The Global Church Story Series is a collection of 12 stories highlighting the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s (ELCA) international evangelism work through Missionaries and Young Adults in Global Mission, International Women Leaders and Global Ministries. Use these stories for Bible study groups, in your congregation’s bulletin or newsletter and as part of your fundraising efforts throughout the year.

Learn more about these programs by visiting ELCA.org/globalchurch.
Hope and healing in South Sudan

Situated in eastern Africa, South Sudan is the newest country in the world. But newest isn’t the only way to describe South Sudan—it’s also one of the most volatile.

According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 1.5 million South Sudanese are internally displaced and many more have fled to neighboring countries due to poverty, food insecurity, a lack of education and health care, and extreme violence against civilians. While the government struggles with the situation, many have turned to the church to be a healer and peacemaker.

“With all of this suffering, we still see God has a promise for us,” said Hilary Garang Deng, bishop of the Malakal Diocese of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan. “He gave us a mission to testify about the great God who created the world.”

Part of this mission includes establishing the Evangelical Lutheran Church Africa Mission in South Sudan. With the assistance of local partners, including ELCA congregations that are Sudanese, the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan, and the South Sudan Council of Churches, the ELCA is seeking more than $1.2 million to enable this work.

Last November the partners broke ground on a Lutheran center and health clinic in Juba, the nation’s capital. The center is near Juba’s Hai Referendum area, which lacks basic health and education services, making it difficult for people who are displaced to improve their lives, said Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director for ELCA Global Mission.

“It is precisely in that community that we are planting a center to provide these opportunities,” he said. “This center will be a place of encounter for a community that has experienced the horrors of war, a place of hope for the next generation of leaders, an instrument through which we will touch people’s lives and where the good news of the gospel will be proclaimed.”

The center will offer courses, including English-language lessons and computer training. This will be the first formal education for many South Sudanese adults. “Most of them were in the war and couldn’t get an education,” said Mawien Ariik, an ELCA pastor who coordinates outreach for the new church. “This time is about catching up so they can learn, they can operate a computer, and they will know how to write their names. This time is hope for them—we are giving them what they couldn’t get when they were young.”

Joining Ariik at the church’s frontlines is Wal Reat, an ELCA pastor serving in refugee camps in South Sudan and its bordering countries. Both are South Sudanese natives who sought asylum in the U.S. during the war and eventually became ELCA pastors. What’s more, they come from feuding tribes. Together they hope to grow the Lutheran church and bring healing to their country.

“The church is calling for the unity of the tribes in South Sudan to be one in Christ, but it is tough for those who are really wounded to convince them to accept others,” Ariik said. “The message that the church is conveying is that they are all children of God and we are supposed to remain as one. It is not bad to have different tribes, but to love others as one body of Christ—it is a big challenge for us to convey that.”

Hope is a common thread connecting and motivating these leaders in South Sudan. Amid conflict, violence and poverty, they are growing the Lutheran church, spreading the message of God’s love and bringing hope for a peaceful future.

Through the Global Ministries project, South Sudan: A New Church for a New Nation, the ELCA is raising more than $1.2 million to support this work.

Visit ELCA.org/globalministries to learn more.
"When we read about the Reformation, we see how women are strong and bold and how they impact other women. When we go back to our various countries, we can be inspired to be bold women."

Fatima Bass Thomas, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Gambia
It’s March 2015 and 16 women leaders from around the world are gathered in a classroom in Wittenberg, Germany, to discuss Lutheran women from the past. “When we read about the Reformation, we see how women are strong and bold and how they impact other women,” says Fatima Bass Thomas, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Gambia (ELCTG). Thomas knows a thing or two about being bold—she is one of only two pastors in the newly formed ELCTG. “When we go back to our various countries, we can be inspired to be bold women.”

The participants come from nine countries: The Gambia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Russia, Senegal, Slovakia, Tanzania, the Czech Republic and Romania. These women were selected from ELCA global companion churches to participate in the second of six Wittenberg-based seminars through the ELCA’s International Women Leaders program.

Under the theme, “Lutheran Women at the Crossroads of the Reformation,” the seminars are designed to inspire and empower global women.

“We have learned about the Reformation in books, but [we] have never had the opportunity to see these places before, especially the house of Luther,” says Mame Coumba Faye, who serves as president of a Christian women’s organization in Senegal. “I believe in Lutheranism, but now I can say it’s a reality because I have seen it. I will speak about this experience to all the women I know, that the Reformation is real and true.”

