

Engaged in Mission

magazine



WINTER 2019



Stories about God’s people intentionally engaged in loving the Lord, people, and our Lutheran theology to make disciples of all nations in the Minnesota South District and beyond.

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COVER IMAGE

MN South pastors and lay leaders pray with a woman during a prayer walk through Via Quince, Nicaragua, during an October 2019 CALMS Exploratory Trip.

Photo MN South Communications

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Networking & collaboration

Learning from the church in Acts

by Lucas Woodford

The book of Acts records how the New Testament church began spreading in the midst of an immoral and unwelcoming culture. In fact, the prevailing culture of the day—the government included—was often hostile to the faith. Nonetheless, Acts records how the burgeoning church encountered numerous challenges and still persevered. At one place, the church was rapidly growing and expanding (Acts 2:27), while in other places, it encountered stagnation or opposition (Acts 16 & 19). Even so, the Holy Christian Church carried on.

This is the promise Jesus first gave Peter: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). In other words, no matter the time, culture, or era, we have Christ’s promise that His church will endure. Thus, no matter the challenges we are facing today, we do so in the confidence of Christ’s promise.

With that in mind, it is fascinating to observe how the New Testament church often collaborated together for the care of souls and the spreading of the Gospel and consider what we might be able to learn from it.

Act 2 and 4 show how believers often sold their possessions to help others in need, while Acts 11 records how believers in Antioch “determined, every one according to his ability” to send relief to the church in Judea. Elsewhere,

school enrollment, we see local congregations and schools that are closing at a much more rapid pace than in previous eras. To be sure, this is certainly concerning. But even so, we have the promise of our Lord Jesus that His church will not fail!

Thus, as we endure this challenging season within the life of the North American church, I’d like us to consider what can we learn from the collaboration of the New Testament church that can help us navigate this “new to us” mission environment—and then utilize our digital networking platform to help enhance any potential collaborations.

For example, we can consider ways for our congregations and schools to come alongside one another in order to provide encouragement, pool resources, and strengthen mission and ministries. There is no need to remain isolated when resources could be shared and partnerships formed.

To that end, the stories that we’re sharing with you in this issue are examples of how a few of our District congregations and schools are forming partnerships. I pray you will find them an encouragement, understanding that each ministry has its own needs. In other words, what works for these ministries may not work for yours. But the New Testament church reminds us how we can be collaborative and intentional about forming partnerships for the sake of the Gospel.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH REMINDS US HOW WE CAN BE COLLABORATIVE AND INTENTIONAL ABOUT FORMING PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL.

the Apostle Paul told the Christians at Ephesus to follow his example of hard work so that those who were weaker might be helped: “In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). And at other times, the Apostle Paul was routinely writing letters to the congregations he had established, that they might be shared and circulated among the regional churches. (Consider Paul’s parting words in 2 Timothy 4 about bringing his books, “and above all the parchments.”) In short, all of this took what we would today call networking and collaboration.

What can we learn from all of this in light of the time and place our congregations find themselves in? I ask this on two accounts. First, because our last MN South District Convention (in June 2018) passed a resolution strongly encouraging our congregations “to form partnerships with others in their circuit and region to intentionally engage their communities and do mission outreach and service” (Resolution 3-02). Second, our churches and parochial schools are in a new mission environment. Though this is not new in the history of the Holy Christian Church, as Acts reminds us, it is new to our time. We now live at a time when the Church no longer has the privileged place in society that it did 100, 50, or even 25 years ago. Christian beliefs are regarded as counter-cultural and quite often even offensive.

When this is coupled with declining resources, aging membership, shrinking membership, and declining parochial

As the Apostle Paul knew the challenges and importance of building partnerships in the Gospel, so I encourage our congregations to consider doing likewise: “And you Philipians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only” (Philippians 4:15).

Of course, there are no guarantees with this initiative. We are in uncharted territory in many respects. But we are in this together. And we have the promises our Lord has given to us and the New Testament church that remind us to look beyond our immediate context, see the history of the church, hear the text of Scripture as the power of the Gospel, and embrace the life it gives and the lessons that have been learned long before us. Thus, Paul’s words lead us forward as we explore all the possibilities: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8-9).



Rev. Dr. Lucas Woodford is president of the MN South District. View his latest blog posts and what he’s reading at mnsdistrict.org/presidents-office. Email him at lucas.woodford@mnsdistrict.org.

Being witnesses in Jerusalem . . .

How we help congregations become more

“I was overwhelmed by the pure human connection that I felt with most of the people. Like us, they are merely trying to find their way and needing Jesus to help make it happen,” says Pastor Todd Stocker from Trinity Lutheran Church, Hudson.

Stocker traveled to Nicaragua at the end of October on a District-sponsored CALMS (Central American Lutheran Mission Society) Exploratory Trip. That week, three MN South District congregations sent pastor-lay leader teams to meet with local Nicaraguan congregations, pastors, and deaconesses on a CALMS Exploratory Trip. The hope was to pair each team with a different Nicaraguan congregation for future missionary exercises.

Helping instead of hurting

In the wake of books like *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett, congregations are looking for more than one-and-done mission trips. “Pastors and congregations want to see their people sent out on missionary exercises and return as more committed disciples—but they need help,” CALMS Executive Director Jacob Gillard says.

