more; the seeds of faith were nurtured and supported by her parents despite there being no female Palestinian pastors. Her story made me think of my own past growing up in a church that still doesn’t allow women to be pastors. I wept the first time I heard a woman preach and had a visceral reaction to seeing her with a clerical collar and stole. I also remembered interviewing the Rev. April Larson shortly after she was elected the first woman bishop in the ELCA, the denomination in which I am now ordained. Bishop Larson shared the story of saying to her mother, “I don’t know how a bishop is supposed to look.” Her mother stood her in front of a mirror and said, “This is how a bishop is supposed to look!”

Many had a hand in placing Dr. Niveen before that mirror and telling her, “This is how a pastor is supposed to look!” Niveen names those people in her story, stressing the important role that my co-author, the Rev. Dr. Ruben Duran, played in her life. Accompaniment is crucial for each of us if we are to live our lives as God intended.

I grasped this many years ago when I needed an infusion of a blood product for a neuromuscular disorder that had left me very weak. I couldn’t lift my arms, and I struggled to keep my eyes open. The blood product to be infused was gamma globulin, which, I learned, was made from a tiny part of the blood. To have enough for an infusion, many, many donors had to give blood.

As the infusion began, I started to visualize all those donors. Soon I could feel hundreds of hands lifting me back to health, and then, the greatest gift of all, I could see God holding all those donors in God’s own divine hands.

The story of Dr. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras and her call to ministry is one in which the God of all possibilities makes the impossible happen, using the love and faith of many on her journey. I am because we are — and we are because God is!



For your reflection:

1. Was there a time when what seemed impossible became possible in your life?
2. What people most supported you on your faith journey?
3. How have you been a help for others in living out their life callings?

11. A Refugee Journey

Rev. Moses Suah Dennis
Director of Evangelical Mission
ELCA Southeast Pennsylvania Synod

My life's journey began in Liberia amid suspicion and uncertainty. It took a dramatic turn after I heard the gospel from a street-preaching, female, African evangelist. Her message sent me on a faith journey to Lutheran congregations in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana and the United States. I spent eight years in a wilderness of refugee camps along my journey and ultimately landed in Philadelphia, Pa., on July 26, 2001.

A new phase of my life's journey began in 2002, when I enrolled in Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and started the candidacy process in the ELCA Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. I was ordained March 4, 2006, served as a mission developer for six years, followed this with 10 years of pastoral ministry, and was appointed by Bishop Patricia Davenport to be co-director for evangelical mission in the synod in 2022.

I was born in Bong County, Central Liberia, into a polygamous family. My mother was the fifth wife of my late father, having married him during his prime years, at the dawn of the 1970s. My childhood and teen years in rural Liberia were filled with longings that prepared me for the Christian faith. I lived with my maternal grandfather for a little over eight years in rural Liberia and later moved to Kakata. This brought me to St. Paul Lutheran Parish, where I began attending Sunday school and the parish's elementary school.

The Rev. Henry George, the evangelist at St. Paul parish, became a father figure and mentor to me. His exemplary leadership and my enrollment in the parish elementary school had the greatest influence on me during those early, formative years of my life and faith. In addition to canvassing neighborhoods around our parish with members of the youth fellowship, I also traveled with Rev. George to satellite congregations to lead worship, administer the sacraments and train lay leaders. Our work at St. Paul ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Liberian civil war on Dec. 24, 1989.

I fled to Ghana by way of Ivory Coast to seek refuge from the war and continue my education. God miraculously sustained me in the refugee camps of Ivory Coast and Ghana through the support of church leaders, the refugee camp community and my own personal resilience. During my refugee years in Ghana, I completed high school through Harvard College in Cambridge, Mass.; earned my undergraduate degree in Christian ministry and religious studies at the former Ghana Christian College and Seminary and served as student evangelist at the Emmanuel Lutheran Refugee Congregation during the four years of my undergraduate studies.

The journey that began when I left my grandfather brought me to Philadelphia on July 26, 2001. During my first few months in Philadelphia, I was shocked by many aspects of U.S. culture and faced unexpected challenges. But with guidance from the Rev. Rosa Key, pastor of Tabernacle Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, I began a new chapter in life when I entered into the candidacy process for ordained ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I joined the Lutheran Theological

Seminary at Philadelphia family in September 2002, completed a degree in clinical pastoral education at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in summer 2003 and interned at Saint Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arlington, Mass., in 2004.

My call to serve Faith-Immanuel Lutheran Church in East Lansdowne (FILC), Pa., and to develop the Faith Worship Center was issued by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod on Feb. 1, 2006. The success story of Faith-Immanuel was made possible through six years of challenging, creative, collaborative, faithful leadership and a partnership involving personnel and financial support from my congregation, my synod and the churchwide organization. Faith-Immanuel is now a community hub in East Lansdowne, home to the Girl Scouts, the Faith Worship Daycare Center, a distribution site for Delaware County Share Food Program, the AFA Agency/FILC social ministry partner and other emerging ministries. All this grew out of a partnership between the three expressions of our beloved ELCA that began almost two decades ago.

Based on my life experience, I contend that the ELCA's engagement in hundreds of other strategic and maturing ministries like Faith-Immanuel needs to be continued, evaluated, strengthened intentionally, supported and expanded. This will maximize the significant assets that are turning decline into growth in specific places across the church. My journey stretches between two continents and two extremes of church life (growth in Africa and decline in the United States), giving me timely "good news from the margins" that is worth sharing.

Violet's Reflection

"Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." —Saint Augustine

Pastor Moses Suah-Dennis was aptly named. In his story we see a leader heeding the call of God in ways that were once unimaginable to him, guiding folks across continents and church bodies to the One who brings rest and hope to our restless and sometimes weary hearts. Reading his story, I was awed by his faith journey and struck by several key points.

To begin, Pastor Moses, like the Moses of ancient Biblical times, could not lead people out of the desert without entering it himself. In his own words, he spent years in a "wilderness" of refugee camps. His leadership and guidance of others wasn't conducted through a phone or GPS system — he stands alongside those he leads, offering his own vulnerability and experience in the desert to convey the hope of being led to a place of wholeness and peace. To lead someone out of the wilderness, you must be willing to enter the wilderness yourself, however that may look.

I was also struck by the words of Pastor Moses in his description of his teen years, "filled with longings" that prepared him for the Christian faith. I was curious to know more about those longings and started to reflect on the longings that led my own restless heart to the God I know in Jesus — a hunger for justice, for connection, for a sense of meaning in the suffering we all experience, and much more. Pastor Moses helped me to see how our "hunger pains" are actually a gift, leading us to a place of rest in God's heart.

From this beautiful story of one man's life journey, I learned that in order to lead, we must be willing to be led. God placed no shortage of leaders in Pastor Moses' path, from the unnamed "street-preaching, female, African evangelist" to the people of his beloved Faith-Immanuel congregation, where he now serves in addition to being his synod's co-director for evangelical mission.

I am grateful for the witness of Pastor Moses Suah-Dennis and all that he continues to teach in his ongoing life journey. I pray that I might continue in my own ministry and life with the sort of trust and deep listening for God's word that is shown in this story of one faithful leader and follower of God.

Ruben's Reflection

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us but life in you. —2 Corinthians 4:7-12

God used a street preacher in Liberia to call Pastor Moses into international leadership, which he carries out with much dedication and zeal. Every time I get to connect with him, I am inspired by his gentle spirit and his genuine joy in being a proclaimer of the good news in Jesus Christ. His eight-year experience as a refugee, filled with uncertainties, rough times, loneliness and affliction, did not crush him; instead, it clarified his purpose in life and his calling as an evangelist. As with the apostle Paul, these afflictions produced endurance, character and hope because God was preparing Pastor Moses, an earthen vessel, to bear witness to the power of God to transform lives and the world.

God is still calling people, and that includes you. You may not travel across continents, but your service and ministry among immigrants and others on the margins of society builds bridges across cultures and languages. You never know — each person you encounter and serve may be on a journey of discernment, a quest for a preferred future. Through your ministry, new people will become disciples, activated to invite others into the way of Jesus and to experience community, justice and love.

We are blessed to have Pastor Moses serving God in and through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. May his witness give strength and sustenance to your own leadership and service among your neighbors.



For your reflection:

1. Have you ever experienced "the wilderness"? What did it look like?
2. What are your longings? Have any of your longings led you to where you are today?
3. What people have guided you on your life journey? How have you guided others?

12. Chinese Witness in New York

**Rev. Mary Chang, *Pastor*
St. Jacobi Lutheran Church, New York, N.Y.**

In 1997, I had a respectable career as an educator in Hong Kong.

