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(page 14)

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

Called, gathered and sent

In 2017, ELCA missionary work takes many forms

By Robert C. Blezard

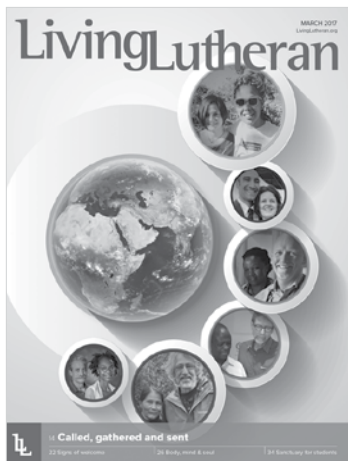
Missionaries have been part of our Christian faith since the resurrected Jesus gathered with his followers on a mountaintop in Galilee to give them the Great Commission. But the work of missionaries has changed a great deal over the years as Christians have sought to reach out to a changing world with the love of Christ. How that work has evolved may help us understand our own mission better.

Exercise 1: Missionary, me?

- Have you ever dreamed of being a missionary? Where did you get that idea? What countries would you dream of serving, and why? What do you imagine the work and life would be like? What hardships do you think would await you? How would you overcome them?
- Our denomination's Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program enables adults 21 to 29 years old to serve ELCA missions around the world. To learn more, go to elca.org/yagm. What do you think about the opportunity? If you are in your 20s, is this something that would appeal to you? If you are older, would it have appealed to you as a younger person? Who in your congregation might be interested? Would your congregation want to support a YAGM?

Exercise 2: Ideas and images

- When you think of a missionary, what images or ideas come to mind? Where do those images come from? How have missionaries been depicted in books, films and television shows? What are some media caricatures and stereotypes of missionaries? How might those older images for missionaries have been appropriate for the world of a century or more ago? Why do they no longer fit?
- How do the descriptions of the missionaries in the *Living Lutheran* article differ from these older images? Why is their approach more appropriate to today's world?



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continued

Exercise 3: Job description

Based on your study group's understanding of what a missionary is and what a missionary does, come up with a job description for a missionary. When done, compare that job description to the actual jobs done by the missionaries profiled in *Living Lutheran*. What adjustments would you have to make in order to fit your group's job description to that of the actual missionaries? Why?

Exercise 4: "God's work. Our hands."

Our denomination's handy motto describes how we are to live as God's people. From the article, lift up the many specific ways that missionaries are doing "God's work" with their hands.

Exercise 5: Supporting missionaries

- How do you, personally, and/or your congregation support missionaries? Do you contribute to missionaries? Is there a line-item in your congregation's budget for them? Do you get letters or emails from ELCA missionaries and distribute them?
- After doing some research on your synod website, discuss: What missionaries does your synod support, and how? How much money goes to support missionaries? What kind of nonmonetary support does it give? Does it have a global mission committee? What is the scope of its work? How is the work of missionaries publicized?
- After researching on the ELCA website (elca.org/globalmission), discuss: What are the missionary efforts our denomination undertakes? Why? How much is spent to support missionaries? In what other ways does the ELCA support missionaries?
- Your congregation's financial contributions to your synod and churchwide offices help fund the efforts of ELCA missionaries. How much money does your congregation provide for synod and churchwide ministries?
- **For action:** Write out a case statement for the missionary efforts of your synod and our churchwide offices and make an argument for why your congregation should increase its financial support for those efforts.
- **For action:** Make contact with an ELCA missionary or Young Adult in Global Mission and form a relationship between your congregation and that person. Publicize the missionary's work and follow his or her journey. Provide support with prayer, communication and whatever else is appropriate.



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Exercise 6: Great commission

Jesus gave his present and future followers their “marching orders” in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20. Read it and discuss.

