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## Study guide:

# Proclaiming God's love

*From Cambodia to Costa Rica*

By Robert C. Blezard

The good news is that the Lutheran church is growing rapidly. The bad news is that it is only growing in Africa, in Asia and other corners of the world, not in the Americas or Europe, where we have been in steady decline for some time. In other parts of the globe Lutheran churches are working hard amid challenges and setbacks, finding strength as they follow the Spirit's leadings to bring the gospel to God's people. What can we learn from them as we accompany them in ministry?

### Exercise 1: Why?

Author, speaker and systems philosopher Simon Sinek popularized the concept "start with why," positing that many organizations struggle because they concentrate too much on the "what" they do and not enough on the "why" they do it (see [startwithwhy.com](http://startwithwhy.com) for details).

Scrutinize the story from each country and discern the "why" of their actions—the purpose, the mission, the spark that ignites their passion and gets them moving. If your study group is big enough, separate into groups and assign each a country or several countries. Report on the "why" for each country. When all have reported, discuss:

- What did the countries have in common? What elements were distinct?
- What is your congregation's "why"? How do you know? How is it articulated? If there is a mission statement somewhere, does it express the actual "why" or an idealized idea of what a panel wished was the "why." What ignites passions and gets people moving?
- What can your congregation learn from the stories of Lutheran churches across the globe?

### Exercise 2: What?

Study the stories of every country again, this time making a list of what they do—how the rubber of their "why" meets the road of their "what." For each country correlate the "whats" and the "why."

Reporting on your findings, how do facets of ministry from each coun-



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## Study guide: **Proclaiming God's love**

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try relate to its why? What do the countries have in common? What do they have in distinction?

List your congregation's "whats." Make sure you have thought of everything. Now relate it to the "why." What do you learn about your own congregation? What could you learn from the stories of Lutheran churches across the globe?

### Exercise 3: Relationship

Read the two greatest commandments that Jesus identifies in Matthew 22:35-40 (or Mark 12:28-31). What do they have in common? How do you know if you are following them or breaking them—what are the marks or measurements? In what ways are both dependent on relationship?

Turning to the second, what does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? Is it an emotion that resides in the heart and stays there? Or must it be expressed in the life of a Christian? If so, how? What is the role of relationship?

Looking at the stories from the global church, in what ways does each church exemplify fidelity to the greatest commandments? How many examples can you think of for each country?

How does your congregation do? What can you learn from the global church?

### Exercise 4: Community

If possible, divide your study group into three general segments: the older ones, the younger ones and the middle ones. Ask each to discuss the question: "How has the notion of 'community' changed in your lifetime and why? When done, have each group report out. Then discuss:

- What are the major ways that our country's notion of "community" has changed? How fast has it been changing? How are those changes evidenced? Is it for the good or the bad? What was lost? What was gained? What groups benefited from the changes? What groups lost?
- What caused the changes? What influence did the following factors play: economics, technology, communication, politics, religion?

As a study group, come up with a summary statement of how "community" has changed in our lifetime and why. Discuss:

- As our nation's notion of community changed, how did churches fare? Mainline Protestantism hit a peak in membership and financial resources in 1965, and it has been in slow decline since. Is there



## Study guide: **Proclaiming God's love**

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a correlation between the change in “community” and the decline of the church? Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

- Does a church’s health depend on a strong sense of community? Why or why not? In previous generations, were the generally accepted understandings about community more supportive of churches than they are today? Why or why not?
- Looking through each nation’s stories, what is the implicit understanding of how each culture defines “community”? How does it compare with our own culture’s? What can we learn from our brothers and sisters abroad?

### **Exercise 5: Meeting needs**

In all of the stories from around the globe you hear about poverty, human needs, accompaniment, care and concern for others. What are the commonalities of those elements across the stories?

What is the connection between a church’s desire to understand and meet the needs of the poor among them and its ability to cohere, adapt, grow and spread the gospel?

