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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Study guide

God's church in two places

Inside the ELCA companion-synod program

By Robert C. Blezard

It's easy to be a lifelong Lutheran in North America and believe that all Lutherans across the globe have the same basic worship style, temperament and customs that we do. But our typical European-derived model of Lutheranism is just one way to be church. That's why the ELCA companion-synod program is so important. By bringing us into contact with Lutherans of different cultures, we can deepen our own understanding of faith.

Exercise 1: Missionary travel

Mission trips often provide eye-opening experiences that are life-changing. If one or more members of your study group have been on a mission trip, invite them to share their experiences. If not, find someone in your congregation or community who has been on a mission trip. Have them share photos and artifacts as you ask them:

- Where did you go? Why?
- What happened?
- What was the country like? What were the people like?
- What moved you the most, and why?
- How did they exercise their faith? What stands out the most for you?
- What did you admire most about their faith and how they exercised it?
- What did you learn?
- How did it change you?
- How are you a different Christian as a result?

Exercise 2: Your synod's companion

All but one of the ELCA's 65 synods has at least one overseas Christian companion.

- How many companions does your synod have? Who are they? (If your study group is unaware of your synod's companion-synod participation, research the issue together for discussion. Information can be found at elca.org/companionsynods.)



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- Describe the companion relationship: How is it expressed? What kind of things do you do? What commitments are made on each side?
- How often do members of your synod visit your companion? How often does your companion visit your synod?
- Does your congregation participate in your synod's companion-synod program?
- If so, how? Why? How long? What does your congregation put into the program? What does your congregation get out of the program?
- If not, why not? What opportunities does your synod offer for congregational participation?
- Why is the companion synod program worthwhile?

For further study: Invite someone who has visited your synod's companion to talk about the experience. You could ask her or him to show photos and mementos from the trip.

For further study: Explore together your synod's companion by researching the church culture and that of the country in which it is located. How big is the church? How does its size compare to those of other religious groups? What are the other religious groups? What language do they speak? What is the climate like? What is the history (briefly!) of the country? How do they practice their faith? What are their houses of worship like? What do their hymns sound like (find audio).

Exercise 3: Church growth

Whereas the ELCA and other expressions of Lutheranism in the developed world (principally North America and Europe) have faced declines in the last generation, Lutheranism in the developing world, particularly in Africa and Asia, is on the rise. Discuss:

- Why are Lutheran churches in the developing world growing? Why are Lutheran churches in the developed world declining?
- What can Lutheran churches in the developing world teach us about evangelism?
- It's been said that we now need missionaries from Lutheran churches in the developing world to come and teach us in the developed world. Why might that be a good idea?
- Given the growth/decline differential between Lutherans in the developing versus the developed, why is the companion-synod program so important? Come up with 10 good reasons.



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- What can Lutheran churches in the developed world learn from our companion synods?

Exercise 4: Accompaniment

ELCA Global Mission has developed a philosophy that guides our relationships with Lutherans from other nations, especially those that are not as wealthy or are in the developing world. It is called accompaniment. Here is how it is described on the Global Mission webpage:

Walking and working together, we seek to *accompany* our companions. Accompaniment is defined as *walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality*. The ELCA lives out accompaniment in relationships with global companions, striving to share God's love and participate in God's mission together:

- **Mutually:** All of us have gifts to support God's mission. There is no mission *to*, only mission *with* and *among*.
- **Inclusively:** We seek to build relationships across boundaries that exclude and divide.
- **Vulnerably:** Just as Jesus became vulnerable to us, we open ourselves to others.
- **Empowering:** We seek to identify and correct imbalances of power, which may mean recognizing and letting go of our own.
- **Sustainably:** To ensure local ministries last for a long time, we seek to embed mission in ongoing relationships and communities.

Discuss:

- What is the difference between ministry *with* and *among* versus ministry *to*? Which would lead to stronger and better relationships?
- In a relationship, what is mutuality? Why is it important?
- What gifts have North American Lutherans to share with companion synods? In return, what gifts have they to share with us?
- What does it mean to be vulnerable in a relationship? Why is vulnerability an ingredient in building a strong relationship? What does it mean to be vulnerable in a church-to-church relationship?
- In a relationship, what are imbalances of power? What imbalances of power might exist in a relationship between a U.S. synod and one in, say, Tanzania? How might differences in education, wealth and political power play?