As the women discuss the stories of 16th century leaders Katharina von Bora, Katharina Schütz Zell, Argula von Grumbach and Elisabeth of Rochlitz, they are encouraged to apply what they learned from the past to their own unique contexts.

“The stories of Reformation-era women are important,” says Kathryn A. Kleinhans, Mike and Marge McCoy Family Distinguished Chair in Lutheran Heritage and Mission and professor of religion at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, who taught the seminar. “[They] allow women to make connections to their own culture today—not only to use these women as role models, but also to be able to show male church leaders that the inclusion of women’s voices and the valuing of women’s work is not simply a result of modern liberalism. It has roots extending back to the Reformation itself.”

At the end of the week, the women leave Wittenberg to journey home. These seven days will leave a lasting impact on the group. Adriana Florea, a parish pastor from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania, says it best during the last day of the seminar: “I take with me this word: solidarity with other women.”
"In general, women have not been afforded the same access to education by the social and political structures in their home churches and countries."

Tammy Jackson,
director of ELCA International Leaders
Women of purpose

Sarah Abendanon just bought a winter coat. “It is heavy, and I feel so big in it,” said the freshman at Augsburg College, Minneapolis. Used to the tropical weather of Suriname, she is preparing herself for January in the Midwest.

Abendanon and five other young women from Malaysia, Mexico and Madagascar are the first scholarship recipients of the ELCA International Women Leaders initiative. A partnership among the churchwide organization, global companion churches, and ELCA colleges and universities, the initiative seeks to open doors for women identified by their churches as promising leaders.

Since 1988 more than 900 leaders have completed academic degrees and other study programs with scholarship assistance from the ELCA. They have returned home to serve their churches and communities as bishops, seminary teachers, pastors, doctors and more. One third of them are women.

“In general, women have not been afforded the same access to education by the social and political structures in their home churches and countries,” said Tammy Jackson, director for the ELCA International Leaders program.

Abendanon’s recommendation started with the youth board of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Suriname. Active in church social life, a frequent liturgy assistant and an excellent student, Abendanon was her peers’ top choice.

Working in the mornings and attending classes at night, Abendanon had completed two years of university in Suriname before applying for the ELCA scholarship. At Augsburg, she is savoring a completely different style of teaching. “My religion professor asks what we think about our readings and encourages different points of view,” she said. “In Suriname schools, what the teacher says goes.”

“The world probably needs nothing more than bright, educated women who will go into their communities and make a difference,” said Jon Lund, executive director for the Center for Global Learning at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. “If you want to promote peace and peace building, this is a marvelous way to do it.”

Abendanon is looking beyond this academic year. She is sure that when she finishes her business degree, her denomination “will be very happy to have somebody who knows how to manage and organize things for them.”

And as for winter in Minnesota? After buying the coat that the sales clerk guaranteed would keep her warm on the coldest day, Abendanon says she’s ready: “Bring it on!”
A church connected to the community

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

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 Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (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?”
"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)."

Bradn Buerkle, ELCA missionary
In Russia, identifying as Lutheran “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.

A need for more theological training inspired the church to partner with the ELCA on the Equipping for Service project. Buerkle administers the project; 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].”
"(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."

Daniel Orn, a founding pastor of the Lutheran Church in Cambodia.
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.

In the mostly Buddhist context of Cambodia, 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.

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 congregation, where people 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.

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

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.”
"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."

Geraldina Álvarez Rocha, pastor, feminist theologian and human rights activist, Costa Rican Lutheran Church

Through the Global Ministries project, Costa Rica and Honduras: Strengthening Small Churches, the ELCA is seeking to raise $500,000 to support this work.

Visit ELCA.org/globalministries to learn more.
‘A church without walls’

Gilberto Quesada Mora, president of the Iglesia Luterana Costarricense (ILCO, Costa Rican Lutheran Church), has an understanding of evangelism that 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.

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 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.”

An ELCA grant helps fund work to build up more leaders like Álvarez Rocha. The project “is a 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.”
Fatima Bass Thomas: Contemporary reformer

Nine-year-old Fatima Bass Thomas had a dream. As the oldest of eight children born to peasant farmers in Gambia, she knew her likely future would consist of getting married, doing domestic work and raising children. But even at the age of 9, she dreamed of something more—the opportunity to go to school.