With my three lovely and naughty children, I lived in a 600-square-foot flat in Kowloon, a small fishing village. The local residents were Chinese from all over, but Cantonese was the major language. A British colony from 1842 to 1997, Hong Kong includes the Kowloon Peninsula, Hong Kong Island and about 200 small islands and new territories.

During the 1960s, many people fled from southern China to Hong Kong, the largest such migration since 1949. Hong Kong established its own identity but was initially known as a leader in industrial manufacturing. It later became one of the best banking centers worldwide, standing equally with New York and London.

I am proud of my hometown and proud of the hard work and dedication I brought to creating the cultural impact and bilingualism of British Hong Kong.

I am part of Hong Kong; its strength stays with me wherever I go.

In July 1990, my sister-in-law and I came to visit my daughter in Pittsburg, Pa. I hadn't seen my daughter since she left home almost two years earlier. I held her with a joyful heart and tears streaming down my face as we were reunited in this strange country of America.

From Pittsburg, I traveled to Philadelphia. In a take-out Chinese restaurant, the venerable Pastor Yao introduced me to a Vietnamese Chinese family who spoke Cantonese and helped me start my new job with neither a job description nor anything else.

I took this chance to serve and love our Lord by starting a ministry group with Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai ... mostly refugees from Southeast Asia. We may look alike in skin color, but we weren't alike in anything else. Lord help me!

As the new kid on the block, I searched for resources to help me communicate. I found biblical picture books with bilingual text so that my new friends could learn about faith with gospel tracts and pictures. They learned about faith, and, of course, I prayed in English with them! Pastor Yao was happy to gather people, and after 18 months of teaching, training and worship service, we had 18 adults baptized.

It has been a long journey. Now I am in my 26th year of service as an ELCA ordained pastor. Since 2018, I have been an outreach minister at St. Jacobi Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. By the work of the Holy Spirit, it has baptized over 100 Chinese adults. What was once a German Lutheran church is now a robust and growing Chinese church community.

I am grateful to God and to the church for treasuring and loving me and my family. God uses those who are vulnerable to bring God's kingdom on earth and to proclaim the gospel of Christ to a dislocated people. Thanks be to God, "for God so loved the world" (John 3:16).

Violet's Reflection

I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. —Psalm 13:5

I recently read a work of fiction in which a tiny part of the story involved a badger killed on the road by a speeding car. The author noted that the badger was killed simply because it had followed its mother's footsteps, not deviating from the path along the road. A small, weasel-like animal, the badger is a creature of habit and, based on scent, likes to follow a similar path each day in its search for food, rarely deviating from that path.

Like the badger, many of us are creatures of habit, following a path we know and finding comfort in the familiar, even if that turns out not to be our best way forward. Change is hard; for Pastor Mary Chang, however, change led to a thriving ministry that spread the good news of a loving Savior. Though we rejoice in even one person whose life has been transformed by the gospel, Pastor Chang had baptized 65 people within the first three years of her ministry, affirmed the baptism of dozens more and developed leadership skills in countless others.

Pastor Chang calls her story a testimony, always pointing with humility to the power of God in all she has done. She could have easily remained in her respectable career as an educator in her beloved Hong Kong, but following a visit to her daughter in Pittsburgh, her life was changed. Overcoming the barriers of language with the use of pictures, Pastor Chang used a common love of God and need for grace to connect her to a diverse community of Southeastern Asian refugees. Pastor Chang stepped out on faith, and she was held always in the hands of our loving God.

Reading Pastor Chang's testimony, I was struck by her deep sense of faith, trust and humility. Her joy and gratitude seep through her words like the tea I just spilled seeping through my paper towel. It was impossible for me to read her piece without absorbing some of that joy and gratitude.

In 2020, many of us found our lives turned upside-down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us are still recovering from the grief, fear, isolation and uncertainty the pandemic brought into every day of our lives. Even the simple things we thought we could count on — a trip to the grocery store, hugging our grandchildren — suddenly became a life-threatening challenge. Many of us couldn't go to church, yet we learned how to be church with one another. Though just about everything in our world changed during those early years of COVID, one thing never changed: the love and mercy of a gracious God.

As a child growing up in New York, I would go to the circus at Madison Square Garden every year with my father. I remember being fascinated by the trapeze artists, especially that magic moment when two were swinging and one reached out a hand to catch the other. That moment when one of them let go of the trapeze, waiting to be caught by the other, is my picture of faith. Pastor Chang shows us that God will always be there to catch us. But can we, as Pastor Chang did all those years ago, let go of whatever we might be hanging on to?

Ruben's Reflection

The journey of Pastor Mary Chang brings to life Jesus' words to his disciples known as the Great Commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Pastor Chang's sense of call and her confidence in the power of the gospel are aligned with God's vision of people of all nations becoming disciples of Jesus. The original Greek for "nations" was *ethne* — that is, God desires all ethnic groups to be disciples of Jesus. To realize this vision, Jesus sent out the first disciples in all directions to proclaim the gospel. Historically, such missionaries have traveled from west to east and north to south. With Pastor Chang, we have the unusual journey of a missionary from the East to the West.

Her mission is clear: every day she goes out to meet people, listens to their stories, accompanies them in their life journeys, serves them and, when the opportunity arises, shares with them the hope within her. She invites people to experience the covenant God makes with them in the sacrament of Baptism and then involves them in the teaching and formation of new disciples and leaders for church and community.

Pastor Chang's journey from east to west, spanning many years and thousands of miles, has been difficult, but God has always provided. Though she feels vulnerable and sometimes weak, she also experiences the dignity of her call, the authority given to her by God and the constant presence of the Spirit in all her endeavors.

God's vision, mission and provision have propelled Pastor Chang from Hong Kong to New York City. In 2018, the Metropolitan New York Synod and St. Jacobi Lutheran Church invited her to serve as a part-time interim pastor for the church. St. Jacobi was created about 150 years ago to welcome German and other European immigrants, providing them with a spiritual community for their new life in the United States. As the Germans and others began to move out of the neighborhood, church membership dwindled. For a season, St. Jacobi's served Latiné people as well as Germans. But as the neighborhood attracted Chinese and other Asian immigrants, word got out that there was a new Chinese pastor in town.

After leading worship for about 14 German Lutherans, Pastor Chang continued walking the streets to meet people and introduce them to Jesus Christ. People responded positively. I remember her phone call asking me to look into creating a new ELCA Chinese congregation that would be hosted by St. Jacobi's. With that as our initial goal, we set up a meeting to make plans and begin the process.

But the Holy Spirit had another plan. In mid-2023, Pastor Chang, a couple of her ministry leaders and I met with the Rev. Teresita Valeriano, ELCA director for Asian and Pacific Islander Ministries, and Branden DuPree, director for evangelical mission in the Metropolitan New York Synod. An idea occurred to us: what if, instead of creating a new Chinese church, we invited all new Chinese disciples

to become members of St. Jacobi's? It could become one church with two expressions: one primarily Germanic, worshiping in English, and one Asian, worshiping in Chinese. The idea became a strategy and soon a new reality. We knew full well that the Germanic expression of St. Jacobi's might not survive but that the new Asian expression might continue the historical legacy of a church dedicated to serving new immigrants.

So one Sunday, more than 120 Asian people joined St. Jacobi Lutheran Church. Pastor Chang has trained great leaders who now accompany her on her rounds, meeting people, serving them and introducing them to Jesus Christ and their growing community of disciples. We are getting reports of 30 to 40 adult baptisms every four months. Since 2019, Pastor Chang has baptized more than 300 people. Being a transitional community, the church attracts 150-160 worshipers to its Sunday services. Two of its leaders are pursuing ordination in the ELCA, and many lay evangelists and others are doing community outreach.

All this has happened because Pastor Chang was open to relocating from the East to the West to experience the vision, mission and provision of God in a strange land.



For your reflection:

1. What is the vision of your congregation or community organization?
2. What are some ways you can connect people's stories and journeys with the story of God's unconditional love in Jesus?
3. How are you experiencing God's provision in your life and in your church ministry?

13. From the Bus to the Fountain

Pastor Anna-Kari Joy L. Johnson
Manager, New Ministry Development and Evangelism
ELCA Christian Community and Leadership

With your powerful gift of imagination, given to you by God, please imagine yourself standing with me in Mexico, on the south side of the towering wall built to block people from connecting or crossing the border between Mexico and the United States.

A couple years back, the organizers of the ELCA mission developer's training felt God calling us to gather at both sides of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. We held a prayer and worship service together, on both sides, at the same time with hundreds of missional leaders during our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America training for mission developers, church planters, and renewals.