“Mission committees have gone the way of the dodo. It’s a rare congregation which has a mission expert on staff who can consistently offer the ‘whole mission package’ year after year,” Gillard says.

Enter CALMS.

Congregations come alongside international congregations to form long-term international mission partnerships. It starts with a CALMS Exploratory Trip designed to connect a pastor and lay leader from a congregation with a sister congregation abroad. In the months that follow, each team will bring a larger team from their congregation on their own trip to “develop the relationship and mutual ministry going forward,” Gillard says. “A bright future awaits!”



“People are more alike than cultures. One of the little moments that will stay with me is when we were celebrating a Reformation service, with a hundred children all around for the service. One little girl, no more than two years old, came up during the service and sat on Mark’s lap, just like his own grandson would do,” Muther says.

With relationships at the center, CALMS mission trips focus on equipping international congregations to be more effective themselves rather than doing the work for them.

Pastor Paul Muther from Trinity Lutheran Church, Janesville, recognized his congregation’s “longing for an ongoing global relationship” that will open their eyes “to how our connection in the Gospel is global.”

Mark Schultz, lay leader from Trinity, Janesville, was previously part of Trinity’s mission partnership in Mexico and is looking forward to a new partnership in Nicaragua. His goal going into the trip was to “find ways we can help” and make “very good friends—relationships are central.”

This kind of humble attitude makes global partnerships fruitful. Congregations don’t enter the partnerships looking to fix each other; instead, they’re looking for ways to support and help each other.

New partnerships formed:

Trinity, Janesville | Pastor Paul Muther & Mark Schultz
Pastor Hernaldo & Deaconess Mariela in Somotillo

King of Glory, Blaine | Pastor Peter Gueldner
St. John, Elk River | Brett Hardecop
Pastor Anastacio & Deaconess Lizbeth in Rancheria

Trinity, Hudson | Pastor Todd Stocker and Steve Kelly
Pastor Silvio & Deaconess Paola in Via Quince

Relationships at the center

One of the keys to a successful CALMS Exploratory Trip is in the preparation beforehand. It can take time to adjust to the idea of a mission trip focused not on building houses or schools but on building “understanding and relationships,” Stocker says.

“We are excited to see how the fires of international mission will burn brightly in Nicaragua and back here in Hudson,” Stocker says. He and lay leader Steve Kelly are solidifying the partnership by bringing their congregation into the loop. They’re focused on sharing “the joys, the concerns, and the needs” of their new partner church, Nueva Jerusalén, with their members.

“All of this will be under the umbrella of relationship building, not project building,” Stocker stresses.

Bringing it home

CALMS helps develop a mindset that brings the mission work home. Pastor Peter Gueldner from King of Glory Lutheran Church, Blaine, says, “This trip to Nicaragua allows me to engage a culture abroad, learn from them, and then learn how to engage the people of Central America right here in Blaine.” Gueldner knows the mission trip isn’t over

• and to all the ends of the earth

intentionally engaged in the mission of God



The MN South team prays over the men of Dios en Cristo, that they would be faithful and courageous leaders in their church, homes, and community. Dios en Cristo is the congregation where Pastor Martin Perez (president of the Iglesia Luterana Sínodo de Nicaragua) lives and serves.

just because the itinerary is complete—it's only just begun.

Gueldner brought a lay leader not from King of Glory but from nearby St. John Lutheran Church & School, Elk River. As the trip progressed, Principal Brett Hardecopf says he “began to think more and more about how God could use me, our congregation, and others to build His Kingdom—in

Nicaragua for sure, but here in Minnesota as well.”

Gueldner and Hardecopf are looking into how they can involve the school in the partnership as well. Hardecopf is “hopeful that our school’s students and teachers can connect with the students in the congregation in Nicaragua.”

At the end of the day, Gueldner prays that “the people and churches here in Minnesota will look beyond their day-to-day existence” to go beyond “just sending financial support to a mission field but walking with them as we build up God’s Church together.”

Each fall, Assistant to the President for Missions Rev. Dr. William Utech connects rural and small-town congregations with CALMS, one of the District’s strategic mission partners. Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8 motivate this partnership. “As pastors and congregations become more involved and invested in the mission of God ‘to the ends of the earth,’” Utech says, “they will make an eternal difference in the lives of people there, AND their Christian witness in their own particular Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria will also be strengthened and enhanced.”

To learn more about how you and your congregation can engage in a long-term mission partnership that will strengthen and enhance your witness on a global and community level, contact Utech at william.utech@mnsdistrict.org.

Celebrating five years of partnership

Trinity Lutheran Church, Medford, formed a mission partnership after a District-sponsored CALMS Exploratory Trip to Guatemala in 2014. Here’s what Pastor Mark Biebighauser had to say about the partnership:

Beginning with a “Get-to-Know” Exploratory Trip to Guatemala with CALMS in 2014, our congregation made the commitment to enter into a mission partnership with the village of Taguayni-San Antonio in the beautiful mountains of southeastern Guatemala. Since then, we have made five trips to the village. Twenty-six different people have participated on the trips (ranging in ages from 17 to 72).