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- Why is it important that North American churches take the lead in seeking to identify and correct imbalances of power?
- How do these principles of accompaniment differ from missionary strategies and attitudes of, say, the 19th century? How might you characterize those earlier strategies and attitudes? Why are the principles of accompaniment better?

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Inside the ELCA companion-synod program

By Anne Basye



In September 2018, the Nazarethi congregation of the Losikito Parish (church pictured here), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), welcomed guests from the Northern Illinois Synod.



Photo Courtesy of Ron Gustafson

Donna Bright (center), a member of Messiah Lutheran Church, Ralston, Neb., connects with sponsored students and friends from the ELCT Nkuu Kati Lutheran Parish during a Nebraska Synod trip.

The global church is a reality, not just an abstract concept, for the thousands of Lutherans engaged in ELCA companion-synod relationships.

“Companion synods nurture a church that is global, not only the parochial enclave of being together,” said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission.

The companion-synod program started soon after the ELCA was formed in 1988. Today it connects synods and their congregations with Lutheran church bodies throughout the world. Sixty-four synods have at least one global-church companion. Because many synods relate to more than one church, there are more than

120 companion-synod relationships.

Most participating churches, including the ELCA, are members of the Lutheran World Federation, the global communion of national and regional Lutheran church bodies headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland.

These connections are nurtured by prayers, presence and projects. As Lutherans from varied nations pray for, visit, support and encourage one another, they share their gifts and learn new ways to live out their faith.

“In several letters, the apostle Paul tells Christians to ‘greet one another with a holy kiss,’” Malpica Padilla said. “That’s what companion-synod relationships let us do. They let us receive

Photos: Courtesy of Ron Gustafson



Left: Christopher Ayubu Lukumay (right), pastor of Likamba Parish, ELCT North Central Diocese, presents Matthew Gustafson with a *shuka* (Maasai wrap), during a 2016 visit with the Northern Illinois Synod. Center: Jeneth Massangwa presents a bead cross necklace to Debbie Gustafson. Right: Ron Gustafson of Grace gathers with Likamba members after worship during a 2018 trip to Tanzania.



Photos: Courtesy of Martin Malley



Headmistress Bella Urasa (left) from Nkwawangya Primary School on Mount Kilimanjaro receives textbooks purchased by Messiah from member Martin Malley (back right) and Okully Mwanga (right), pastor of Nkuu Kati, Messiah's partner parish.

one another, participate in each other's ecclesial life, in our struggles as Christian people trying to live faithfully."

Rich relationships

For Martin Malley of Ralston, Neb., participating in the Nebraska Synod's relationship with the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania "enlarges my worldview and lets me see outside my box."

Visiting Tanzania during a synod trip was Malley's first peek beyond his "box." Dropped off after dark on the steps of Nkuu Kati Lutheran Parish in Nkuu, he felt anxious. "I didn't know the food, the people, the culture, the language or

where I would stay," he remembered. "What am I doing here?" I wondered."

Malley's anxiety vanished when church council members came out to greet him. "By the end of the weekend, I was so taken with the people and the beauty of the place that I was on fire!" he said.

Now Malley serves as the synod's volunteer coordinator of Tanzania ministries, weaving myriad Nebraska-Tanzania connections into the fabric of the synod and diocese.

"Scores if not hundreds" of Lutherans have traveled between Nebraska and Tanzania and built "long-standing personal relationships" over time, said Brian Maas, bishop of the Nebraska Synod.

Nebraskans and Tanzanians swap pulpits, visit

each other's schools and congregations, and keep up with each other on Facebook. Nebraskans have donated generously to the Northern Diocese, funding scholarships, purchasing textbooks, equipping evangelists with motorcycles and supplying hospitals and clinics. But "this is not about us doing projects," Malley said. "It's about us having Christian friends on the other side of the world."

In companion-synod relationships, care and support flow both ways. Visitors from Nkuu Kati took note when Malley and other members of Messiah Lutheran in Ralston showed how they were retrofitting the church's bathrooms to accommodate people of all abilities. "Three months later [Nkuu Kati] sent a check for \$300 to support our project," Malley said. "We knew then that this was a partnership."