“Going to school was seen as a successful route to a brighter future for everyone,” Bass Thomas said. “School helped me be who I am today to serve my country, church and community, both locally and globally.”

Two years later, after overcoming family challenges, she had her chance. After completing primary school, Bass Thomas went on to teacher training college and was placed at a school a few hours from her village. It was there that she met her husband, Samuel Thomas, a pastor and fellow Anglican in a country that is 95 percent Muslim. Motivated to serve Christ, both left their teaching jobs in 2000 to establish the Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Gambia.

Today the growing church has 2,500 members making up five parishes (regions) and nine congregations. Bass Thomas serves as the sole pastor, while her husband is the church’s bishop.

Through their leadership, the couple has influenced the outreach priorities of the Gambian church, which is committed to helping give children, girls in particular, access to primary schooling. Bass Thomas, the bishop and other leaders believe in the equality of men and women, an idea that might seem radical to others in their country.

As the church grows, women will have an opportunity to be ordained, and “if a woman is not qualified to take a position [within the church], all efforts will be made to educate and help that woman become qualified,” Thomas said.

Last April, Bass Thomas joined others from around the world at the “Lutheran Women at the Crossroads of the Reformation” seminar hosted by the ELCA’s International Women Leaders program.

After returning from Wittenberg, Germany, she convened 54 women, six from each of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in The Gambia’s nine congregations, for a weeklong gathering during which she shared what she had learned from the seminar.

“I pray the Holy Spirit can touch the women of our church to be active like the women of the Reformation,” she said.
Return to the Holy Land

Working near Jerusalem in the West Bank community of Beit Sahour, Marta Erling Spangler started to see the world through the eyes of the Palestinian Christians and Muslims around her.

One of the first participants in the ELCA’s Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) service program when it opened sites in the Holy Land in 2008, Erling Spangler had plenty to see.

While she could visit Jerusalem whenever she wanted, her students at the Evangelical Lutheran School in Beit Sahour needed permits to enter. Few could secure them. She took her access to higher education for granted. Checkpoints and conflict stood between her students and university degrees.

Erling Spangler’s growing awareness of her own privilege drew her to focus on social justice after her year of service ended.

Some years later, after volunteering with AmeriCorps in Pittsburgh; earning a master’s degree in ethics, peace and global affairs; and working for The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Geneva, she is in Jerusalem again, serving as resource development and board liaison officer with Augusta Victoria Hospital. Operated by the LWF on the Mount of Olives, the hospital provides healthcare services otherwise unavailable to Palestinians.

Living with families and serving in Lutheran schools clustered around Jerusalem, all YAGM participants are immersed in life in the Palestinian community. “YAGM come to walk with us, to worship with us, to struggle with us, to rejoice with us, and to be part of the transformation of peace and justice that is happening in this place,” said Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. “They come, not just for a personal spiritual journey, but to stand in solidarity with us as brothers and sisters in Christ.”

For help with the journey, Erling Spangler and others turn to mentors like Imad Haddad, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah. Haddad said he has seen the YAGM alumnae “growing in understanding the culture, growing in their faith, and in how they used their faith while serving. Coming back is a testimony that they really understood the message.”

Today, walking alongside the Palestinian Lutheran community as a professional on the payroll is a new role for Erling Spangler. “The community I was serving is now on the other side of the [separation] wall, and most of them can’t come visit me,” she said. With no vehicle and a 9-to-5 schedule, she can only visit on weekends.

On the plus side, she feels like she is making a difference: “I’m not making decisions for others. I’m assisting what Palestinians have already decided is necessary, what they are dreaming for society. It feels great to be in that position again.”

The program in the Holy Land is one of 11 country programs part of Young Adults in Global Mission. Visit ELCA.org/YAGM to learn more.
A change of plans

“Plan carefully and plan for your plans to change.”

Thad Titze, a graduate of Augustana College (now Augustana University), Sioux Falls, S.D., found these words of wisdom from a former professor to ring true as he began a year of service in Hungary with the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program in fall 2013.

After two weeks of Hungarian language instruction, he was on the road to his home for the next 10 months: Görögszállás, a predominantly Roma village of 250 people. He had learned just hours before that he would be moving to Görögszállás instead of another town nearby where previous volunteers had lived.

But plans changed, and Titze became the YAGM’s first volunteer to live with a Roma host family. It was a significant step since relationships with Roma people are key for young adults’ experience there.