- What, specifically, are the followers told to do? Whom are they to reach? And how are they to achieve their goals? What responsibilities are implied by the Great Commission for each follower? For the group collectively?
- Did Jesus expect every one of those disciples individually to fulfill all of the Great Commission? Why or why not? Why couldn't it have been fully achieved by those followers in their lifetimes? What parts could those individuals have played in carrying it out? Did the inability to fulfill all of the Great Commission absolve them of responsibility? Why or why not?
- Does Jesus expect you and every other Christian individually to fulfill the commission? Your congregation and every other congregation? Why or why not? What part can you play? Does the inability to fulfill all of the Great Commission absolve us of responsibility? Why or why not?
- Collectively, and working over centuries, do Christians as a whole have the ability to fulfill the Great Commission? What part can you play? What parts can your congregation play? What parts can our denomination play?
- By sending missionaries to foreign lands, how does our denomination fulfill its part? By supporting missionaries with prayers, materials and funding, how do you and your congregation fulfill your parts of the Great Commission?

Exercise 7: Accompaniment

ELCA Global Mission's work follows a model of accompaniment, which it defines as “walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality” (from elca.org/globalmission). The Global Mission website goes on to explain that the five principles involved are mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, empowering and sustainability. Read about accompaniment on the website and discuss:

- Break into pairs and take turns explaining the accompaniment model of ELCA Global Mission. Share your explanations and what the experience was like. Together come up with a simple explanation. What did you learn?
- What are the strengths of the accompaniment model? How might accompaniment work for the people your congregation needs or wants to reach?
- What is the distinction between “mission to” and “mission *with* and



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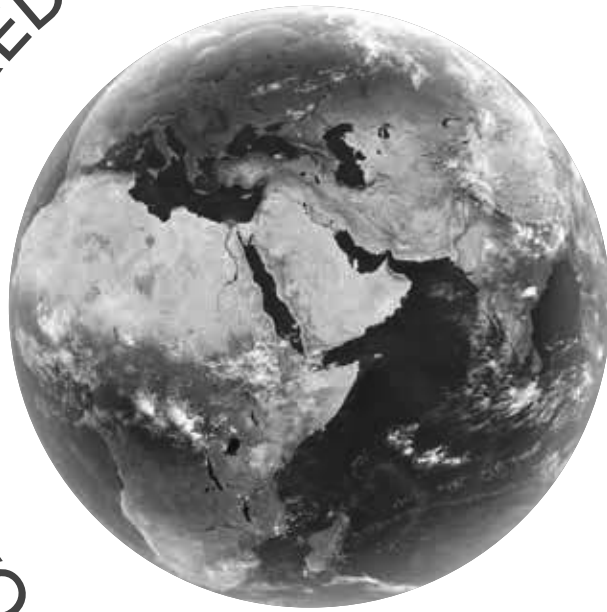
among?” Which is more relational? Why would the ELCA seek “mission with and among” over “mission to?”

- What does “vulnerability” mean in the context of a relationship? Why is it important? If you don’t have vulnerability in a relationship, what does that generally mean? Why is vulnerability an important element in accompaniment?
- Why is identifying and correcting imbalances of power important in relationship? Why is it especially important when we are in relationship with people who may be poorer economically than we are? How does the principle of “empowering” serve in accompaniment?

Exercise 8: You are missionaries

- Who are the people in your community that your congregation needs or wants to reach with the love of God and the power of Jesus’ gospel—in other words, your “mission field”? Why do you need to reach them? How has your congregation tried?
- What insights into your congregation’s “mission” work can you glean from the stories of the missionaries and the model of accompaniment that guides their work? Explore how each of the five accompaniment principles could inform your work.

CALLED, GATHERED AND SENT



In 2017, ELCA missionary work takes many forms

By Anne Basye

Photos courtesy of ELCA missionaries

As you read this, some 225 ELCA pastors, doctors, nurses, teachers, theological educators, communicators and community organizers are serving on every continent but Antarctica.

These widespread missionaries are couples, families, singles; ordained and lay leaders; in long-term or short-term calls; new to global service and veterans whose parents were missionaries too.