Shared ministry models

Companion-synod friendships have kindled a global conversation about how to be church in a changing world. For people from the Montana Synod and the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the conversation centers on lay leadership formation.

Challenged by mountainous landscapes, vast prairies and a shortage of full-time pastors, both entities turn to lay leaders to fill the gap. Eighty percent of Bolivian pastoral leaders are laity. Montana's 204 pastors and four deacons are supplemented by 113 lay pastoral associates (LPA).

"The Bolivian sense of distance is like Montana, but even more so," said Cynthia Thomas, a synod-appointed LPA from Great Falls. Every Sunday, she drives 300 miles to lead worship in three rural communities—peanuts compared to the distances traveled by Bolivian lay ministers. She calls their work "phenomenal."

"One of the gifts that God has given our church is the large number of members who feel called to lay pastoral ministry," said Emilio Aslla Flores, president of the Bolivian church.

Exploring their programs, the companions discovered that, whereas Bolivian lay pastors are the primary leaders of their congregations, most Montana LPAs play a supporting role, filling in when pastors are gone. Many LPAs are women.

In Bolivia, "due to cultural reasons and tradition, the leadership of women pastors has mostly been absent in the life of our church," Aslla Flores said. When the two groups participated in a joint seminar on lay leader formation in Bolivia last year, each presented its training program and curriculum. Aslla Flores said this mutual exchange equipped his church "to make the changes needed in the next few years to increase

Photos: Courtesy of David Scholten



Top: La Paz, Bolivia, was the site for the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church's (IELB in Spanish) 80th anniversary celebration. Bottom: Steve Van Gilder, pastor of Bethel Lutheran Church, Great Falls, Mont., serves communion at the anniversary worship service in September 2018.

participation of women leaders."

During the seminar, LPA David Scholten realized that Montanans generally become lay leaders because of their strong faith and their commitment to the ELCA. Bolivian lay pastors, he added, "are more about evangelism, about the concept of vocational call."

Another aspect of the Bolivia-Montana conversation is indigenous ministry. A couple years ago, Aslla Flores was excited to meet ELCA leaders from the American Indian and Alaska native communities at Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana. The Bolivian church consists entirely of indigenous people, which makes it unique among Latin American Lutheran churches. Members are either Quechua, Aymara or Guaraní. Although 8 percent of Montana's population is American Indian, "we have not done a good job of indigenous ministry," said Jessica Crist, bishop of the Montana Synod. "We can learn from the Bolivian church."

Thanks to the Bolivia-Montana relationship, Crist said, "people can see and say, 'What we are doing is not just about the small congregation I am a member of. This is about the church across the globe!'"



Left: Emilio Aslla Flores (center), IELB pastor presidente, and Jessica Crist, Montana Synod bishop, lead a parade through the streets of La Paz en route to the anniversary worship service (photo at right). The IELB invited the synod, its companion, to send a delegation to attend the celebration and visit ministry sites across the country.

Joys and challenges of crossing borders

Like any friendship, companion-synod relationships can be challenging. Mixing cultures and languages can be tricky for everyone, especially when individualistic North Americans rub elbows with more collective-minded people in places such as Tanzania or Bolivia. Distance complicates everything.

Often, differences exist in approach and inequities in resources—between ELCA synods and their companions and among ELCA synods themselves. The St. Paul Area Synod financially supports myriad ministries of the Iringa Diocese of

the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Other companion relationships are much smaller. Some companions, such as the Montana Synod and the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church, exchange almost no money at all.

Even when churches aim to walk together in mutuality, they sometimes stumble. When 69 participants from Tanzanian dioceses and 72 from ELCA synods gathered in Moshi, Tanzania, last summer to take the pulse of the 20 companion relationships, the meeting was conducted in English, mostly by

North American leaders. While the agenda included space for all voices, some Tanzanians felt left out. Discussing the issue on the last morning led to one suggestion: the next summit might be held in the U.S., led by Tanzanians.

The Moshi conference named the joys of companionship too. “We have different abilities, cultures, perspectives,” said a participant from the Konde Diocese. “We can use them to help each other accomplish things.” For this speaker, it mattered “that there is a companion who cares for me.”