At the time for prayer, we laid our hands on the hard metal of the wall, which felt so ungiving. Suddenly the pastor speaking called out, "Pray for Jesus to transform this wall! Let this wall become an altar of prayer!" I still feel the wind of the Holy Spirit, and God's victory! Suddenly the wall was an altar of prayer to Christ in our midst. Suddenly we were all in the presence of almighty God! The One who is. The Christ who is to come. The God we will all see standing before us. The One in whose holy presence no racism, sexism, xenophobia, oppression or injustice will be able to stand. The Resurrected Christ who will break every chain, heal all diseases, bind up every broken heart, set every prisoner free! The Christ who makes every person part of the royal family priesthood of the living God!

Because you are a human like me, I know you have also experienced tragedies and huge challenges. I hope that, in some way, with signs and wonders both small and huge, God shows you in person that our mysterious challenges and sufferings will all become altars of prayer. I have come to believe that Jesus Christ will enter every challenge, every brokenness in our human family and bring God's unstoppable resurrection and love until every mysterious challenge, every person involved and even we ourselves become part of Jesus Christ's resurrection story, shining with love streaming through all. I have come to believe I will see every challenging situation in my life transformed into the resurrection of Christ. I have come to believe that every person I meet will be brought by Christ into an eternal life, resurrection community where we will all be Christ's family.

After our prayer pilgrimage to the border, I arrived back in my home, Chicago. The Rev. Ruben Duran, ELCA senior director for multi-ethnic ministries and leadership, and the Rev. Mary Campbell, ELCA program director for Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO), connected me to churches working directly with new immigrant people. I visited Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey with the Rev. Rose Mary Sanchez-Guzman in El Paso, Texas; trained to serve as an ELCA AMMPARO Guardian Angel; and prepared for my home congregation to become a Welcoming Congregation for AMMPARO.

We also became connected to the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants (ICDI). I invited friends from church to join the ICDI ministry at the Chicago Greyhound Bus Station. Now we take turns going to our bus station every morning at 5:45 a.m. to welcome new immigrants arriving

directly from the border. Many people have not eaten for two or three days as they journeyed north from the border. We distribute water, food, first aid, hygiene kits, clothing, shoes and coats. Our entire Chicago Greyhound Bus Station is transformed into an altar of prayer where everyone is welcomed in the priesthood of all believers. Practically everyone we meet joins in the effort to make sure everyone receives the items above plus words of encouragement and any prayers desired.

Often, I get to invite newcomers to my Sunday morning church service.

About a year ago, I entered Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Chicago with three men who had just arrived in the city. My husband, the Rev. Kristian Johnson, was preparing to preach. He quickly repeated the Gospel reading in Spanish. The Gospel was about praying without ceasing. The men smiled, agreed and encouraged us all to pray without ceasing throughout our life journey. They all wore crosses and testified to the whole congregation that, when we pray without ceasing, God shows us every step of the way. All three men had just prayer-walked across 10 countries in Latin America.

Getting to know people with new perspectives who have arrived in Chicago is a sacred gift. We are astonished and awed. As we listen to people's experiences of walking thousands of miles, everyone encounters the living Christ. Christ is answering people's prayers with audible words. Christ is walking alongside people, protecting them in real time.

I am converted again and again by these people walking with Christ, deeply committed to taking Christ's saving love and helping to rescue one another! One young man, walking from Venezuela, volunteered to help a family with multiple children and babies by carrying their feverish 6-year-old all the way from Panama to Mexico City on his own shoulders. Another young couple with a baby of their own took five more children under their wings to make sure they arrived safely and were claimed by their own parents. Another small group of men were robbed of every penny they had to make the journey; their Facebook friends donated funds for them to keep going. Another woman heard Christ answer her prayer circle from a prison cell. Christ spoke the words, "Take heart, daughters! You will be set free!"

Christ is with you too. Christ will connect you to more beloved people throughout your life. Christ will set you all free! I love the setting free, starting now!

Ruben's Reflection

Anyone who has the privilege of knowing the Rev. Anna-Kari Johnson and her husband, Kristian, would agree that one of their spiritual gifts is the gift of hospitality. They do not hesitate to share that gift with anyone, whenever and wherever they can, especially among immigrants and people on the margins of society. Along with their children, they make God's love real for all they meet. I have seen their gift in action in Chicago, when Pastor Anna-Kari served at Zion Lutheran in Chicago and First Lutheran in Janesville, Wis., among the Latiné community. When Kristian became pastor at First Lutheran Church of Inglewood in Inglewood, Calif., they would stand in front of the famous Randy's Donuts sign on Manchester Avenue in the morning, greeting passersby and offering prayers and blessings to those who asked. They have done the same upon returning to the Chicago area and have teamed up with others to welcome incoming migrants on buses. Today they care for the grandchild of a pastor who was forcefully taken to a detention center and later deported to their country of

origin. Along with their current church, Pilgrim Lutheran, they attend to several immigrants getting settled in, who then move forth with strong a foundation toward well-being and to help others as well. For the last 25 years, they have been organizing congregants into yearly learning groups, to serve among Bishop Medardo Gomez and other leaders in the Salvadoran Lutheran Church.

Most important, they encourage those involved in accompaniment of immigrants to build relationships of mutuality. In their estimation, ministry among immigrants is a two-way street.

Kristian and Anna-Kari believe that every immigrant has a dream and also God-given gifts they can use to pursue their goals and serve others. The two pastors urge people on the accompaniment team to listen, to learn, to understand and to assess the capacity of newcomers. Soon both the welcomer and the welcomed see each other as givers and receivers on the same team, looking into a future with hope and capacity to help others.

By assessing newcomers' gifts and needs, welcomers can identify their priorities and the connections they need to move forward. Through this process, immigrants staying at the Johnsons' home have quickly found jobs and the training they need to improve their lives.

When European immigrants began to arrive in massive numbers, churches and families supported them, propelling newcomers to create their own pathways for the well-being of their families. I see the Johnsons doing the same except for one more thing. They do not hesitate to find the moment when a mutuality of relationships enters the arena of spirituality. The Johnsons are evangelists; they have a passion to share the unconditional love of God in word and deed, and as they pray for newcomers in a strange land, they also pray that these newcomers will be open to beginning a new life with Jesus Christ. I know this. In fact, they have received new immigrant members and celebrated baptisms of first- and second-generation immigrants.

I have known the Johnsons since they were preparing for their wedding day on Aug. 12, 2000. I have had the privilege to work alongside Pastor Anna-Kari, starting new ELCA and ecumenical churches, for more than a decade. Along with many bishops and directors for evangelical mission, we were able to build upon the work of previous colleagues to move the number of organized congregations beyond 520. Hundreds of mission developers, especially first-generation immigrants serving as deacons and pastors, constantly shared their appreciation for the way the ELCA invested in their trainings and supported their work.

Thanks be to God.

I still remember Pastor Anna-Kari's father, the Rev. David Langseth, coming to the ELCA Metropolitan Chicago Synod office in the early 1990s, asking to see the new Latino associate to the bishop. They led him to my office, and he said, "Pastor Duran, I have a daughter that wants to be a bilingual pastor. Can you help us with some directions and recommendations?" That was the beginning of my great friendship with the whole family. Little did I know that we would be working together later.

Anna-Kari and Kristian and their children, Hope, Emanuel and Xavier, are an inspiration to me and my family. They are a force for good in the ELCA.

I invite you to follow their witness and example.

Violet's Reflection

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. —Hebrews 13:2

OK, now I am going to date myself. When I was a child, there was a TV sitcom called *Gidget*. I don't remember anything about the show itself, but I do remember the opening theme song, which began, "If you're in doubt about angels being real ... Wait'll you see my Gidget!"

That song popped into my head as I read this beautiful account by Pastor Anna-Kari Johnson, someone I have gotten to know well over the years and no doubt an angel, a true messenger of God bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to many. Anna-Kari shines with the light of God in everything she does, and her story of meeting new immigrants at the Chicago Greyhound bus terminal is only one example of this. Part of the joy shared by Anna-Kari and others with whom I have walked in my own ministry comes from their daily encounters with the angels God sends our way, coming from the most difficult places on the margins.

The writer of Hebrews knew that, in showing hospitality, we would inevitably encounter God in those sent our way. As a therapist, I often hear terms such as "chronic pain," "chronic trauma" or "chronic illness" — problems that occur not one time but over and over. But as a pastor, I live with the possibility of "chronic mercy," "chronic hope" and "chronic joy." God surrounds us with messengers to remind us that even in the most unlikely places — such as a Greyhound Bus Station — we are given opportunities to connect, show kindness and see the face of God anew in one another.