When Christians seek to meet the needs of those around them, what gospel message do they “preach” through their actions? What gospel message is conveyed by the actions of each church whose story is told in *Living Lutheran*?

What is your congregation’s approach to the needy in its midst? On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you characterize your congregation’s priority to meet the needs of the poor? What are its priorities?

What can your congregation learn from the churches across the globe?

### **Exercise 6: Rejoice in suffering**

All churches struggle with setbacks, obstacles and challenges, but some face bigger obstacles than others. Identify the challenges facing Lutherans in Russia, Cambodia and Costa Rica. Discuss:

- How are these obstacles being met? How are the churches moving forward and doing good ministry despite challenges?
- Does a church grow and find strength *despite* obstacles and challenges or *because* of them? What happens to a church when it takes a challenge head-on with courage, trust in God’s presence and guidance?

In Romans 5:3-5, Paul wrote: “[W]e boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,

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because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Discuss:

- In what ways do the stories of the global churches underscore the truth of Paul's teaching?
- What challenges and obstacles does your congregation face? Does your synod and our denomination face? Does God give you (and all of us) the guidance, wisdom, creativity and tenacity to overcome them?

### Exercise 7: ELCA accompaniment

Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission, describes his unit's role as stewarding relationships through accompaniment. "Accompaniment is walking in solidarity that is characterized by interdependence and mutuality," he said. Study his comments on page 17 and discuss:

- Accompaniment is a philosophy of *ministry with*, rather than *ministry for* or *ministry to*. What is the difference between *ministry with* and *ministry for* or *to*? Why is this distinction important for building relationships?
- Looking at the stories of the global church, how do they model accompaniment in their ministries to the poor and needy in their midst?
- Does your congregation, in its outreach and service to people in your community, exhibit *ministry with* or *ministry for*? How might your ministries be strengthened by working toward an accompaniment model? How could this be achieved?

### Exercise 8: Missionaries to the West

The Lutheran Church in Cambodia has set a goal of sending missionaries to the developed West to help revitalize the Lutheran churches. Discuss:

- What could their missionaries teach us? How could they show us the way?
- What does the Lutheran Church in Cambodia (and our other partner churches) have that we lack? That we really need? How would we need to change?
- If missionaries came, would we listen?



## Proclaiming God's love: From Cambodia to Costa Rica



Lutherans from Usolanga, a congregation in the Iringa Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, stand outside their church after worship. Lutherans in Tanzania number 6.5 million.

By Erin Strybis

To get a sense of how zealous Tanzanian Lutherans are, you could start by worshipping with them. Not only is the average service two to three hours long, including multiple choral performances and offerings, the sheer amount of people gathered is impressive.

“Wanna see a Lutheran megachurch? Go to Tanzania,” said Rahel Mwitula-Williams. “You’ll see 500 people in worship. There are more Lutherans in Tanzania—my birth country—than in America.”

She’s right. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) has 6.5 million members—approximately 13 percent of the country’s population—compared to the ELCA’s 3.7 million. It is one of the largest Lutheran churches in the world.

An April report from the Pew Research Center predicted that by 2050 four out of every

10 Christians in the world will live in sub-Saharan Africa if trends continue. In *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Philip Jenkins argues that the center of Christianity has shifted to Africa, Asia and Latin America. “That’s a reality for Lutherans,” said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director for ELCA Global Mission. “We are seeing a tremendous growth in the Lutheran community in the global south.”

Through its global mission work and membership in the Lutheran World Federation, a communion of 72 million Lutherans from 98 countries, the ELCA is in regular communication with these fast-growing churches and with those whose membership is stagnant or in decline. As the ELCA considers its future, what can it learn about evangelism from its Lutheran brothers and sisters around the world?

### A church connected to the community

A third-generation Lutheran from Tanzania, Mwitula-Williams now works in the U.S. But she has had an intimate view of the church's roots—her grandfather was one of the first local missionaries in Tanzania, trained by Lutheran missionaries. He was called from western to northern Tanzania to teach and spread the gospel.