The Roma population (also known as gypsies) is the largest ethnic minority group in Europe. Who the Roma are and where they come from is a topic of some debate.

Titze learned that the Roma are “people who migrated [around 1,000 years ago] from Northern India [and] who have dispersed throughout Europe and have some cohesive language and cultural narrative.”

Throughout history the Roma have been subjected to persecution, oppression and genocide. Today they continue to face discrimination from the dominant culture in Europe. Young adult volunteers like Titze work with Roma people through ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary.

“One of the more serious social questions in Hungary is [the] relationship with Roma and non-Roma population,” said Tamás Fabiny, bishop of the church’s Northern District.

“[Roma] live in very deep circumstances, where their everyday experience is poverty and hostile treatment from [the] majority of [the] population. The Hungarian Lutheran church is trying to do her best to help those in deep crisis.”

Titze’s main assignment was to help at a “children’s house,” an early childhood education ministry in Görögszállás. Begun by the Filidelfia Lutheran Church in Nyirtelek, Hungary, the ministry is led by Mihály “Misi” Györfi, a pastor who served as Titze’s advisor.

When Filidelfia expanded its work to Görögszállás, Györfi said the congregation first focused on making connections with the Roma. Then they shared their faith and began a mission congregation in the village.

“It was amazing to see how God has given [the Roma] new life in Christ,” Györfi said.

The congregation soon realized it needed to do more. “We needed to take care of their physical needs,” Györfi said. “We started to pray to seek God’s will. We are thankful to God we [were] able to start the children’s house.”

Serving preschoolers and their parents, the ministry offers activities and toys to kick-start early childhood development and provides a warm meal. “A lot of these children don’t have books and toys at home,” Titze said. “Coming to the children’s house was also an opportunity to get warm. Many people didn’t have doors and windows.”

Titze lived five minutes from the children’s house so he was often able to build deeper connections with his Roma neighbors who came there with their children.
"I needed to accompany them in their brokenness and sadness. It was the hardest part of the year and the hardest thing to walk away with at the end of the year."

Thad Titze,
Young Adults in Global Mission volunteer

Titze developed special relationships with his host family and his supervisor Györfi, who became both a friend and spiritual advisor. Since his return to the U.S., Titze also has kept in touch with his host brother, Little Sani, through Facebook.

“When Thad arrived, he was a boy. When he left he was a man,” Györfi said. “He experienced hard times and joy with the Roma. He grew in his faith and Christian devotion. We miss him very much, despite the fact he was only here a [short time].”

Titze is glad he made the decision to serve for a year. “The [YAGM program] has affected me profoundly and changed the way I think about church and communities,” he said. “Each and every day we have a chance to recommit ourselves to living with purpose, humility and compassion.”
"She said, 'All languages are understood in heaven.'"

Edward, member, Lutheran Church in Kigali, Rwanda
One bread, one body

Edward, a young Rwandan member of the Lutheran Church in Kigali, leans over to me every few minutes to translate parts of the service we’re attending. In a low voice, he tells me a short summary of what the preacher just said in Kiswahili. I’ve been in language school for two days learning Kinyarwanda and now happen to find myself at the Lutheran church’s monthly Kiswahili service. I don’t mind. I probably would have understood about the same amount either way (about zero.)

About two-thirds of the way through the service, Edward leans over, “Communion,” he says. I appreciate his help, but this one I had on lock. I watch as the pastor breaks the bread and pours the wine, something I’ve watched my own father do most Sundays of my life. I walk up to the railing and kneel at the altar. I receive a wafer in my hands and place it on my tongue. This is the body broken for me. I don’t need a translation to know the pastor’s words. I am the body. I know. As the tray of wine comes by, I tentatively reach for a cup. This is the blood poured out for me. I say a short prayer and walk back to my seat. I reflect, quietly, on what just happened. I just communed with a Kiswahili speaking congregation ... in Kigali ... in Rwanda ... where I live. And suddenly I could be anywhere. I am everywhere.

I am finally across the table from my granddaddy again. I am breaking bread with my grandmother as she hums the hymns that quietly coax me to sleep. I am at Lutheridge in an Upper Craft Lodge on a Thursday. I am at Briarwood on a Friday afternoon. I am at Flathead on a Sunday morning—the sun spilling over my face like water. I am in a circle with 74 Young Adults in Global Mission and the communities they are serving all over the world. I’m holding the hands of all of the best friends I left in the U.S. I’m in a pew next to my sweet family, my siblings and I trying not to attract too much attention as we make each other giggle. I am home. I am here. I am in the kingdom of God. I am in Rwanda.