“Missionaries are how the church engages in sharing its resources, including people, to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ,” said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission. “Sending them is a sign of being church, of being the body of Christ.”

The body of Christ today includes more than 145 Lutheran church bodies with 72 million members in 98 countries who also preach, teach, heal, feed and care for God’s creation.

So why are ELCA missionaries needed today, and what do they do?

One global, Lutheran church

In the past, Lutheran missionaries were sent to establish new churches around the world. Today ELCA missionaries partner with existing church bodies to spread the good news in their unique contexts.

Local leaders have replaced missionaries in pulpits and bishops’ offices. Churches that missionaries helped start now run their own seminaries, provide their own evangelists and pastors, and administer their own programs. And ELCA missionaries are sent only when an invitation is issued by a global companion church.

“The global church is at a more solid place,” said Heidi Torgerson, ELCA director for global services. “Instead of approaching us for long-term people to help start and grow a church, [the ELCA’s global companion churches] are asking us to fill more specific, technical positions. It’s a real testimony to growth and something to celebrate for our companions.”

Still, she noted, “our fractured world needs healing. ELCA missionaries are agents of that healing through the work they do.”



Steve Swanson, a medical doctor and ELCA missionary, examines a child at Selian Hospital in the Arusha Region of Tanzania.



Jodi Swanson works with inpatient and outpatient programs at Selian Hospital.

Supporting health and healing in Tanzania

In Tanzania, healing means training and supporting staff for the 21 hospitals and dozens of dispensaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. That's the role of Steve and Jodi Swanson, along with Mark and Linda Jacobson, as medical missionaries in Arusha.

A pediatric infectious disease and tropical medicine specialist with a background in public health, Steve is medical director of the neonatal intensive care unit at Arusha Lutheran Medical Center. He trains local professionals, leads teaching ward rounds, offers weekly educational conferences, partners students with visiting doctors and develops protocols.

Jodi also has extensive credentials in pediatric nursing and community health. She works with the inpatient and outpatient programs for malnourished children at Selian Hospital and trains nurses at the medical center's nursing school, where she hopes to develop best practices around the care of children with malnutrition.

The Swansons and Mark Jacobson, who is a doctor, are sometimes assisted by participants in the ELCA Global Health Volunteers program, which facilitates short-term placements of three weeks or a month for health professionals.

For the Swansons, serving as missionaries means carrying out their work through relationships. Jodi spent a year winning the trust and friendship of colleagues in the nutritional unit before she began to

make suggestions. Steve works to create relationships that are warm, collegial and encouraging. He always acknowledges his mistakes so the student doctors won't feel ashamed of their errors.

"In many ways, I ended up walking in my father's footsteps, but in medicine," Steve said, whose parents Allen and Jean Swanson served 28 years in Taiwan, and whose aunt, Lois Swanson, worked for 38 years in administration for the Tanzanian church. "He was training pastors and missiologists in Asia, and I am training doctors in pediatrics, neonatology, infectious diseases and seeking to advance evidence-based medicine in Tanzania."



Jenna Bergeson (right) took her missionary teaching position after the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong asked the ELCA for English as a Second Language teachers to help give Asian leaders more international opportunities. Read more of her story at LivingLutheran.org.

Grace in the highlands of Bolivia

“A missionary walks with and listens,” said David Thorp, who serves the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church as a pastoral educator and trainer.

Walking and listening are core tenets of accompaniment, the model of mission that all ELCA missionaries are trained to implement. Defined by the ELCA as “walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality,” the model first emerged in Latin America. The ELCA implemented it in 1995. Thorp had a front-row seat to its evolution from 1982 to 1991, when he and wife, Shelley, and their children served the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Peru as it transitioned from missionary to local leadership.

Twenty-five years later, Thorp sees how Bolivian Lutherans have replaced the “more colonial model” of foreign direction with strong pastoral leadership “and a deep sense of self-confidence,” he said. Today Bolivian church staff supervise him as he walks with and supports them by facilitating “theological, biblical dialogue.”

