



Sarah Abendanon, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Suriname, earned her degree at Augsburg University, Minneapolis, with a scholarship from the International Women Leaders program.



EMPOWERED TO EMPOWER OTHERS

Leaving her home in Suriname for Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Sarah Abendanon felt frightened and excited.

"Before my departure for the U.S., I was a very insecure girl," she recalled.

Abendanon's home church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Suriname, had endorsed her to pursue her bachelor's degree in the United States through the ELCA's International Women Leaders (IWL) program.

Since graduating in May 2018, Abendanon has found work as a publications officer, started her own small business and volunteered her marketing skills to her church. She credits her Augsburg education as invaluable. "I came back much more confident," she said.

Abendanon is one of 39 young women who have received IWL scholarships, awarded through partnerships with 11 ELCA colleges and universities. The scholarships continue for the duration of their bachelor's degree programs.

Thanks to the generosity of ELCA members during and after *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*, all the women's expenses are covered, "a type of scholarship that's extremely rare these days," said Kaleb Sutherland, director, International Leaders program for scholarship administration and student engagement. "The idea is to remove any barriers for students to access this opportunity."

Mission Support dollars fund IWL program administration and help to support ELCA companion churches, some of which encourage young women to apply for IWL.

Yuen Ching Lee graduated from Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, in 2019 with the help of an IWL scholarship. She was endorsed by her home church, the Lutheran Church in Malaysia.

Originally from Selangor, Malaysia, Lee said studying in the United States "broadened my mind and mindset to what things and society could be like, especially when it comes to women empowerment and going against patriarchy."

Today, Lee is a teacher for a Malaysian nonprofit, Dignity for Children Foundation, that educates underprivileged youth to pursue careers that could lift them out of poverty.

Sutherland noted that the ELCA designed IWL to accompany young women from ELCA companion churches in the hope that they would return to their communities and churches to pursue their vocations with confidence. Recent graduates such as Abendanon and Lee are thriving.

"I continue to do the work of the [church] and the IWL program [by using] my gifts and talents," Abendanon said. "And I pass it on by helping [my] neighbors wherever I can. No matter where we are and where we are from. We are one."

To watch a video about this ministry, visit [ELCA.org/SOFIA](https://www.elca.org/SOFIA).

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