That was 60 years ago when the church was smaller. When seven Lutheran churches across Tanzania merged in 1963 to form the ELCT, it had 500,000 members. Today the church continues to expand.

Mwitula-Williams thinks the rapid growth has everything to do with the church's commitment to social services. "At the end of the day, you can preach all you want but what connects the community are basic needs," she said. "If my health is not good, my kids are not going to school. If I'm farming and don't have clean water, I'm not coming to church on Sunday. Before he taught people, Jesus made sure people's needs were met. Because the Lutheran church tries to live out the gospel this way, that's why it's growing."

The village of Idete where Mwitula-Williams' grandmother grew up had a Lutheran clinic, primary and secondary schools, and a church. Across the country Lutheran institutions abound: 23 hospitals, more than 140 health centers and dispensaries, several schools and a university with

10,000 students. The institutions provide services for everyone, regardless of religion.

"The church is involved in all aspects of life," said Joe Troester, an ELCA missionary serving in Arusha with his wife Deborah. He said this structure was influenced by early German missionaries who came to Tanzania from state churches that received tax money to care for people back home.

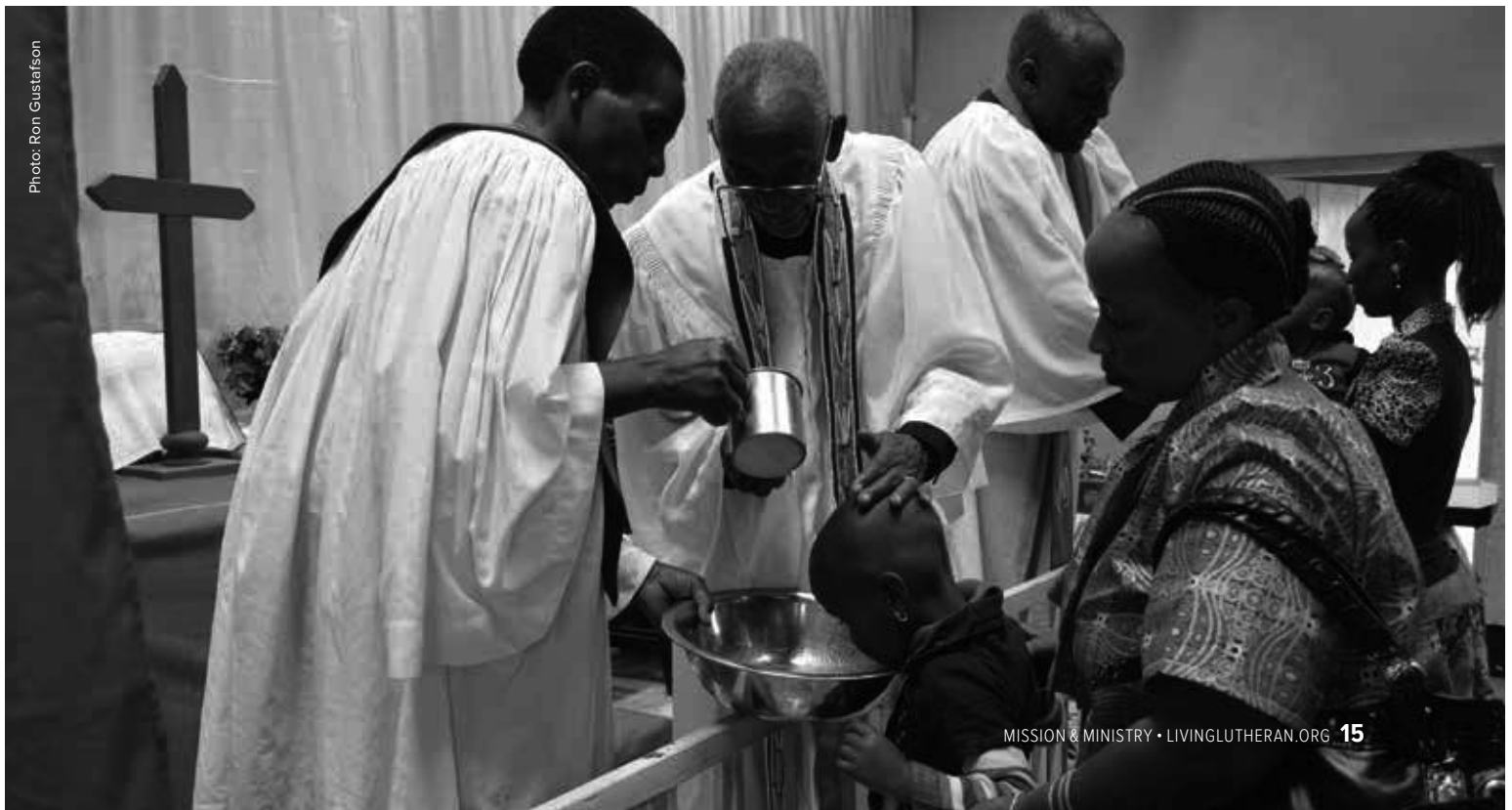
Although German and other missionaries played a role in sharing the gospel with Tanzanians, their departure was also significant. "During World War I, whole missions were abandoned and people left," Troester said. "The [Tanzanians] picked up the job and started evangelizing on their own. It's that sort of evangelism that has continued."