During a recent Bible study, our leader, a man who had been living on the street and who struggled with addiction, chose to focus on a story from Luke 7 in which a widow loses her only son. In the story, Jesus "was moved with compassion for her" and commands her lifeless son to get up from the pallet that was carrying him to his grave. We looked at the word "compassion" and its literal meaning from the Latin *pati* and *cum*, meaning "to suffer with." Pastor Anna-Kari, in showing her compassion to the folks in the bus station, allowed herself to suffer with them, but because Jesus showed such great compassion to all of humanity, we also know what it means to share joy. When we open our hearts to the suffering of others, God opens us to receive the joy and grace offered to each one of us.



For your reflection:

1. Where have you met one of God's angels today? What message did they share with you?
2. Pastor Anna-Kari refers to the gift of "imagination." If you could solve any of the world's problems right now, what would it be, and how would you solve it?
3. How do you, your family or your community of faith welcome the stranger?

14. The Bread of Life, Pan de Vida

**Rev. Maristella Freiberg, Director for Evangelical Mission
ELCA New Jersey Synod**

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." —John 6:35

Some years back, leaders of St. John Lutheran Church in Passaic were inspired by the presiding bishop's annual video at the Synod Assembly to start a breakfast ministry and build relationships with their community. They held planning meetings and purchased ingredients for a nutritious breakfast. They placed signs around the church, advertising a free meal for anyone after Sunday worship. Excited hosts waited for guests to show up.

No one showed up. The disappointment was great.

Then a woman of the congregation suggested taking the food to the day laborers who were looking for work in the Home Depot parking lot. "Let's go," said their pastor, the Rev. Jay Unzaga. "There were men there who welcomed us," he recalls. "From that Sunday on, we haven't stopped going there, feeding a hot breakfast to about 30 to 50 men every week." Later they added a brief, monthly worship service. Misión Pan de Vida (Bread of Life Mission) began.

Misión Pan de Vida gathers with day laborers and people experiencing homelessness to share food, prayers, worship and hope. The ministry relies on the strong commitment of Latiné lay leaders that have carried it forward even during the transition of mission developers.

Throughout the years, I have been privileged to lead worship in this holy place. Doing so was always a humbling and nurturing faith experience. The day laborers are so welcoming. Breaking bread and sharing the cup of salvation with these immigrant, undocumented and unhoused neighbors is a profound experience. Their struggles are palpable. Their joys and afflictions, their accomplishments and humiliations, their dignity and fears intertwine in their gazes. In the words of our current mission developer, Haydee Colon Hernandez, "Misión Pan de Vida responds to the suffering of the community by feeding, nourishing and sharing resources with families and individuals. My presence at the parking lot allows me to see and hear stories that make my call very humble, and I see God's face in everyone there."

Ruben's Reflection

In Passaic, N.J., the need for work is real, as are the challenges that prevent the laborers in Pastor Maristella's story from seeking employment through any local job agency. Marketing themselves for day-by-day opportunities to work becomes their alternative until better options appear.

After securing a friendly and safe place early in the day, these laborers make themselves visible, waiting, hoping, worrying and praying for any chance to work and to feed their loved ones. Some

days are good; other days they go hungry. What keeps them hoping? A sense of community with others in the same situation.

People in the neighborhood know about this resource, and businesspeople are also aware. The word goes out that this is an asset in the community. But the laborers are limited; they can't go anywhere or lose an opportunity in this supply-and-demand system.

What a creative and courageous move was made by St. John Lutheran in Passaic. If people are not able to come to the church, then the church must go with and among them. For this, we thank Latiné lay leaders who mingle in the community, seeking to participate in the love and mission of God everywhere.

In this story, do you notice the emerging dynamics? From giving food to sharing a meal together; from showing care to building relationships; from one-sided generosity to mutual hospitality and respect. Ministering on the margins of society, we learn that genuine relationships, characterized by trust and mutual respect for human dignity, generate opportunities for and interest in the things of the spirit. I am not surprised that the laborers requested prayer and eventually worship, with a holy meal in a holy parking lot. Everyone gets bread to live for another day and the bread of life to live every day with God.

Jesus did it more than two thousand years ago: "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness" (Matthew 9:35). The church of Jesus Christ is located on the streets, in homes, at lakeshores, in train stations, at truck stops and now in parking lots.

God bless you as you continue to serve outwardly, where the need is, where God is already at work, turning all things holy with love and justice.

Violet's Reflection

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." —Matthew 26:26

Growing up in a family of limited means, with seven of us living in a tiny New York apartment, we often ate in shifts, the kids first and my parents taking what was left, always making sure we had plenty. There was one part of the meal, though, where we always had enough for everyone to share, and that was the fresh Italian bread we'd break off in hunks to dip, top with garlic or provolone cheese, or just eat in its pure savory goodness.

There is something special and universal about bread. We see it in every culture and in so many different forms — naan, cornbread, tortillas, baguettes, challah, fry bread ... the list is endless, and to me it's all so good! Jesus was brilliant when he chose to be present with us in the form of bread. I remember, one time, running out of communion wafers as we celebrated the eucharist during our worship in the park. I reached in my backpack and pulled out the bagel I had brought for lunch; that day it became the body of Christ.

The story of Misión Pan de Vida and Pastor Maristella's response is a true depiction of the Word becoming flesh and living among us. The disappointment of those at St. John's when no one showed up for their breakfast feast became transformed into the joy of a ministry that turned a Home Depot parking lot into a sacred space and place of healing. Their experience shows what God can do when we are open to God's whispers, often leading us in a direction that we ourselves never would have chosen.

Pastor Maristella also shows us the power and the gift of being in a supportive role. Though she didn't start this particular mission herself, her openness, creativity and support of Pastor Haydee proved to be invaluable. We are each invited to participate in the building of God's kin-dom, which happens now and not only at the hour of our death and beyond. Nevertheless, the joys of sharing in that process — regardless of our role — are limitless. Ask the lay leaders who carried out this ministry even amid clergy transitions.



For your reflection:

1. Have you ever thrown a party that no one attended? How did you feel, and why didn't they come?
2. Do you remember a time when someone reached out to you and you felt a deep sense of welcome?
3. How does this story inform you about the concept of outreach and making it a way of life?



Part 3: We Learn From One Another

Stories of Hope and Possibility (Toward Beloved Communities With Economic Diversity)

Introduction by Rebeca Malmgren
Coordinator of Economic Diversity
ELCA Homeless and Justice Network

Ice and snow covered the old city above our heads, but we were warm underground, making our way through the tunnels with the “welcome wagon.”

We were in downtown Philadelphia with the Welcome Church, a “church without walls,” and we were walking with a couple pastors while they visited people in their church community. At that moment, “the community” was the folks in the tunnels and corridors of the Philadelphia train station.

We pulled the wagon around, stopping to say hello and sharing food with folks along the way. There wasn’t a formal church service that afternoon, but we did find a “prayer of the day.” On the wall of one of the tunnels, someone had written in black, bold letters:

*Jesus
We waiting on you to love us
In Jesus name Amen*

The author of this prayer is a voice for the many people waiting to experience the comforting, peaceful and providing love of Christ.

As we continued to walk the streets that day, Pastor Schaunel and Pastor Violet (and later Pastor Giselle, Pastor Tom and Pastor Mary) told us story after story of how the love of Christ is embodied by the individuals they’ve met through the Welcome Church and how much these connections have shaped their ministry.

Over the same weekend, we visited dear friends from a few more congregations that are part of the ELCA Homeless and Justice Network. The pastors all proudly told us that their community members are artists, advocates, writers, council members, musicians, jewelry makers, communion servers, crocheters, small-group leaders, idea makers, food servers, ministers ... the list is never-ending. God uses these churches as hubs for folks to receive the love of Christ, and they experience this love through the leadership and gifts of the community members.

As we consider what it would look like to become healthier in economic diversity as a church, we must listen to the stories and learn from the wisdom of the church communities in the margins that live this out every day.

For instance, as a church, we are often good at the concept of charity. But as you read through the stories in this section, you will see that charity alone cannot promote healthy economic diversity. Charity is equal in importance to and must always go hand in hand with promoting human dignity and working on the systemic, foundational causes of poverty. You will see that mutual work and partnership across all socioeconomic levels are just as important as providing for others

out of abundance. All people, across all income levels, are image-bearers of God. People who are marginalized and living in poverty are vital and valuable in leadership spaces and have much to share with the world.

The Homeless and Justice Network has a saying: "'With,' not 'for' or 'to.'" There's a sense of equity involved when we say we're working "with" or "alongside" others as opposed to language like "we minister to the homeless." There will be no healthy economic diversity until we reject "ministry to" and embrace and embody "ministry with." Otherwise, as Howard Thurman wrote in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "It is certainly to the glory of Christianity that it has been most insistent on the point of responsibility to others whose claim upon one is the height and depth of their need. ... It is the sin of pride and arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse and to make of it an instrument of self-righteousness."

ELCA Homeless and Justice Network Principles:

God loves all people, no matter what.