How has our experience been so far?

In one word: WOW.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

As a result of this partnership, our congregation has learned the great importance of this little word “and” found in those words from Jesus. It’s not Medford “or” Taguayni—it’s “and.”

Here’s what we mean: By God’s grace, our church has not only been able to be a blessing to the Guatemalans we’ve met (VBS, Bible distribution, prayer walking, home visitation, community education, scholarship assistance, construction of a community kitchen, and TONS of hugs), but we have been profoundly blessed by them. They have loved us, taught us, and helped us become more faithful servants for God’s kingdom here at home.

We call this a “double blessing.” Us to them and them to us. A southern Minnesota Lutheran church and a southeastern Guatemalan mountain village have both been changed for the better—thanks be to God! We are so grateful to Him for this “WOW” experience, and we can’t wait to see what He has in store for us next!



Photo: Mark Biebighauser

Marsha Borwege from Trinity, Medford, with her friend Elvis from Taguayni-San Antonio. Marsha has prayed for Elvis daily these past five years. Here is one of the thousands of hugs exchanged through our mission partnership!

Partner, mentor, friend

Congregations find encouragement in walking together

“The things that are happening in St. Peter are by God’s grace and by God’s patience with us,” Congregation President Will Purvis says. St. Peter Lutheran Church, Vernon Center, is a small, rural congregation about 25 miles south of Mankato.

Just a few years ago, they felt like they were being swallowed up by a vortex—aging and tired leadership, declining resources, dwindling enthusiasm for community outreach and congregational inreach, ongoing pastoral vacancies. And on top of it all, it seemed like they were losing members every week to large sister congregation Hosanna Lutheran Church, Mankato.

“There was a perception that Hosanna was showing up and stealing members,” says Pastor Dennis Heiden, senior pastor at Hosanna. At least, that was the case until one congregation member at St. Peter challenged the congregation to simply ask how Hosanna had such big growth in such a short time. With the Spirit’s guidance, St. Peter decided to try to understand what was really going on instead of letting their perceptions reign.

So in the fall of 2011, the leadership of St. Peter met with the leaders at Hosanna, and their questions and concerns were welcomed. The answers they received were anything but malicious: Hosanna’s leadership (and congregation members) was driven by one simple but passionate desire: “connecting people to Jesus.”

It was a welcomed wake-up call to the congregation of St. Peter—and

a mission they were ready to embrace anew.

In fact, the meeting between the leadership of St. Peter and Hosanna went so well that they did it again. And again. As St. Peter was struggling and fearing for their survival, they were looking for help from surrounding congregations. Hosanna was ready and willing. The two congregations signed a mentoring covenant during worship in May of 2012.

The members at St. Peter yearned to *be* the church rather than be a place where people *go* to church, and Hosanna was willing to walk alongside them as they figured out how. As a larger congregation, Hosanna offered not only material resources (like Sunday school curriculum) but also non-material resources like encouragement. Purvis says they were ready to “adopt a community-focused attitude of generosity” with the “we-got-your-back” support of Hosanna.

Since 2012, St. Peter has had seasons of vacancy and pastoral turnover. When Hosanna stepped up to provide pastoral leadership during their most recent vacancy, Purvis says, “It felt like we were on steroids” compared to the “life support” feeling of previous vacancies. However, he stressed that “it was never the [previous] vacancy pastors’ attitudes—it was our own attitude that made us feel like we were on life support.”

And God is faithful. The revitalization and growth taking place in St. Peter reached a wonderful milestone this spring. In May 2019, Hosanna

celebrated with St. Peter when they filled their vacancy permanently—when Pastor Adam Finney accepted the call to serve at St. Peter. Years of consistent encouragement from Hosanna have helped the congregation members rediscover their passion, joy, and optimism for ministry. Moving forward, St. Peter and Hosanna continue to find ways to collaborate for the sake of spreading the Gospel throughout their communities.

Resource: encouragement

Throughout the years, Heiden has seen firsthand the joy Hosanna has experienced through their ministry partnership with St. Peter. There’s a mutual benefit for all congregations involved as each church learns how to be a resource to the other—in materials and encouragement.

The congregations are not conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:26) but rather are committed to supporting each other as fellow workers for the Truth found in Jesus (3 John 1:8). Hosanna knows that they don’t have all the answers, and their desire isn’t to create a bunch of mini-Hosannas. Instead, they’ve promised to walk alongside the smaller congregations.

“The ministries at Winnebago [the congregation they’ve recently formed a second partnership with] and Vernon Center are not the same ministries that are at Hosanna because you have to take into account the community and congregations that are there,” Hosanna





Pastor Mike Omtvedt says. “You also have to take into account what they value in those congregations.”

If you ask anyone at St. Peter, Our Savior, or Hosanna, they’ll tell you that one of the biggest reasons for their successful partnerships has been that the smaller congregations approached Hosanna unsolicited. It wasn’t a matter of a big church (Hosanna) coming in and saying, “You’re doing XYZ wrong, and here’s what you need to do instead.” It was a matter of the smaller church coming to the larger church and asking if they’d be willing to help them—and the larger church being humble enough to agree not to take things over but to encourage and assist the ministries already in place.