A culture of passionate, strategic evangelism has been central to the ELCT's growth—all congregations are expected to establish preaching points in neighboring areas, Troester said. Catechists preach at those points and work toward establishing an independent congregation—thus the church continues to expand.

The denomination also expands its reach through mission work in neighboring Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia, Mozambique, Uganda, Malawi and Congo.

Mwitula-Williams insists that her church is "not just about building megachurches—we're actually about service. We are meeting the needs of God's people. And people want to know, who is that God you're talking about?"

Lotegelwaki Lesikar, pastor emeritus (center), and Christopher Lukumay (right), pastor of Likamba Parish, conduct baptisms. The congregation is located in Likamba, Tanzania.



### 'Heroes of the faith'

In Russia, Lutherans are also building up their church, focusing primarily on lay leadership. Unlike Tanzania, identifying as Lutheran there "means to be a minority," said Dietrich Brauer, archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia (ELCR).

The majority of people are Russian Orthodox or practice Islam, and many consider Lutheranism a sect. "[Being Lutheran] is not always easy. It demands courage," he said.

Lutherans who kept the faith during the Soviet regime know much about courage. From 1922 to 1991 the government only tolerated religion behind closed doors. Lutheran bishops and pastors were executed or lived in exile. Despite this, Russian Lutherans continued to worship in each other's homes. "They knew hymns by heart, baptized children and prayed as they could," Brauer said.

Bradn Buerkle, an ELCA missionary in St. Petersburg, believes faith helped the Lutherans survive that era. "Part of the responsibility of the church [today] is to take care of people who lived through the oppression," he said. "They were heroes of the faith."

Today the ELCR has 50,000 members in 300 congregations across Russia. The distances between congregations are huge, and many are without pastors.

"The church is very young after being reborn, after having the freedom to develop a public church again starting in the 90s," Buerkle said.

Members of a congregation in Abakan, south-central Siberia, participate in a seminar conducted by ELCA missionary Bradn Buerkle.



Photo courtesy of Bradn Buerkle



Marina (left), Anya, Viktoria and Galina (last names withheld), Lutheran lay leaders from the Abakan region, attend a team building retreat led by Buerkle.

A need for more theological training inspired the church to partner with the ELCA on the Equipping for Service project. Buerkle administers the project, which is being funded by gifts to Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA. For three years, he has traveled throughout the country to conduct educational and leadership seminars for lay leaders.