And slowly I realize that I have always been here, at this same table next to my new Rwandan friends. My whole life, I have been seated beside the kind souls of Edward and Veronica and Frank, speaking Kiswahili and Kinyarwanda and English. I have been surrounded by a communion of saints who—though I could not see them—were no less present with me every other time I took communion than they are now.

The service proceeds and I continue to understand nothing. I spend a few more minutes pondering my communion experience. I feel the breeze drift lazily through the church’s open windows. I am completely at peace. As the service concludes, Edward leans over to me one last time. The theologian, Veronica, just said something in Kiswahili. “You know what she said?” he asks. He knows I don’t, but I shake my head anyway.

He smiles over at me and says “She said ‘All languages are understood in heaven.’”

All are seated at the communion table in the kingdom. All are understood. Amina. Amen.

*Savanna Sullivan served with the Young Adults in Global Mission program in Rwanda during the 2015-2016 year.*

The program in Rwanda is one of 11 country programs part of Young Adults in Global Mission. Visit ELCA.org/yagm to learn more.
Lessons from life on the border

Build a wall. Welcome all. Deport 11 million immigrants living illegally in America. Create a path to citizenship for those who are undocumented.

The number of Mexican citizens coming to America has dropped annually for about the last decade, according to the Pew Research Center, but about half of all undocumented immigrants, and more than a quarter of documented immigrants, are from Mexico.

Immigration and migration are abstract issues for many U.S. citizens who are unaware of the impact policy decisions have on families in Mexico—something Hannah Smith, Alyssa Kaplan and Josh Stallings have learned in their time in Mexico with the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program.

Each country has needs, but only Mexico deals as closely—geographically and politically—with the U.S. Living in these communities has taught these three young adults lessons about what’s happening on the border and how things might change in the future.

For her year with YAGM, Smith is living in Cuetzalan but serving the nearby community in Ayotzinapan, where she teaches English and works on projects for a library. As rewarding as the experience has been, she said border relations frustrate her.

“While in the U.S. they may be called illegal aliens. To me they are friends and family. Nearly half of the students at the Instituto de Educacion Integral de Magdalena Cervantes (her school) live with a single parent or grandparents, many because one or both of their parents have crossed the border in search of livable wages.

“The privilege of my citizenship, the navy-blue booklet that allows me to enter this and countless other countries as I please, and the seemingly arbitrary luck of my birthplace challenge me every day.”

What surprised Kaplan was that despite animosity between the nations, she has been treated like family. “They have nurtured me, cared for me, and invited me into their traditions and culture without reservation or expectation of reciprocation,” she said. “Their kindness, openness and acceptance have shown me what true Christ-centered service looks like.”

Stallings works in Apizaco at a shelter that provides food, clothing, medical care and housing for Central American migrants for up to two days. Despite growing up in Texas near the border, Stallings said he didn’t know anything about life on the other side.
He said he now knows “[U.S. citizens] can educate ourselves about the reasons that people are immigrating to our nation. We can work to receive these neighbors with more compassion. We can engage in the political process.”

Heidi Torgerson has seen the impact of immigration for years as a missionary in Mexico and through a variety of experiences on the border. Now director of global service for ELCA Global Mission, she believes immigration is more than a political issue—it’s a spiritual one.

“In John 10:10, Jesus tells us that he came so that all may have life, and have it abundantly,” she said. “I don’t think Jesus was talking only about an abundant spiritual life in this passage. He was talking about life right here on earth, an abundant life where all are able to live with dignity, with assurance of safety, with enough resources to provide for one’s family’s basic needs.”

Earlier this year Torgerson joined the YAGM Mexico group in a prayer vigil on the U.S. side of the border to remember the lives of migrants who have died in this country while trying to cross through the desert.

“When our foreign and economic policies rob this kind of abundant life from our neighbors in countries south of us, we’re not just talking about political issues,” she said. “We’re talking about theological issues. We’re talking about sin that’s been built into the structures of our government’s policies.

“If we believe that Jesus desires abundant life for all, then our call as Christians is to learn about, name, denounce and work to actively dismantle the structural sin that keeps our neighbors from sharing in the abundant life that Jesus promised.”
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