A common roadblock

St. Peter and Our Savior were facing the same discouragements that many of our congregations face: aging membership, declining worship attendance, and financial stresses. Assistant to the President for Congregation Mission Formation Dr. Phillip Johnson notes that about 60 percent of our 246 congregations are at or below the average number of worshipers (125) needed to sustain a full-time pastor and supporting ministry.

That’s a hard number to swallow.

Last winter, Johnson mapped out all 246 of our District’s congregations according to average weekly worship attendance. It turns out that most areas of our District have a wide variety of congregational sizes—and most regions have at least one church with over 500 worshipers each Sunday. That’s unusual. So Johnson started asking himself if “perhaps there’s an opportunity for congregations to begin working alongside one another.”

The day-to-day ministries of our District’s congregations may look different in small versus large congregations, yet the Spirit is present through it all. Where the Word and Sacrament are faithfully administered, Christ cares for and loves His Church.

At a time when it can be easy to latch onto a fatalistic mindset, congregational partnerships can be a tangible representation of the endurance and

encouragement of God (Romans 15:5-6). Congregational partnerships are a reminder that we are all of one body, working toward a common goal: loving others as Christ has loved us (John 13:34).

Two churches—one mission

Once Johnson started asking if there were ways he could help encourage congregations to walk alongside one another, he started noticing “lots of different models of cooperative ministry that have happened in our District.” The partnerships at Hosanna, Our Savior, and St. Peter are one example. Another partnership that was recently made official is the one between Trinity Lutheran Church, Rochester, and Mt. Moriah Lutheran Church, Byron.

At Trinity and Mt. Moriah, the congregations entered into a “two churches—one mission” model this fall. They began with a one-year agreement to make sure the partnership would work for both churches—Trinity did not want to come in and take over, says Pastor Nathaniel Schwartz, senior pastor at Trinity.

They may only be a few months into the partnership, but God is already moving greatly through it. In October, Mt. Moriah hosted a trunk-or-treat event that welcomed over 120 children from the community. How did Trinity help? Mt. Moriah provided half the trunks and Trinity provided the other half. Members from both congregations walked the community with door hangars advertising the event. The hope was to pump up the congregation and prepare them for a positive attitude toward future community engagements.

Trinity is committed to walking alongside Mt. Moriah to help them move “from survival mode to missional mode,” Schwartz says. And it’s not just a one-way partnership. Even as Trinity pours into Mt. Moriah, “it’s rubbing off and it’s making Trinity more missional,” Schwartz says.

Outreach ministry

Once a congregation has over 300 active members, they’re in a position to “tithe” a strong group (80

to 100 people) for the purpose of a new church start, Johnson says. The District has seen several new churches in recent years—and we praise God for the way these new ministries win new people for Christ. At the same time, congregational partnerships are another way all congregations can engage in intentional outreach and evangelism.

Hosanna had been praying about starting a new church plant for over a year, but there was not unity in the congregation about the possibility, so they were in a holding pattern. That’s when St. Peter approached them about beginning a mentoring partnership. It was an answer to prayer for Hosanna.

*THEREFORE WE OUGHT
TO SUPPORT PEOPLE LIKE
THESE, THAT WE MAY BE
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TRUTH. (3 JOHN 1:8)*

“We learned very quickly that God wasn’t calling us necessarily to plant a new church,” Omtvedt says, “but God was working in our hearts to come alongside a church.” Hosanna has discovered that there is great joy to be found in walking with other congregations.

And so, whether your congregation is big or small, struggling or thriving, consider reaching out to your nearby sister congregations. “There’s a joy in walking with other churches, and it’s infectious,” Omtvedt says. This is one infection we want to spread to all our congregations!

Find ways to walk alongside each other, encouraging each other to focus on all things true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, and excellent—all to the aim of proclaiming Christ crucified in your community.

Your mission gifts at work

We invite you to use this list in your personal and corporate prayers, that these leaders would be strengthened in their efforts to reach people with the good news of Jesus.

2019 District-supported missions & outreach

MN South / CALMS Exploratory Trips to Central America

Rev. Dr. William Utech
Rev. Jake Gillard

Concordia University, St. Paul Campus Ministry
Pastor Tom Gundermann & DCE Shelly Schwalm

District Prison Ministry

Dr. James Seemann
Vicar Joshua Miller

Holy Cross & Our Savior Lutheran Churches
(Austin & Brownsdale) & East Austin Immigrant Outreach

Pastor Gemechu Olana

LINC Twin Cities

Pastor Ben Griffin & Pastor Demelash Yoseph

Peace Lutheran Church (Robbinsdale)
Vicar Martin Cornes

POBLO (People of the Book Lutheran Outreach)
Nader & Georgette Alaraj, Bloomington
John & Mariam Gayed, Rochester

ReDO / Shepherd of the Valley (Hastings)
Pastor Chad Kirchoff

Remedy Church (New Church Incubator Plant #1, Oakdale)

Sudanese Evangelical Lutheran Mission of Southern Minnesota (Faribault)
Pastor Gatluk Reat

UpWorks Christian Community Development (Minneapolis)