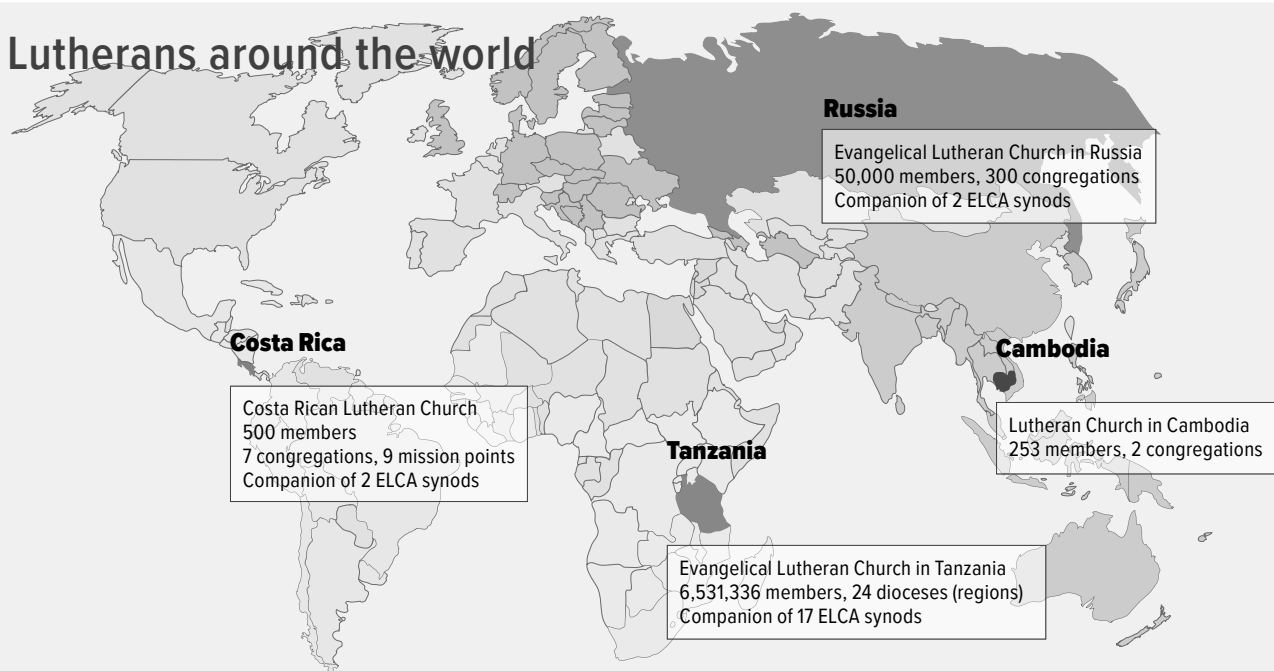
Buerkle has seen the strength of lay leadership firsthand. While the 25 members of a congregation in Abakan, south-central Siberia, waited for a new pastor, lay leaders covered preaching, communion and other duties. By the time they called a new pastor, the congregation had grown to 35 people. Now, with a pastoral vacancy again, "the congregation is not so anxious, due in part to their participation in the Equipping for Service project," Buerkle said. Today it has 50 members.

The ELCR is unique in that "there is no separation between laypeople and pastors. It is a complicated but a crucial point for Russia," Brauer said. "For the church of the majority, the qualitative difference is very important. Ordination is not a sacrament in our church and there is no class of priests as a social group."

The empowerment of lay leaders combined with the Lutherans' strong faith gives Buerkle hope for the future. "When I saw how many great laypeople there were, their circumstances were such that they wouldn't get to seminary, that's what helped me to develop this program, seeing the potential that was out there," he said. "It's important to say just how committed the lay leaders are here. In the Russian context, you have to be willing to endure great hardships [to be Lutheran]."