Pacifica Synod members traveled to East Malaysia in November 2018 to dedicate two new schools of the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM).



Judy Wiggins of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, Huntington Beach, Calif., dances during dedication festivities.

Support and inspiration

The Pacifica Synod includes Hawaii and six counties in southern California. With a large Asian population and congregations made up of people from Indonesia, China and Japan, a companion in Asia “seemed the right place to go [to create a relationship],” said the synod’s bishop, Andy Taylor.

The Pacifica Synod relates to the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM).

“Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Confucianism are all present in Malaysia,” said Franklin Ishida, ELCA director for Asia and the Pacific. “The great beauty of engaging in Malaysia and other parts of Asia is coming to a better understanding of the role of church in multireligious, multicultural, multiethnic contexts.”

Several visits have nurtured this companion relationship. Money from synod members helped build two BCCM-run kindergartens in East Malaysia. Plans also are underway to connect youth from both companions and to develop sister congregations, one in Malaysia and one in California.

James Chong, bishop of the BCCM, said this companion relationship gives them “strong moral and spiritual support in our journey of our faith as minority Christians. It is comforting to know that we belong to a wider church and we will not be alone in our struggle.”

Taylor agrees, adding that global relationships can influence “how we do mission locally.” Attending graduation at Sabah Theological Seminary in East Malaysia, he was intrigued by a degree awarded to “people who are not pastors but get theological training and talk about what God does in the world.”

Taylor wondered if the ELCA might incorporate this model into its leadership training.

For Chong, the answer is clear: “We constantly keep in mind the main purpose of our existence as a church, to bring the gospel to others and [make] disciples.”

Different contexts, same mission

Vitality is of particular concern to Lutheran churches in Europe and North America because, as religious affiliation declines in developed countries, more disciples are dying or leaving the church than are being added through birth and outreach.

There are lessons to be learned from churches in the former East Germany, which have persisted despite “decades-long discouragement of religious practice under communism,” said Kathryn Kleinhans, dean of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, at a fall 2018 consultation of six ELCA synods and their German companions.

At the consultation, German leaders shared with their North American companions how they are merging, reorienting their work and encouraging young adults to participate. One highlight was a recent YouTube campaign to persuade young people to make their voices heard by running for council positions.

On the flip side, Lutherans in the global south (the developing nations of Africa, Central and Latin America and most of Asia), where the church is expanding, have much to teach about vitality and evangelism.

“Congregational vitality is not only about how we can improve numbers or reverse the decline,” Malpica Padilla insisted. “It’s about rootedness in



Pacifica Synod members caught sight of a beautiful rainbow above a BCCM church during their visit.



Murray Finck, Pacifica Synod bishop emeritus, greets students prior to the school dedication ceremony.

Christ, about discipleship, about life in community, about congregational ministry for the sake of the world. The experience of Tanzanian congregations [whose numbers are growing rapidly] can serve the ELCA well as we wrestle with this issue.”


Experiencing the vitality of those congregations through the Tanzania-Nebraska relationship “has had a leavening effect,” Maas said. “We benefit greatly from the spirit and the spiritual grounding of the church in Tanzania.”

Thomas experienced vitality during a march through the streets of La Paz to the church where 80 years of Lutheranism in Bolivia was celebrated. “Everybody was so joyful, so excited that we were celebrating the Lutheran church,” she remembered. “I’ve been proud to be a Lutheran, but I don’t think I ever got that excited about it. It truly made my heart pound.”

Chong said Malaysian Lutherans know that “God’s heart is longing for those outside the church. As a church, we strive to have God’s heart

at the center. So we count our members, and if the number is reducing, it is a concern for us.”

For Lutherans dismayed by local decline, there is great hope in Jesus’ command “to go and make disciples of all nations.” Today, through companionsynod relationships, ELCA members heed Christ’s call alongside neighbors from Tanzania, Malaysia, Bolivia, Germany and beyond in an ever-evolving global church.

“We are God’s church in two different places,” Taylor said. “We can learn from each other and encourage one another.” 

For more information, visit elca.org/companionsynods. Download a study guide at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



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