Woodbury Lutheran Church (Liberty Ridge)
Pastor John Kuehne

MN South District LCMS career and GEO missionaries



Rev. Dr. Thomas & Mary Aadland
Theological educator,
Kenya



Johanna Heidorn
Photographer /
communication
outreach specialist,
Latin America &
Caribbean



Rev. Dr. Daniel & Dr. Joan Jastram
Asia theological
education manager,
Asia



Rev. Vance & Linda Becker
Theological
educators,
Kenya



Kayla Hoem
Communications
specialist,
Spain



Missionaries in their own words

Stories from your District-supported missionaries

“I’m always looking for ways to teach kids about faith, what it means to worship God and be a disciple. One of my regular practices has been to invite all the kids who want to come up and witness a baptism up close. They love watching infants be baptized, but there is true excitement when an adult gets baptized.

This last month, a lady who has been attending our church for a long time was baptized. The next Sunday, she was serving as an usher. When it came time for the offering and she came up to take the baskets from me, one of the little boys who had witnessed the baptism loudly exclaimed, ‘Hey! That’s the lady who was baptized last week!’ Even children recognize they are part of a larger community of disciples saved by grace.”

Pastor Jon Kuehne, Woodbury Lutheran Church, Liberty Ridge Campus

“EVEN CHILDREN RECOGNIZE THEY ARE PART OF A LARGER COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES SAVED BY GRACE.”

“A month ago on a very cold Friday morning, Layla, a pregnant woman from the Middle East, stopped by the office asking for information regarding the ESL classes. She walked from her home to the office just seeking some help. After she registered, I had the chance to chat with her for a while. I heard her story and why she came to the States. I found out that she’s seven months pregnant, and she has another three kids, all in school. She lives a mile away from the office; however, this long way and the hard weather

didn’t stop her from checking us out. I also found out that her husband is not here at the moment, and he will come only when she gives birth.

Layla doesn’t have any idea about the health system in the States. Moreover, she doesn’t have any kind of health insurance. I offered my help, and I called on behalf of her some places in the town that might help. I checked around to get some more information that could give us a clue where she could get started. After many calls with many people, we found out that none of the resources in town could help by any means with the medical examination (prenatal); they only give advice. However, all of these sources pointed us to the county, where they might help with prenatal and the baby after the delivery.

In less than one hour, I was able by the help of God to find three volunteers willing to help Layla navigate her way in the city. Moreover, to get an appointment with one of the insurance navigators at the county. What an achievement that happened that day!

Layla was extremely happy, and she felt that she was surrounded by family that truly care, and she’s not alone anymore. I consider this an achievement as I have helped many immigrants in the past talk to the insurance people or just get a hold of one of the county employees to answer one question. But in Layla’s case, everything was done in one hour. Finding people who are willing to assist with transportation was another surprise—not just one driver but three! (God is really up to something.)

We have helped her with food, even though she doesn’t need it, but we are trying to show her that we care for her as a part of the family. In the last week, she and her kids attended the

Redeemer Church trick-or-treat event and were able to meet more friends.

Layla came the following week on Monday to the office to get started with her English classes. When she came, she was happy and let me talk to her husband, who is still overseas. He thanked me a lot and he said, ‘Miracles never stop. I’m happy that God is taking care of my family, and God put you all on her way to show kindness and love.’

Layla felt more comfortable to share in-depth with us how we made a difference in her life by showing care and love. She continued by saying that when she went to the mosque asking for some guidance, none over there had shown interest. Also, she went to some Somali services in town asking for the same need and where she should get started. She was surprised that none of them had helped even with a suggestion or a word of advice. Everyone said that they had no clue.

The impact that we did in less than a month was very strong. We didn’t talk about Christianity or religion so far, but our deed was louder than our voices. She mentioned that Christians show more mercy than her people—that was a surprise to her. She continued that all she heard in the past about Christians was lies and it’s not true. I am sure that as we continue with her, God will visit and touch her heart to bring her closer to Him.”

John Gayed, POBLO, Rochester

“I AM SURE THAT AS WE CONTINUE WITH HER, GOD WILL VISIT AND TOUCH HER HEART TO BRING HER CLOSER TO HIM.”

Interview: Vicar

Pastoral care &



Vicar Joshua Miller began his vicarage in our District this fall. He recently took some time to share about his hopes for his vicarage and some ideas for how lay members can engage their communities.

What led you to being a vicar today?

I have been a lay person in the LCMS for about 13 years. I have my Master of Arts and my doctorate in systematic theology from Luther seminary in St. Paul, and I also teach theology at Augsburg University. Over the past decade, I've really had a lot of movement toward the pastoral office, and a lot of people who said, "Josh, this is something that you should do. You should consider this."

About a year ago, it got to be so much that I couldn't fight it anymore. I think that it's not fair to be this involved in theology and to have that level of education and to see the need in my own denomination and to turn away from that. I was reluctant at first but then very joyful about preparing for the pastoral office.

So I entered the colloquy process, and in last May I went to St. Louis before the colloquy committee. They approved me for colloquy pending my vicarage. So I'm very excited to be doing my vicarage and getting that hands-on level of experience.

What is your vicarage placement?