Photo courtesy of Bradn Buerkle

## Lutherans around the world



### Top 10 Lutheran World Federation churches and membership

1. The Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus - 7,886,595
2. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania - 6,531,336
3. Church of Sweden - 6,225,091
4. Protestant Christian Batak Church (Indonesia) - 4,500,000
5. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark - 4,400,754
6. Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland - 4,031,235
7. Church of Norway - 3,835,973
8. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - 3,765,362
9. Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (India) - 3,000,000
10. Malagasy Lutheran Church (Madagascar) - 3,000,000

Source: Lutheran World Federation

## Modern mission



What does global mission look like in the 21st century? Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director for ELCA Global Mission, sat down with *Living Lutheran* to explain.

### **Living Lutheran: What is the primary focus of ELCA Global Mission today?**

*Malpica Padilla:* Global mission is the responsibility of the whole church, not of a unit. My staff's role is to steward

relationships with the ELCA's global companions. My goal is to map out the total engagement of this church in global mission ventures, really knowing what each expression is doing and how that is contributing to a commonly agreed upon goal. Not necessarily the goal we set for ourselves, but a shared goal with our companions. We must ask: Whose needs are we meeting—theirs or ours?

### **What is accompaniment and why is it important for ELCA's global mission?**

Accompaniment is walking in solidarity that is characterized by interdependence and mutuality. And we (the ELCA) walk with our companions and our companions walk with us in the same way that

God through Jesus walked with us. It is patterned after that *kenosis*—when Jesus emptied himself to assume our humanity. Because of that relationship, we have been working together [with global companions] for more than 20 years.

### **What do ELCA members need to know about the global church?**

We are both donors and receivers of gifts from the global church. Each gives according to their own capacities. When we had Hurricane Katrina, one of the first contributions we received was \$200 that came from the Lutheran church in Madagascar. When we needed to find people for specific ministries, we have turned to the Lutheran church in El Salvador. Let us share what God has given to God's church to do God's work.

For more information about ELCA Global Mission, visit [elca.org/globalchurch](http://elca.org/globalchurch).



### Holistic ministry

A youth hostel, a farm, a meal program and English classes. For members of the Lutheran Church in Cambodia (LCC), these are safe places and spaces where they can bear witness to God's redeeming love.

Lutherans in Cambodia have two similarities with those in Russia: they are a minority group and live with heartbreaking memories—for them, the devastating rule of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. In this mostly Buddhist context, direct evangelism isn't as effective, said Daniel Orn, a founding pastor of the church. "The majority of people look at the Christians as believers who are indoctrinated by a Western religion," he added.

Instead, Orn said the LCC hopes to attract people to the faith through the caring, Christian way its members live and through its holistic, innovative ministries like its hostel project and congregation in Phnom Penh.

The hostel met a critical need because the LCC's first congregation in Kruos Village had a few university students who needed a place to live. The church first rented a home to six students at an affordable rate. By 2012 the hostel ministry had grown so much that the LCC was able to purchase three three-story units that house 60 students and include space for worship and fellowship, said Adam Erickson, an ELCA missionary in Cambodia with his wife Sarah.

Now the hostel has a congregation of 65 members aged 19 through 30 that represents 10 of Cambodia's 25 provinces. Most are university students like Sareoun Chum, a young adult leader and hostel volunteer. For Chum,

it's easy to serve God but hard to know if he is making a difference. Yet the connections he makes through the hostel ministry bring him excitement: "I know I have a good relationship with other students to exchange experiences."

Chum also appreciates that his church not only "works with the soul" but also focuses on serving the poor. One example is an agriculture ministry, also founded by the Kruos Village congregation, where villagers receive training so they can grow produce in their gardens to eat and sell at the local market. The program also provides chickens, which helps families buy meat to supplement their diet. Ultimately, the ministry has helped the village become more food secure, Erickson said.

With approximately 253 baptized members, two congregations, multiple ministries and big dreams, the "LCC is a young growing ministry full of enthusiasm," Erickson said.