By offering workshops on Lutheran identity and liturgical worship, Thorp equips Aymara- and Quechua-speaking pastors and leaders of this minority church to thrive in a context dominated by Catholicism and neo-Pentecostalism. He frequently focuses on tenets of the Reformation.

“After 500 years grace is still a powerful lens on the gospel,” he said. “It’s a word that doesn’t exist in the Aymara-Quechua language because society is so reciprocal. If I do you a favor, you do one for me.”

David Thorp (left) with Emilio Flores, president of the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church.



The idea of a free gift for people who have been marginalized, when they experience a church that looks after their needs with no obligation attached—it’s new and enlightening.”

Learning to be a pastor in Argentina

“I’m everything personally that most people don’t expect in pastors,” said Nicolette Faison. “You see me walking down the street with tattoos, nose ring, my hair—no one is expecting me to say, ‘Oh, yeah, I work in the Lutheran church,’ much less be a missionary.”

A student at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Faison’s one-year call is learning how to be a pastor with the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina and Uruguay as her mentor. She gives back to the church as an intern with the San Lucas congregation in suburban Buenos Aires, and is one of four who serve in global companion churches through the ELCA’s Horizon International Internship program. (Others are serving in Chile, Germany and Slovakia.)

“All missionaries are learners,” Torgerson said. “I don’t think there’s a way for a missionary to enter faithfully into another culture without becoming completely vulnerable to the communities that have called them.”

For Faison, that means adapting to the relaxed Argentine approach to running a congregation and adjusting to a church that is practically empty on Sunday but teems with after-school programs, women’s groups and Bible studies during the week.

Nicolette Faison works on a gardening project with students. She has a one-year call with the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Argentina and Uruguay.



Serving in another language and culture is shaping the way Faison anticipates continuing ministry to people whose first language is not English. “We don’t have enough ministers in our tradition who can serve these communities,” she said.

Outreach in the outback

In Adelaide, Australia, Henry Martinez and Kim Crawford get some perplexed looks when they introduce themselves. Missionaries in the land of Vegemite and big-wave surfing? Really?



Kim Crawford and Henry Martinez with a quilt featuring the names of all the Lutheran congregations in Australia.

The confusion clears when Martinez and Crawford explain the ELCA’s Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program. Since arriving in Australia with their young sons in spring 2016, the country coordinators have worked with the local church to welcome the first-ever YAGM down under.

Besides mentoring young missionaries whose one-year service placements range from an aboriginal boarding school to a transitional retirement home, they are building relationships with the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA). “Our program is very interesting to the LCA, which also deeply desires greater engagement with its young people,” Crawford said.

Martinez added, “The term ‘missionary’ almost always calls for explanation in a way that ‘pastor’ does not.” The title can come with baggage, especially among laypeople

who associate the word with forced conversions, the loss of indigenous cultures and centuries in which people were seen as “objects” of mission.

Past mission efforts by Australian Lutherans treated indigenous people better than government efforts and policy. “But we are aware that our presence is connected to the painful past of mission history,” Crawford said.

Still, using *missionary* reminds the couple that they are doing more than just creating a cross-cultural program for young adult leaders from the ELCA. “We are part of a greater movement, which is God’s mission of making a people and doing so in great love,” Martinez said.



Adrainne Gray and Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land walk through Jerusalem’s Old City.

Telling the story in Jerusalem

Adrainne Gray and her husband, Ben, are careful observers of life in Jerusalem, where they serve in communications for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

What they see can be humorous, like the woman taking a selfie while holding her baby, who was dressed in a Santa suit, in front of the statue of Mary in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Sometimes it’s tragic, like lunching with a co-worker whose house lies beneath an army outpost, and who lives under the scrutiny of the soldiers in the lookout tower.

Whether they are taking photos, writing stories or preparing press releases, their charge is to connect the English-speaking Lutheran world to the reality of life for Arab Lutherans in Israel.