Without conditions, we respect the dignity and value of all people.

Everyone has something to offer, and to be whole, we need every person.

We minister *with* one another, not *to* or *for* one another.

We want to see lives transformed and to be transformed ourselves.

Jesus stood on the margins so that all could be included, and so do we.

Church is the people, not the building.

Community is vital to all that we do.

You can see these principles at work in the following stories. How can they enlighten the work you do? I believe that these voices can refresh and promote healthy ministry in the whole church. Please stay connected with us, and may God bless you.

1. Good News From the Margins

**Rev. John Stroeh, *Pastor*
Peace Lutheran Church, Tacoma, Wash.**

When I think about what it means to be part of an economically diverse, multiethnic community of faith, I'm reminded of two Scripture passages:

"As [the two disciples from Emmaus] came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So [Jesus] went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24:28-31).

"Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2 GNT)

I've served as pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, Wash., for 15 years. Peace Lutheran Church has been rooted in the same place in the city for over 100 years. It was established as a German-Russian Lutheran congregation in a working-class, German-Russian section of the Hilltop, but by the 1970s, as the neighborhood became predominantly African American, the worshipping community had dwindled and the church almost closed. With the call of a new pastor, church leaders followed God's vision to form a diverse community of faith, taking steps to become inclusive, welcoming and reflective of the community by hiring key African American leaders from the neighborhood to serve the church (including as a lay pastor, a gospel musician and a community meals director). It grew into a multiethnic, multigenerational, economically diverse congregation, strengthened and connected in its commitment to justice and service in the Hilltop community. Peace Lutheran Church has been a quiet, faithful witness to God's presence and peace through ongoing change in the neighborhood, including intense drug activity and gang violence in the 1980s and '90s, and now accelerating gentrification and the accompanying displacement of long-time, low-income residents, especially families of color.

As I have lived and served in this faith community, God has opened my eyes to see Jesus in new ways. A white, male, middle-income Lutheran pastor, I journey with folks from all backgrounds and walks of life. We eat together and share our stories, we spend time together and serve together, and we help carry one another's burdens. It's eye-opening, humbling, life-changing, challenging, uncomfortable and the biggest blessing I could ever receive. I'm learning and growing and seeing Jesus show up all the time.

I've seen Jesus revealed in different perspectives shared with me. A longtime neighborhood resident and activist who had been gone for 10 years returned to our neighborhood, moved into one of our church-owned homes offering low rents (because he could no longer afford to live in the neighborhood in which he grew up) and became active in the congregation. One Sunday during Lent, he saw the deep purple displayed all over the sanctuary and told me he loved it. "Oh yes," I said, "it's the color of Lent. It's the color of royalty — Jesus is a different kind of king. It's the color of repentance — we're sinful and in need of God's forgiveness." He said, "I'm thinking it's the color

of reconciliation. Red and blue make purple.” I thought of Republicans and Democrats, but he was thinking Bloods (red) and Crips (blue) — rival gangs in our Hilltop. He was the force behind a rock monument built a few blocks from our church in the 1990s, proclaiming “All Lives Are Precious,” a reminder amid turbulent, divisive times that we’re all beloved children of God. He led a small group on faith-based community development that inspired middle-income church folks to deepen their involvement in neighborhood ministry.

I’ve seen Jesus revealed in close relationships that were formed in the church between folks from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It’s powerful to see a guy who has earned a Ph.D. in a good friendship with a woman who lacks a high school diploma and has spent some rough years on the streets of Tacoma. A retired soil scientist drives the church van on Sundays, bringing folks to and from worship, and has grown in understanding and compassion. When a van rider, who had lived a rough life of addiction, prison time and abusive relationships, wanted to affirm her baptism, she chose him as a sponsor. God has led him to drive individuals in our church to doctor’s appointments and grocery stores, and he now serves as council chair for community resources, a ministry of accompaniment. When a doctor’s wife in the congregation had a pacemaker operation, a woman on a fixed income, who has been hospitalized 70 times in her life, added the other woman to the prayer chain and telephoned to encourage and pray for her. A woman who struggles with mental illness and has experienced homelessness and addiction has been one of our church’s faithful ministers in the prayer corner during Sunday worship. Her prayers are genuine and heartfelt, and her words of encouragement are a blessing.

I’ve seen Jesus revealed in leaders of our community ministries who have known homelessness and poverty. A woman joined the church with her family after staying overnight for two weeks at our location as temporary shelter. She has permanent housing in our neighborhood now. She started a hygiene ministry, mobilizing the congregation to donate items and assembling hygiene kits for folks living on the streets. A church member who has known homelessness and addiction helped start our affordable-housing ministry and make it authentic and relevant. She now serves as council chair for outreach, helping our church provide blessing bags and encouragement for folks living in low-income and senior apartments nearby.

Jesus has shown up to teach me generosity through the Native American woman in our church who, despite her own financial struggles, brought a heaping tray of small fry breads for Holy Communion one Sunday. Jesus has taught me loyalty and commitment through a woman God saved from addiction, who has led our community meal ministry for over two decades. Jesus has taught me care and encouragement through that same woman, who helps me deal with challenging individuals in our neighborhood, wishes me a blessed Christmas or Easter or a happy birthday, showers my two kids with gifts even though she can’t afford to, and treats me as her family.

We’re only scratching the surface here. What happens when people live and serve and journey together in a multiethnic, economically diverse community of faith? Eyes are opened. Blessings are shared. We learn to see one another as God’s children with gifts to give and receive in community. Lives are changed. Thanks be to God that Jesus keeps showing up as people from different backgrounds walk side by side, eat together and help each other carry their burdens. And thanks be to God for my mentors in faith — Larry, Craig, Sandra, Eileen, Myrah, Teresa, Anita, Aida and so many more.

2. Transformation and Sustainability

**Marcela Sala, *Former Executive Director*
Amextra (Mexican Association for Rural and Urban Transformation),
Mexico City, Mexico**

After 15 years of pilgrimage, 25 Tzotzil families from the village of Acteal in Chiapas, Mexico, faced an emergency situation, living on the roadside near Ocosingo and in need of food, shelter and clothing. Their long journey had begun in 1997 after they survived the Acteal massacre, in which 45 Tzotzils were shot to death in a Catholic church by a right-wing paramilitary group. From that moment, this group of 57 Indigenous people — children, youth and adults — traveled from place to place in Chiapas, looking for somewhere to live.

In 2013, I was executive director of Amextra, a Mexican nonprofit aspiring to “promote the integral transformation of marginalized communities in Mexico.” We met the Tzotzil refugees during the last period of their long walk. A pastor of the Presbyterian church had told us about the group, and we began to visit them. At the beginning, Amextra had no collaborators or financial resources in the area, but we did have a team with a huge heart that operated in the Los Altos de Chiapas region, and that compassion led them to go and learn about the situation.

The relationship with the Tzotzils began with the simple act of listening to them and accompanying them in their pain. We also shared some food and clothing that the team had obtained on their own. During our first visits, we learned about the history of the community and prayed with them so that God would finally give them a place to settle down and rebuild their lives. God heard our prayer. Following the methodology of Amextra, we carried out a participatory community diagnosis in which families identified the resources they had; where one sees only sorrow and despair, God hides wonderful treasures. Nuevo Acteal (“New Acteal”), as the families called themselves, had important strengths: a solid community organization, resilience to overcome adversity, local leaders willing to serve their community, love of work, knowledge of how to work the soil, hope in the future and enormous faith despite the harsh situations they had lived through.

This was our starting point to implement pilot projects, which soon began to flourish. At Amextra we call this stage “Emergent Community.” Thanks to their good organization, the families of Nuevo Acteal managed to secure a loan to buy land. During this time, Amextra’s team was accompanying them with biblical reflections that motivated them to move forward. That is how the families managed to reconcile with their past and start a new story. Where there was nothing but arid soil, the families built a deep water well and began to learn and practice agroecology techniques of enriching the soil and to experiment with projects that allowed them to harvest food such as fruit, honey and mushrooms and other vegetables. This led them to rename their community Nuevo Paraíso Tzotzil (“New Paradise Tzotzil”): they had ceased to be displaced and once again owned a piece of land and their future. God continued to work and open doors; soon more people learned about the history of Nuevo Paraíso and offered support.

With the help of Amextra and various churches, the families were able to build what they considered most urgent: a temple, houses and dry toilets. At Amextra, we call this stage “Sustainable

Community,” in which families manage to satisfy their most basic needs, such as food and shelter. Today, almost 10 years after that first meeting, Amextra operates in Ocosingo with a team of five people. The community of Nuevo Paraíso Tzotzil is identified as a model place for those who want to learn about environmentally friendly food production techniques, and the most successful pilot production projects have been replicated in at least five communities in the area.