It is a year-long vicarage. I was fortunate enough to be placed at King of Kings, Roseville. My family lives in Roseville, so I know the folks here pretty well. Pastor Steve Bielenberg is actually a good friend.

I've had a passion for prison ministry and corrections ministry—ministry to returning Christians—for quite some time, really since I was a kid. My grandfather was a pastor

and was very involved in prison ministry. It really gave me a heart for that, too. It's a section of society that just is not really served well by pastors—partially because of the restrictions, both for people in prison and for those on parole (they're not always able to go to church, depending on the terms of their parole and what kinds of places they can go to).

So when I heard about what MN South does via the nonprofit group Crossing Home, I was very excited to see how I might become involved in that. Through talking with Dr. Utech and President Woodford, we were able to come up with a situation where I could have almost a third of my vicarage be through prison ministry.

What are you looking forward to learning?

I'd say the main thing that I'm hoping to learn is how to do pastoral care well. Both through watching our senior pastor here at King of Kings, Pastor Bielenberg, and working alongside our associate pastor, Pastor Vue Lee.

The prison ministry and corrections ministry portion of my vicarage is also largely giving pastoral care.

Can you tell us more about pastoral care?

A lot of it is listening and then knowing when to speak. I would define pastoral care as preaching the Gospel in a personal context. It's learning to hear the person that you're giving pastoral care to—where they're at. It's learning the right time and the right place and the right way to preach the Gospel personally to them. That may include (for pastors) bringing the Lord's Supper to them because they're unable to come to church for physical reasons. It may be simply reaffirming a very faithful churchgoer in their everyday walk. It may be seeing what struggle they're going through and then telling them very specifically, "Jesus died for you in this circumstance, and you can have confidence to face your everyday life. You can have confidence in your relationship with God, knowing what Jesus has done for you."

And I'm always struck by the encouragement that people right away seem to get from that. It's always remarkable. I think I should start writing down what people say after they've received private communion because everyone always says something very significant about how much that helped them right away.

What's been most encouraging so far?

I'd say the most encouraging thing has been the responses of people who I visit with. There is never a time when I leave a visit thinking that it wasn't worthwhile. Every single time, people are so encouraged by the visit that it's encouraging to me.

I had one resident of one of the halfway houses that I visit take me aside after the visit with the whole group and say, "I just want you to know that your coming and visiting and what you say helps me get through the week, and I just would not have been able to do it without that." I'd say that's the biggest encouragement in the world.

Joshua Miller

correctional ministry

The two pastors have also come and visited the homes when I visited them. They didn't at first—I went myself, but then they came along with me. So I would say they've kind of caught the bug, too. They see that this is an important sector of our community that nobody else is serving. We had another one of the residents of a home say, "I love it when you come, because you never bawl us out. You just tell us that we are loved and accepted in God because of what Jesus did."

How is King of Kings involved?

One big way in which we've done this is a warm clothing and bedding drive for the residents at Crossing Home and for the potential residents (people with a criminal record who come into Crossing Home's drop-in center). At this time of year, of course, coats and blankets are really important, and gloves and all of that.

It was a way that lay people at King of Kings could get involved and feel like they're doing something really important that's not too hard. They don't have to initially go out of their comfort zone too much to just help a little bit. But through that, several members have come to me and asked, "How can I get more deeply involved?"

So a coat drive to start?

Exactly. Jesus said you came and visited me in prison, and [we want to] extend that to those who are out of prison but for parole restriction reasons can't actually come into our building here. That is a really important thing that lay people get involved in, so they're very interested in helping to serve that particular part of our community. That happened through a coat drive!

How is Jehovah, St. Paul, involved?

Crossing Home's drop-in center is housed at Jehovah. That drop-in center is open once a week on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Anyone who has a criminal record can come and apply for housing, can apply for a job, understanding that it's a Christian community that they will be joining if they get into one of the halfway houses.

Jehovah also hosts the residents of Crossing Home coming to church. They're required to attend church. If they do not already attend a church of their own, they're provided a way to get to Jehovah, and then Jehovah also provides a space for a class to be taught to them on Sunday morning.



"FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD, I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME DRINK, I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME, I WAS NAKED AND YOU CLOTHED ME, I WAS SICK AND YOU VISITED ME, I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO ME."

(MATTHEW 25:35-36)

How can our readers get involved?

There's a variety of ways people could be involved. Jim Seemann, who is the MN South District's prison ministry coordinator and a mission liaison to Crossing Home, would probably be the best person to contact. He could then talk to the person and find out their strengths. They need people to write resumes for people. They need people who are willing to bring clothing and blankets and maybe sort some of that stuff at Crossing Home. They need people to help teach the class that's offered during Bible study time at Jehovah.

And then, of course, for people who don't have a hands-on way that they may help, but might be able to financially give to Crossing Home or more specifically to MN South District's prison ministry. There are all kinds of costs associated [with our District prison ministry]—we rent the space from Jehovah, there's a cost for a food pantry that we have, for transportation that's provided for the folks in the home to come to church on Sunday at Jehovah.

What do you hope happens next?

I think the best thing that could happen is that lay people might read this story and say, "Oh, that's something I would like to get involved with. I would like to go and visit some of my shut-ins" or "I would like to go and volunteer at the Crossing Home center, sharing the love of Christ."