Ben Gray takes a break from shooting photos for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land to climb a tree and harvest olives.



Phil Knutson (left) greets community leader Alberto Chema at the Mavuco Clinic in Mozambique.

“The amazing thing is that our co-workers are joyful, hopeful people,” Adrainne said. “They are living.”

While the majority of ELCA missionaries are in their 20s, early 30s or close to retirement, the Grays are in the middle of their careers and raising their 14- and 11-year-old kids. They came to Jerusalem after she completed her training as a deaconess in 2015 and was looking for a call.

“We didn’t have this part of the world on our radar at all, but when we saw the opening, we knew immediately that our talents fit its need,” she said. “We wear the term ‘missionary’ proudly—it’s central to the work of the church.”



In Bratislava, Slovakia, Kathy and Bill Fredell support the education ministry of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Slovak Republic. The couple, who retired before becoming volunteer missionaries, serve as teaching coordinators for all Central European schools. Read more of their story at LivingLutheran.org.

Nurturing gifts in Southern Africa

As the ELCA’s longest-serving missionary, Phil Knutson has seen a lot of changes over the last 35 years.

After growing up in South Africa with missionary parents, finishing college and becoming a pastor of the American Lutheran Church (an ELCA predecessor), Knutson began service as a parish pastor with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa in 1982. He was supervised by a local bishop, which was a significant shift from what he witnessed in his youth when foreign missionaries ran the church. He and his wife, Lou—from an Afrikaner family openly against apartheid—were involved in marches, taken in for questioning and had their phone tapped.

“You never knew if you would be in prison and deported the next week,” he said. “Those were challenging times, but it was a privilege to be working alongside people in that community.”

After 17 years in the parish, Knutson became the ELCA’s regional representative for Southern Africa. In this role, he uses his experience more broadly, working with companion Lutheran church bodies in 10 African countries to grow the church.


Knutson said he is pleased by the ELCA’s emphasis on accompaniment, which includes nurturing the gifts of talented, capable people who are leading ministries, developing curricula and reflecting Christ to their neighbors.

“In Lutheran churches across Southern Africa, I see some 2 million brothers and sisters who, instead of waiting for someone to come from somewhere else, are engaged in mission formation and training,” he said. “That approach applies to us in the ELCA as well.”

Different roles, same mission

Although they serve in different roles in 44 countries, ELCA missionaries are united in their primary call to accompany global companion churches in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

“ELCA missionaries are ambassadors,” Malpica Padilla said. “Paul writes to one of the communities, ‘Receive one another.’ We send missionaries today because ‘sentness’ is a sign of being the church, of being part of the body of Christ.”

Knuston agrees and believes missionaries are needed now both abroad and at home: “Being a missionary is not a plane ticket. It’s not the color of your skin or your country of origin. We are all missionaries through baptism—called, gathered and sent to participate in God’s mission locally and globally.” 

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at LivingLutheran.org.

Church support makes a difference

“What sets the ELCA apart from other denominations is the support system we have in place for people who serve on behalf of this church,” said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission.

Most ELCA missionaries don’t have to raise their own funds to serve. (In other denominations, missionaries must raise a certain percentage of their salary each year.) Instead, their work is funded through Mission Support (a percentage of ELCA congregations’ weekly offerings) and direct donations made through ELCA Global Church Sponsorship.

While on home assignment every two years, long-term and Global Mission two-year missionaries visit congregations to meet and thank the people whose offerings and gifts to Global Church Sponsorship help support their ministries. To learn more, visit elca.org/globalchurch.

Fast facts on ELCA missionaries

225 missionaries serve in **44** countries*

Missionary opportunities range from just a few months to many years:

- Long-term (four or more years)
- Global Mission two year
- Self-funded volunteer (lengths of service vary)
- Young Adults in Global Mission (one year)

Learn more at elca.org/globalservice

*Illustrated here are the countries where the ELCA missionaries featured in this article serve.



Anne Basye is a freelance writer living in the Pacific Northwest.