Founded in 2010, the LCC is a product of the Lutheran Church in Singapore's mission work—a denomination founded by the Lutheran Church in America, an ELCA predecessor. Although it relies on outside funding from the ELCA and the Singapore church, Orn said the LCC aims to be self-sufficient by 2035.

Its other goal is "to send missionaries to serve to restore Christians in Europe in the next 20 to 30 years," Orn said. "[In the future] we hope to see Christians, either directly from the LCC or other churches, involved and making an impact in the government. If the majority of government leaders are Christian, the hope of improving the country's situation is high."

Two graduates of the university in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (center), are blessed during worship as they prepare to return home. During their studies they attended a Lutheran hostel congregation, a ministry of the Lutheran Church in Cambodia.



Photo: Y. Franklin Ishida



Touteint, 68, plants cassava in her plot of land, which she received through a Cambodian land concession program, where each family is given land to clear and till. The ELCA supports this program.

Photo: Y. Franklin Ishida

### 'A church without walls'

Gilberto Quesada Mora, president of the *Iglesia Luterana Costarricense* (ILCO, Costa Rican Lutheran Church), has a similar understanding of evangelism to Orn's. It starts with walking with others and advocating for their needs.

"The principle form of invitation that we extend is when we place ourselves along certain populations and walk with them. This can be in a public march, in a demonstration or also in a religious activity," Quesada Mora said. "By acting naturally and being authentic, we make ourselves known in a different way."

The church centers its mission on the most vulnerable: indigenous people, urban poor, peasant farmers, Nicaraguan immigrants, and people living with HIV and AIDS.

When she was 14 and living in her home country of Nicaragua, she heard a Costa Rican missionary speak in worship. "I felt the need to raise my hand in response to God's call to serve as a missionary," she said. Ten years later she found herself in Costa Rica studying theology. Now 32, she is the first female pastor to be ordained by the ILCO in 25 years.

When asked why she joined the Lutheran church, she said, "I felt the need to talk about a liberating God, a loving God, about a God who walks on the side of people, to see God's reflection in each one of them."

This commitment to social justice has been the hallmark of her ministry—for five years she worked in Costa Rica's Sarapiquí region with the church's ministry among migrant children and mothers.

An ELCA grant helps fund work to build up more leaders like Álvarez Rocha. The project "is a



Members of the Costa Rican Lutheran Church participate in a demonstration alongside other citizens.

Founded in 1988, the ILCO has seven congregations and nine mission points with approximately 500 members. Quesada Mora estimates that it accompanies an additional 500 people through various ministries.


"The Costa Rican Lutheran Church has taken upon itself the historical challenge of accompanying and furthering the struggle to defend the human rights of [impoverished and marginalized]," Quesada Mora said. "What moves the Lutheran church is not the immediate affiliation of new members, but rather the accompaniment of processes that free people from historic bonds, be they religious, political, social and even cultural."

The church's commitment to personal witness and accompaniment (see page 17) has drawn people in. "For years our motto was 'a church without walls,'" said Geraldina Álvarez Rocha, pastor, feminist theologian and human rights activist in the ILCO. "When people heard that, they immediately became interested out of curiosity."

Raised in the Church of the Nazarene, Álvarez Rocha felt called to pastoral work at an early age.

proposal for the empowerment of the church, above all the empowerment of congregational leaders, working in five major areas of church life—organization, leadership formation, liturgy, sustainable stewardship and infrastructure," she said.

One of the biggest challenges facing the ILCO, she said, is how it can distinguish itself from nongovernmental organizations. In her work, Álvarez Rocha wants the church to move from providing services to lifting up initiatives developed by community members.

"Without a doubt, I believe that the most exciting part is the fact that we have proven we can be a church that tries to reform itself in time and space," she said. "We are a church that is moving forward with strength, slowly but surely." 

Download a study guide by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab at [LivingLutheran.org](http://LivingLutheran.org). Find this story on the website to watch a video interview with Rahel Mwitula-Williams.



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