Once the need for housing and food was met in Nuevo Paraíso Tzotzil, Amextra began to work in other important areas for the integral transformation of families, such as health and nutrition, education, income generation, strengthening of local leadership, and violence prevention. We recognize that there is still much work to be done, but today the community has leaders who identify their gifts, recognize the grace of God in their lives and are willing to share their knowledge with others. Thus, this community is very close to reaching what we call the “(Over Time) Sustainable Community,” in which they will be able to monitor the implemented projects themselves, using their own resources and skills. Most important, they will continue to set an example of success and a testimony for what faith, solidarity and teamwork can achieve: the transformation of an adverse situation and reconciliation with God, ourselves, our peers and the environment.

3. Café Esperanza

**Rev. Mary Wolfe, *Former Pastor*
Hope's Table, Reading, Pa.**

The first thing folks see as they pass the bus stop at Front and Greenwich Streets is the sign that reads, "Open/Abierto, smiling faces and good food inside." The sign works. In a region of the country known for social reticence, and in a city where racial and ethnic divisions are sometimes raw, people who walk through the doors of the café instinctively let down their guard and feel at home.

Often the first customer of the day is Frank, a middle-aged white man who lives outdoors. He engages with Emily, a staff member who greets him warmly and knows to begin preparing the French toast he always orders. Next through the door is Darra, a young businesswoman of color, who sits down at the community table to enjoy her latte. Nowhere else in the city would Frank and Darra meet, let alone interact.

The community table is an important feature of the café. At any given time, seated there are students from a nearby college or medical school; a group of pastors discussing opportunities for community engagement; the local city council representative; young entrepreneurs from the neighborhood who are beginning a real estate business; older men, living rough, who need a place in winter to get warm or in summer to cool off; patrons from the hair salon across the street; and many others. Greetings are exchanged in a mixture of English and Spanish. Walls that often separate people break down as they get to know each other's stories. The opportunity for café patrons — regardless of their ability to pay for their food and beverage — to become volunteers (temporary or ongoing) provides an additional opportunity for individuals of disparate backgrounds to build mutually appreciative relationships.

Also important to the mission of the café is its cuisine. Those who walk through the door know they will be eating quality food and drinking quality beverages that, as much as possible, are locally sourced, fair-trade and organic. Isis, a Latiné vegan, stops by, confident that she will find something to her taste. Elvis, from the Dominican Republic, has helped the staff create the perfect Cuban sandwich. Patrons know from the decor as well as the menu that this café is not a soup kitchen but an elegant place for breakfast or lunch. For that reason, a suburban woman with her own family foundation feels as comfortable here as those who have spent the night at a nearby shelter.

Café Esperanza is a pay-what-you-can establishment where patrons are welcomed and served regardless of their means. Like Frank, some can pay nothing but are willing to spend an hour helping to clean up the parking lot. Others give \$20 or \$100 for their meal and beverage out of gratitude that a café like this exists in a part of the city where there are few comfortable gathering spaces for refreshment.

As pastor of Hope Lutheran Church, the congregation that owns the café building and parking lot, I began this ministry with the dream of creating a venue conducive to the building of relationships among people whose paths otherwise would never cross. The dream was contagious, energizing, in particular, young adults who are passionate about breaking down the ethnic, economic and cultural

barriers that divide U.S. society — even though many of these young adults previously had given up on the potential for traditional churches to bridge those gulfs.

A few times a week, Diego, an elementary school youth, and his mother, Maria, stop by. They live just a few doors away. Diego always orders a hot chocolate with his food, regardless of the outside temperature, and is always the one to offer a few dollars to pay for the meal. Over time, Maria and Emily, the café's executive director, have grown more comfortable sharing their experiences of raising young sons in the local school district. From such simple lunchtime interactions, Maria has been emboldened to work with Emily to organize a back-to-school party for neighborhood children.

A long-term goal of the café ministry is to provide opportunities for young-adult neighbors to begin building a resumé and develop skills that will help their future employment prospects. Jonell, a part-time student at the local community college, works as a barista and delights in learning everything he can about the espresso machine, including how to create coffee drinks that are works of art. A young immigrant who left his home and family in the Caribbean, Jonell has come to think of Sara, an older Anglo staff person, and Penny, a volunteer, as his surrogate mother and grandmother.

The stories of café regulars are as diverse as they are rich and delightful. Noe, who lives down the street, refers to himself as "Boring Man." One day, another café patron greeted him as he entered, calling, "Hey! It's Boring Man." The volunteer behind the counter asked Noe, "Why are you called that?" Noe responded that he doesn't think of the title as a negative thing. It's because he loves history, archeology, geography — and other things that most people he knows consider boring. Noe suffers from a schizoaffective disorder that can negatively impact his ability to make friends, but at the café, he feels free to be — and celebrate — who he is.

Frank, Emily and Darra; Jonell, Sara and Penny; volunteers, staff, businesspeople and those who live under the bridge — these are people whose lives might never intersect otherwise. They would never have an opportunity to listen to each other's stories or appreciate each other's uniqueness as individuals created in the image of a loving God.

More and more, the organized church reflects the growing division in society between the haves and the have-nots (even between the haves and the have-yachts). People gather for worship, learning and fellowship with those whose lifestyles are pretty much a reflection of their own. When individuals with means engage in service ministries, they often do so at arm's length — a donation in the collection plate, a handout across a table that divides the donor from the recipient. At Café Esperanza, those at various points along an economic spectrum — people of means, people struggling to make ends meet and people on the street — have a place to gather, to listen to each other's stories, to begin to appreciate and respect each other for their beauty as individuals and to learn from each other about coping and striving, sharing and caring. These experiences, which occur every day at the café, demonstrate the vision expressed in Café Esperanza's motto: "Grow hope!"

4. God of Abundance

Rev. Moacir Weirich, Pastor
St. Stephan's Grace Community, Newark, N.J.

It's 10 a.m., and we are doing the first mic check. "Please, count to 10!" One, two, three ... on one end of the long table is Maria: "Uno, dos, tres ..." On the other end is Mirna: "Uno, dos, tres ..." Maria is a factory worker and a member of Make the Road New Jersey (an immigrant advocacy group); Mirna is a cleaner and a member of SEIU 32BJ (an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union, which represents janitors and service workers). And here we are, waiting for Gov. Phil Murphy to come, as this will be a press conference on the new minimum wage for New Jersey of \$15.13 while the federal minimum wage is \$7.25. I am excited because this is the second time Gov. Murphy will be giving a press conference at St. Stephan's Grace Community. The first time was in 2018, his first day in office, when he came here to address the worker community about the need for a \$15 minimum wage for the state. Today we are especially pleased to take a stand with our local workers and to be a community of faith that accompanies God's people in their struggles and accomplishments. St. Stephan's Grace Community has become a reference point for the whole community. Community organizing meetings, workers' rights workshops, trainings for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), immigration advocacy, food and water sharing, community garden tending, cultural celebrations, emergency assistance for residents — all this is centered on the premise of loving God and neighbor and worshiping a God of grace and mercy. Being the church encompasses all that we do together as a community, praying with our feet and working with our hands while joining God's actions in the world.

When we were organized and incorporated as a new congregation in 2009, we wondered how we would sustain this new community of faith. We were reminded about the promise in Philippians 1:6: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." We believe in a God of abundance whose blessings are not cumulative, stored away, but shared just in the right measure as needed. Over the years, resources have flown into this ministry, not always like big rivers but often like little springs of living water. God has blessed this church and the community where it is planted with a steady flow of love, compassion and justice.

Folks are generous at St. Stephan's Grace Community, ready to share, ready to serve. However, most are low-income workers and, to pay the bills, work more than one job. No matter how committed to the church they are financially, the numbers won't add up to cover the cost of ministry. But the miracle keeps happening with the generous support of partner congregations and local organizations that share their resources, allowing us to continue to be a vital church. By sharing, we can reverse the flow of resources, restituting valuable assets to communities that have long been drained. In other words, to achieve the financial diversity necessary to build and sustain a healthy community, we need to reach out to partners both inside and outside the immediate community.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we were anxiously starting to raise funds to paint the outside of our church. We can't neglect this building that has been such a blessing, housing so many great service projects. With the pandemic, we were called to care for people, providing them with water, food, clothing and health care services. Then, in summer 2021, our boiler room was flooded, which

required us to replace and relocate the heating boilers. With the support of local and congregational partners, the community came together to raise funds for painting the church, updating the boilers and feeding the people.