Editor's note: If you'd like to learn more about MN South District prison ministry, connect with Jim Seemann via email at seemann@csp.edu. A new round of his free introduction to correctional ministry class begins at Concordia University, St. Paul at the end of January.



Schools in community

From Mayer to Winona, schools partner with their community, local congregations for positive impact

Photo Rocky Sandcork

“Hope Lutheran High School, Winona, has a unique partnership with Restored Blessings, a store started up by faithful volunteers in their quest to help families in need who desire a Christian education. Dave and Lois Haase, members at St. Martin’s Lutheran Church, Winona, along with several other members, had the idea of starting a store to help families afford a Christian education.

Donations of furniture, household items, books, and gently used clothing are accepted during open hours. The ministry gives those in the community access to high-quality, low-cost items that meet the needs of their families. It opens the doors to share God’s love and peace with those who enter the store.

Some of the workers serving at the store are satisfying community service requirements. Some are released from jail to help. This is a great help to the store, and it fulfills a community need while allowing relationships to be formed and the spiritual milk of the life-saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to be shared with all those involved.



Roger Heimgartner, retired teacher of Hope Lutheran and St. Martin’s, is one of many faithful volunteers at Restored Blessings.

The store is run by over 70 regular volunteers. All of the profits benefit students attending St. Martin’s Lutheran School and Hope Lutheran High School of Winona and their ministries.

Hope Lutheran High School is extremely thankful and proud to be

associated with and to work closely with Restored Blessings, an amazing mission outreach!”

Principal Rocky Sandcork, Hope Lutheran High School, Winona

“For 59 years, Mayer Lutheran High School has prepared Christian leaders in western Carver County. Yet in taking on this challenging mission, the school collaborates with many ministry partners who, when working cooperatively, have enabled 3,500 graduates to serve the Lord and lead His people in remarkable ways.

As an association high school, Mayer Lutheran has been blessed with 12 congregational sources of financial, prayerful, and encouraging support. The members of the Lutheran High School in Mayer Association, Inc. engage the school in promoting Lutheran pre-K to 12 education on two campuses throughout the community. Without the support of the member congregations, the school’s mission would be greatly compromised. In return, Mayer Lutheran provides ample opportunities for the Association to use its human, financial, governance, and facility resources. Truly, the partnership in the Gospel through the Association makes a significant impact for the sake of the Gospel.

In recent years, preparing Christian leaders at the school’s campus in Mayer is no longer limited by time or space. Thanks to expanding technology, Mayer Lutheran established the Genesis Virtual Academy, a K-12 online school, in 2010. The school serves students around the world in a variety of ways. From homeschoolers to schools around the country, many include GVA courses in their curriculum.

Last May, three full-time GVA students graduated with a Mayer Lutheran-endorsed diploma and walked with the graduates of the traditional high school, an event the school’s founders couldn’t have envisioned.

Mayer also offers the Mayer Knights, a community youth program for kids in first through eighth grades that provides opportunities to participate in sports, camps, music, drama, and robotics. Many families trust Mayer Knights as a program where their children will enjoy wholesome, effective, Christ-centered training.



Mayer Lutheran senior Aaliyah Bargmann donates blood at the Red Cross blood drive held twice each year at the school.

Photo Mayer Lutheran High School

Finally, Mayer Lutheran has been a good neighbor in making our community a better place. The school works in partnership with the American Red Cross, Feed My Starving Children, the Carver County Food Shelf, Ridgeview Medical Center, Carver County Parks, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, local churches and schools, and a host of other organizations, large and small. The good from these partnerships has been a blessing to many.

Preparing Christian leaders in the world today can only be accomplished by the blessing of the Lord. He has provided multiple opportunities and resources for the school to accomplish its mission and work to spread the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that so desperately needs it.”

Executive Director Joel Landskroener, Mayer Lutheran High School, Mayer

WE'VE BEEN LISTENING!

Exciting changes have been made to Lutheran Church Extension Fund's (LCEF) ConnectPLUS and PartnerPLUS investments.

LCEF wouldn't be able to support Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) ministries without the faithful support of our investors. This strong and stable base means the important role LCEF plays in supporting the LCMS will continue long into the future.

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3.00%
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On balances up to \$50,000.

- ConnectPLUS is a fixed-rate term note with a premium rate for new LCEF investors (LCMS individuals, organizations and congregations).
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- Second-tier rate applies to portion of balances over \$50,000.
- Additional funds can be added during the term (\$25 minimum).

PARTNERPLUS**

2.50%
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3.00%
4-year

On balances up to \$50,000.

- New money only.
- PartnerPLUS is a special, fixed-rate investing opportunity with a premium rate for LCMS individuals, organizations, congregations and Individual Retirement Account investments.
- Minimum of \$500 to start (no transfers from other LCEF investments).
- Second-tier rate applies to portion of balances over \$50,000.
- Additional funds can be added during the term (\$25 minimum).