I should emphasize that resources come not only as financial gifts to the church but also through services and partnerships that support those in need. The free health screenings and vaccinations served many who were otherwise left out. The training for workers and the fight against wage theft, hosted at the church and organized by the workplace rights organization New Labor, helps to raise the financial well-being of many families. The free tutoring for children, offered with the help of a partner congregation, supports our kids in Newark. The partnership with legal services empowers people to seek their rights and fight against exploitation. The Open Doors LGBTQIA+ support group helps to fight discrimination and promotes inclusivity beyond the walls of the church.

Every year, in early fall, we gather for Celebrating Partnership, an event at which congregations, local partners and the community come together to share and lift up the ministry over the past year. It is a time to thank God, our partners and the community, to worship, to build new relationships and to enjoy the fellowship of friends and supporters of St. Stephan's Grace Community.

We are thankful for all gifts received, from used clothes to grocery store gift cards to boxes of food to financial contributions. We welcome visits to our church. Every connection is a potential miracle. We know from the Parable of the Sower that not every seed takes root, but plenty of them do, and the harvest is always abundant.

Looking back, we realize that God has provided not only for the maintenance of this church but also for those in need of food; those who received gift cards during the pandemic (totaling \$45,000); those crossing the border without family or enough money to get to Newark, N.J.; those gathering in the community garden to harvest their share of fresh vegetables; those unable to afford their meds ... and the list goes on.

How can that be if not for "the one who began a good work in you" and "will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ"? With thankful hearts, we share the blessings of being a community of faith, of being the Lutheran Church in Newark, N.J. We cannot make it alone, and because we are here for the whole community, we invite the whole community to participate in our ministry. We give thanks that we are part of a larger body, the church, where we share our blessings and support each other.

6. Trusting God's Lead

**Rev. Walter A. Baires, *Director of Evangelical Mission*
ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin**

I was born in San Salvador, El Salvador. I was baptized Roman Catholic. Then, when I was 5, my grandparents joined the Pentecostal church, and along with them, the whole family became involved in the life of their congregation. After some years, my grandfather became a pastor. He used to take us to worship services and the big events of the church. I grew up under the teachings of my grandfather's church until I was 12.

Then, due to a financial crisis in my family, I had to live with one of my aunts. With her support, I was able to continue my studies up to high school.

I enjoyed my time in the church with my grandparents. However, when I became a teenager, my view of the church changed. I rebelled against the church's control over its members. My grandfather and my mother were the first influences in my faith journey. My grandfather taught me to trust in God and show compassion to those in need. Through my mother I have learned about patience, forgiveness and humility.

My grandfather's home was always open to all the members of the congregation. Even when we were running out of food, he would insist on feeding our visitors. He used to say, "God will provide." He always made sure that we were satisfied after our meals.

As a teenager, I began to distance myself from the Pentecostal church to the point of not attending services at all. When I was 13, I joined the Boy Scouts, and for three years, I spent my weekends going to my troop activities. Some of these activities were serving the community during civic events as well as during natural disasters.

In 1979, I joined the youth group of the Salvadoran Red Cross and was trained in first aid. However, most of our activities were related to entertaining people in nursing homes and juveniles in correctional facilities. Sometimes we helped to deliver their mail too. This was the year when the political situation in El Salvador grew violent. Peaceful protesters on the streets were violently repressed by the military. In the countryside, peasants who decided to organize and demonstrate for their rights were persecuted and killed.

While I started my first year in high school, political violence increased. More peaceful demonstrations on San Salvador streets were repressed by the military. The political persecution became more evident when dead bodies were left on the streets with signs of being tortured. In 1980, I began to serve as first responder at the Red Cross. Through this experience I began to witness the historical social injustice and the violent reaction of the Salvadoran government against its own people.

After witnessing the silence of the Red Cross toward the government's human rights violations, I decided to leave the organization, and a few months later I joined the Green Cross. This organization did the same work as the Red Cross; the only difference was that it did not have government financial

support. The Green Cross was more neutral and independent; because of its impartiality, the military constantly harassed its personnel and ambulance crews. Very often, the Green Cross headquarters was raided by the military. Half a dozen Green Cross volunteers were murdered by death squads.

In my high school, I organized a team to provide first aid in case of emergency. The school provided us with a room and a first aid kit. I spent my time between the school and the Green Cross. There were times when the state's terrorism also reached my school. My high school was raided every year; sometimes the military came with a list of the students they wanted to detain. There was one incident in which the military's death squad left the decapitated heads of three students hanging on the main gate of my high school.

In those years, I kept myself from being recruited by the guerrillas or drafted by the military because of my involvement in the Green Cross. These experiences helped me to form my own opinion of the national reality as well as to understand the root of the Salvadoran internal conflict. During this time, the Catholic Church began to broadcast Bishop Oscar Romero's homilies on the radio. In his sermons, Bishop Romero always contextualized the gospel with the cruel realities in El Salvador. There was a word of hope for the poor and a prophetic voice against the human rights violations promoted and sanctioned by the government.

Even though I was not Roman Catholic, I felt attracted to Bishop Romero's sermons. His commitment to walk with the poor, his determination to speak the truth of God and his courageous stand against repression and social injustice have stuck with me ever since.

Bishop Romero was part of my cloud of witnesses. Through him I learned that God cares about my body and my spirit. God is concerned about what happens in my daily life here on earth and wants me to live an abundant life. In the Pentecostal church, the focus of worship was always the afterlife. There was no concern for people's suffering or their basic needs here on earth.

The government used the word "communist" to label anyone who demonstrated against the status quo. For many Pentecostals, the persecution of Roman Catholics was justified because of their involvement in social and political issues. In those years, being labeled a communist was considered a death sentence. Thousands of union members, students, peasants, and political and religious leaders were killed under the false accusation of being communists or guerrilla supporters.

In 1982, while I was still serving as a volunteer in the Green Cross, some officials of the Lutheran Church came to our headquarters to request our help. They wanted to evacuate hundreds of families who were living in conflict zones, which had become unbearable. In the early 1980s, the army was executing military operations in the countryside that led to the indiscriminate massacre of entire villages. The Sumpul River massacre in 1980 and the El Mozote massacre in 1981 are some sad examples of it.

The Lutheran Church was setting up a refugee camp near San Salvador. It wanted our protection in order to bring civilians to safety. The Green Cross decided to accept the request, and the first trip was made. About 150 families were evacuated and transported to the Fe y Esperanza (Faith and Hope) refugee camp. After this first experience, the officials of the Green Cross decided to stop this kind of operation; it was considered too dangerous because the civilians evacuated were relatives of the guerrillas.

At the request of the church, the Green Cross established a first-responder station at the refugee camp. Two of my close friends were sent to the camp. A few months later, the church wanted to bring more civilians to safety, so it made a second request, but this time the Green Cross turned it down. Later some church officials persuaded one of my friends serving at the refugee camp of the need to save the lives of women, children and older people who were still facing danger.

I was persuaded by my friend to go underground and to make the unauthorized evacuation. We successfully evacuated 80 families, using our uniforms and our flags. We knew that if the military found out this was an unauthorized evacuation, we could get killed along with the families we were trying to save. On that day, I prayed as I never did before. God got us through 10 military checkpoints; it was a miracle that on that day nobody stopped us.

Upon our arrival at the refugee camp, I asked one member of the Lutheran Church, "Who is Martin Luther?" He answered me, "I do not know that much about him, but we can talk later about him." Then I asked him, "Why are you taking the risk of losing your life by helping these people?" He answered, "We do that because they are our brothers and sisters and because Jesus gave us the mandate to love our neighbors as he has loved us."

This experience with the Lutherans helped me to understand that the mission of the church is to walk with the poor and to witness Christ amid the suffering. Since that moment, I felt attracted to the ministry of the Lutheran Church. Later, in 1983, I joined Resurrection Lutheran Church of El Salvador. I was invited to be part of the church health ministry and served as health promoter in the church medical clinic. In this same year, I was sent to the refugee camp medical clinic to replace one of the health promoters.

My experience at the refugee camp gave me the opportunity to get to know the survival stories of the families living there. I was impacted by their faith stories as well as their hope for a better future for the whole community. I felt inspired to learn more about God and the ministry of the church. I was introduced to Luther's Small Catechism and began to teach it to the children living at the camp.

At that time, I also began to attend the worship services led by Bishop Medardo Gomez. Every Sunday, Bishop Gomez came to the camp to provide the word and the sacraments. I felt inspired by Bishop Gomez's sermons and by his testimony of love and compassion. Bishop Gomez began to invite me to serve as communion assistant for Sunday worship services. After serving as communion assistant and teaching the catechism at the camp, I felt the call for pastoral ministry.

The church sent me to attend a continuing education program. While I was in this process, the persecution against the Lutheran Church intensified and I was forced to leave the country along with six more youth leaders of the church. In December 1983, we became refugees in Mexico City. Our group decided to stay in Mexico City and organized the Lutheran community in exile to provide support for more Salvadorans escaping the violence in El Salvador. In Mexico, I attended seminary with the support of the Salvadoran Lutheran Church. I also met my wife, Elizabeth.

In December 1984, I returned to El Salvador and joined the pastoral team at the refugee camp, leading Bible studies and teaching the catechism. My wife joined me in El Salvador in 1985, and together we visited the refugee camp every week. In the meantime, I started attending again the church's continuing education program.

In August 1986, I was recognized as a deacon. I was certified to preach and to provide the sacraments. This same year, my first daughter, Atzin, was born. I moved with my family back to Mexico to continue my theological studies. In Mexico, I served for a year and a half as a youth director at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd and also provided pastoral care to the refugee Salvadoran community in Mexico City.

In 1989, I was asked to return to El Salvador. My second daughter, Itzel, was born in Mexico. I went to El Salvador, leaving my family in Mexico for safety reasons. The civil war in El Salvador was reaching its highest point at that time. I served as a lay pastor for two years in the eastern part of the country. While I was serving in San Miguel, my son, Walter, was born. In 1991, the church sent me to Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to continue my theological studies. I graduated from LSTC in 1993 and returned with my family to El Salvador. In 1994, I was ordained as a pastor and served as associate pastor at Resurrection Lutheran Church of El Salvador. Furthermore, I was designated coordinator of the sister parish program. In 1996, I was elected vice president of the Salvadorean Lutheran Synod. In 1997, my wife received a scholarship to the M.Div. program at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

In 2001, I was called to serve as a missionary pastor at Ascension Lutheran Church Milwaukee. This call was made possible through the partnership between the El Salvador Lutheran Synod and the ELCA Greater Milwaukee Synod. I joined Ascension's pastoral team and served for 18 years. I enjoyed being part of Ascension's multicultural ministry (one congregation serving and worshiping in three languages). While serving at Ascension, I received a phone call from former bishop Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld, who invited me to consider applying for the opening for a director of evangelical mission (DEM) at the ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin. After praying and consulting with my family, I applied for the position, and in May 2019, I was called to serve as DEM and assistant to the bishop. It has been a long, life-giving journey to get this far. I am grateful to God for allowing me to serve God's people in different places, including ministering outside my comfort zone. After serving in the ELCA for 23 years, I have come to believe that the ministry of the church should not be done in isolation. Multicultural ministry is vital for the existence of healthy and stronger congregations. The church is called to embrace and celebrate the cultural diversity that is already happening in our neighborhoods with the arrival of new immigrants.

7. From Table to Table, Come to the Feast

Rev. Maristella Freiburg
Director of Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop
ELCA New Jersey Synod

From table to table — come to the feast!

*Come on; let us celebrate the supper of the Lord
Let us make a huge loaf of bread
And let us bring abundant wine
Like at the wedding at Cana
Let the women not forget the salt,
Let the men bring along the yeast.
Let many guests come,
The lame, the blind, the cripples, the poor.
Come quickly,
Let us follow the recipe of the Lord
All of us, let us knead the dough together
With our hands
Let us see with joy how the bread grows
Because today
We celebrate
The meeting of the Lord.
Today we renew our commitment to the Kingdom. Nobody will stay hungry.*

I learned this song, “The Feast of Life,” as a young adult in Brazil. I can remember it perfectly, and when it plays in my head, I find myself dancing immediately. Dr. Elsa Támez’s lyrics are part of my own spiritual journey and longing for a world where “ninguém ficará com fome”, (no one will be hungry). It evokes for me the feeding of the multitudes and the Last Supper, where Jesus reminds those around him and us, again and again, that if bread is blessed, broken and shared, there will be enough for all. The power in these actions points to Jesus transforming the economy by blessing, breaking and sharing it. In the words of Dr. Walter Brueggemann, “Everywhere Jesus goes the world is rearranged: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are freed from debt.” And “Everywhere he went he broke the vicious cycles of poverty, bondage, fear and death; he healed, transformed, empowered and brought new life.”

We give thanks to God for ways that Jesus shows up in the stories and voices we just heard in this session — glimpses of the wonderful tapestry of diverse ministries, led by passionate and committed leaders, that are experiencing healing, transformation, empowerment and liberation.

How do we bring these stories of economic diversity into the life of the church and surrounding communities?

The stories we read are from people who followed “the recipe of the Lord,” and we are blessed to witness a new economy of abundance in the world, as Jesus taught us. By joining what God is doing in neighborhoods and communities, people are being woven into a tapestry of love, hope, healing, liberation, justice, abundance and possibility.

These leaders have lived and served in a myriad of faith communities, and the stories they shared are a model and inspiration for communities of faith to deepen our involvement and presence in neighborhood ministries and our commitment to a multicultural, multiethnic, multigenerational, economically diverse congregation at God-given locations.

We give thanks to God for the beautiful humans named in this session: Beca, Schaunel, Violet, Giselle, Tom, Mary, Josh, Larry, Craig, Sandra, Eileen, Myrah, Teresa, Anita, Aida, Alex, Robert, Paul, Leland, Michael, Deb, Susan, Frederick, John, Jaime, Josh, Marcella, Frank, Emily, Darra, Isis, Elvis, Diego, Maria, Jonell, Sara, Penny, Noe, Moacir, Maria, Mirna, Phil, Medardo, Walter, Elizabeth, Atzin, Itzel, Walter and Viviane. All created in God’s image and likeness.

To you, the reader, we offer an extra measure of grace and gratitude!

We give thanks to God for these communities of faith and organizations: Welcome Church in Philadelphia, Peace Lutheran Church in Tacoma, St. Andrew Lutheran Church in West Chicago, the community of Nuevo Paraíso Tzotzil and Amextra, Los Altos de Chiapas in Mexico, Café Esperanza and Hope Lutheran Church in Reading, St. Stephan’s Grace Community in Newark, Fe y Esperanza refugee camp in El Salvador and Ascension Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. They are a testament to the power and presence of God and a witness to the new reality coming into being through God.

Some of these stories encompass leaders’ journeys during a chapter in the story of a congregation or organization; others recount the entire life journey of a person, made of many transitions and moves, reflecting an immigrant journey and their leadership role in many congregations and communities; and still others describe many chapters in the story of a congregation, led by different leaders and engaging a diverse group of people. These stories of God’s people are beautiful, reflecting on and naming the ways God has been present and active within a person, a congregation, a community. Through them we see what can happen when leaders intentionally create spaces where people come together from diverse economic, ethnic, social, racial and cultural backgrounds.

Here are some key practices covered in these chapters:

- Listening to God, to each other, to neighbors and to the world around us.
- Intentionally creating spaces where people from different backgrounds and all walks of life interact, connect, build relationships and form communities.
- Ministering with people, which equals serving with people.
- Mutually caring for and encouraging each other by accompanying each other and bearing each other’s pain, hurt and struggles, as well as celebrations, blessings and learnings.
- Trusting that the Spirit is leading the way, changing the church and transforming the world.
- Pointing to a loving, caring and generous God.
- Building places where people can share stories, celebrate who they are, practice belonging and commit to economic diversity, equity and inclusion.

In Micah 6:8, we read, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” If we switch the order of what God requires of us in this passage and start by walking humbly with God, in loving generously and doing justice, we move from our identity through the ways we live out our faith (behavior) and into our actions (the call to act on). We are invited by God to walk, love and engage in the work of justice, encompassing economic diversity in our midst. This movement from identity to encounter, from being woven into God’s tapestry of love to joining acts of justice in the community, might come as an invitation to the holy journey in front of us.

Now we hope the journey will continue with you in your context and around tables in your community so that you also share stories about the tastes and flavors of the good news from the margin where you are, so that you give witness of God’s abundant love of people, cultivating life together among people from all income levels. Now it is your time!

Taste and see a glimpse of God’s faith, hope and love! Let’s dance at God’s feast!

Appendix

Resources named throughout the book:

Amextra (Asociación Mexicana de Transformación Urbana y Rural / Mexican Association for Rural and Urban Transformation), Mexico City, Mexico, www.amextra.org. For more information, email Veronica Vera (Veronica.Vera@amextra.org) or Alejandra Romero García (Alejandra.Romero@amextra.org).

ELCA AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities), www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/ammparo. For more information, email Mary Campbell, program director (Mary.Campbell@elca.org).

ELCA Homeless and Justice Network, www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/justice-portal (click tab for “Economic Justice”). For more information, email Rebeca Malmgren, ELCA coordinator of economic diversity (Rebeca.Malmgren@elca.org).

Fuller Theological Seminary, “The Church’s Response to the Immigration Crisis” (six-month certification), bit.ly/4gi6m80 or <https://diplomadoscentrolatino.org/diplomado-immigration-crisis/>.

Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants, icdichicago.org.



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