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LCEF is a nonprofit religious organization; therefore, LCEF investments are not FDIC-insured bank deposit accounts. This is not an offer to sell investments, nor a solicitation to buy. LCEF will offer and sell its securities only in states where authorized. The offer is made solely by LCEF's Offering Circular. Investors should carefully read the Offering Circular, which more fully describes associated risks. The State of Washington has adopted a regulatory position that currently prohibits residents of Washington State from opening a new investment unless they are already an LCEF investor and 18 years or older. Rates as of Oct. 2019. Balance restrictions apply. Rates subject to change. Visit lcef.org for details. *ConnectPLUS is available on a one account per investor basis only to new investors 18 and older who have not had an LCEF investment in the past 24 months. ConnectPLUS is not available to investors in Ohio and Pennsylvania. **PartnerPLUS is available to investors 18 and older. New money only.

[WHERE WE GO FROM HERE]

by Sarabeth Marcello

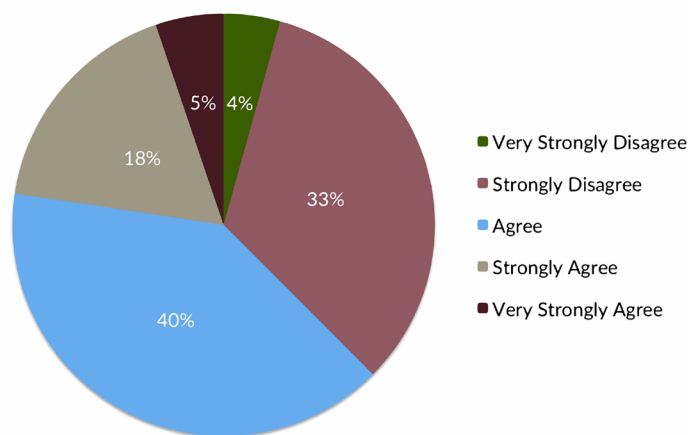


In a 2015 District-wide survey, over 550 MN South District congregational members—from pastor to pew—identified specific concerns affecting their ministry. “Where we go from here” is a new series that helps congregations brainstorm ways to address these specific concerns.

Faithfully love your neighbor

Many congregations do not reflect their surrounding community in their age distribution, ethnicity, and the life-stages of families—and they don't know what to do about it.

When you stand in line at the grocery store or sit down at your favorite local restaurant, do the people around you resemble the people in your congregation? Are people like your fellow shoppers, cashier, diners, and waitstaff represented in your congregation?



Survey responses to the statement “My congregation reflects the surrounding community in our age distribution, ethnicity, and life-stages of families.”

For many congregations, the answer is no. “Many churches are homogeneous and shrinking while our urban and suburban communities are diversifying and growing,” Pastor Pat Simmons explains. Our communities are changing, and we’re not sure how to keep up. As the senior pastor at St. Michael’s Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Simmons has a passion for community engagement.

“We have the Good News, and our neighbors have needs,” Simmons says. “In our serving their needs, understanding their cultures, showing genuine compassion, we gain the opportunity to share our hope in Christ.” Just as Christ led through a servant example, so should we as we interact with our communities.

It can be daunting, though. In a culture that is quick to condemn the church, “community leaders are often suspicious of our motives,” Simmons says. So we have to be patient as we build trust through faithful service.

Not sure where to start? Simmons has a suggestion:

“Both congregations I have served began community engagement in the public schools. Our engagement includes monthly meetings with the principal, weekly after-school tutoring, food security support, etc. By caring for the children, we have been able to engage the wider community.”

At the dual parishes of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Austin, and Our Savior Lutheran Church, Brownsdale, Pastor Gemechu Olana is helping strengthen community

outreach efforts and reinvigorate the life of the church and ministry in general. Outreach events focus on blessing their communities and building meaningful relationships, Olana says.

In November, several members from each congregation (plus some from St. John Lutheran Church, Austin) attended a three-hour mission workshop, hosted by the mission team at Holy Cross. Assistant to the President for Missions Rev. Dr. William Utech along with Rev. Dr. Peter Meier “reassured, encouraged, and energized each participant for more focused Gospel outreach in our areas of influence,” Olana says.

This was just one of several events aimed at tearing down the silos between the nearby congregations. Although each congregation has its own community, Olana and Pastor James Groleau (from St. John) are “in accord that the best thing for our churches in this area is collaboration and intentional networking for greater sustainable influence in our community and the spiritual welfare of all our members.”

Many of the outreach events in Austin and Brownsdale are kid-friendly activities, such as an Easter egg hunt. Each child who attends receives a goody bag with a children’s book from Concordia Publishing House and other goodies.

“By using the rich Lutheran tradition of education, faith, and community engagement,” Olana says, “we persistently try engaging our immediate diverse community through realistic outreach ministries that aim to share and connect people with the hope of Christ.” Outreach activities don’t have to be complicated—in fact, the simplest, most doable ones are often most effective. After all, people today highly value authenticity, not showiness.

*LITTLE CHILDREN, LET US NOT LOVE IN WORD
OR TALK BUT IN DEED AND IN TRUTH.*

(1 JOHN 3:18)

If you’re looking for ways to engage your community through faithful service, consider what your nearby sister congregations have tried. While you may not exactly replicate their outreach events, it may spark a new idea that reinvigorates your congregation’s welcoming efforts.



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