

NALC News

North American Lutheran Church

September 2017

NALC Disaster Response working to assist those hurt by hurricanes

Hurricane Harvey made landfall on Aug. 25, devastating millions on the Gulf Coast of Texas. NALC Disaster Response and NALC congregations have been providing emergency relief ever since.

After touring from Corpus Christi to Houston, Mary Bates, NALC Disaster Coordinator, assessed the need for donation centers and volunteer team housing.

“Some of our church buildings have damage, some of our pastors’ homes are damaged, and many of our congregational families’ homes are destroyed. Your help is needed,” Mary Bates said. “NALC

congregations have addressed the needs of the congregational members impacted, and we are now reaching out to the larger community. Please continue to send your support.”

Nine truckloads of water, flood buckets with cleaning supplies, rakes, shovels, garden hoses, more than 1,000 hygiene kits, 500 layettes/baby items, 2,000 quilts and Bibles, school supplies, and pet food have been delivered to families in need from Corpus Christi to Beaumont by NALC Disaster Response.

Peace Lutheran Church in Clifton, Texas, was a staging area for donations that are much needed by those on the Gulf Coast.



Volunteers at the NALC Disaster Warehouse in Caldwell, Ohio, load flood buckets, cleaning supplies, bottled water, and many other emergency supplies for delivery to Texas for Hurricane Harvey relief.

The NALC’s South Texas Mission District is now transitioning to long-term recovery. The same distribution centers and disaster volunteer team housing used for mudding out homes will now be used to schedule donations of building supplies (especially flooring) and volunteers to rebuild homes. See the NALC website for more information on how to volunteer or send tangible items.

Volunteer teams will be needed throughout the next year and devastated families will need help for a number of years.

The first disaster volunteer team — from St. John Lutheran Church in Boerne, Texas — gutted and
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repaired the home of Pastor Mike Gabby in Portland, Texas. His church, St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Portland, was flooded when flashing on the roof was ripped off.

St. Stephen members generously arranged for volunteer housing and a donations center in the midst of a community with no power and no utilities.

Mary Bates then met with Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Victoria, Texas, an LCMC congregation that we are partnering with in an area devastated by hurricane force winds.

Pastor Bryce Formwalt of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, an LCMC congregation in New Braunfels, Texas, worked with Mary Bates to arrange for volunteer housing and a donations center, to be used by both LCMC and NALC volunteer teams.

While traveling to Rosenberg, Texas, Mary Bates and Pastor Mike Giese of Peace Lutheran Church in Rosenberg got into rising flood waters from the Brazos River. After nearly five hours, they made it into Rosenberg, which was also flooded.

A donations center and volunteer housing have been established at Peace Lutheran Church in Rosenberg. The first recipients were the members of Oromo Evangelical Church, an NALC congregation in Houston. Pastor Kamiso Boru's



Flooding in Rosenberg, Texas, caused by rains from Hurricane Harvey.



Cindy Gember of St. James Lutheran Church in Greenfield, Ind., working with donations at disaster response warehouse in Ingleside, Texas.

home was destroyed as were the homes of several members of the congregation.

In the midst of the storm and the storm recovery, we are at work spreading the Gospel. When Pastor Gabby asked Mary Bates why she was sending quilts to an area with 100-degree heat, Mary responded that Bibles and beautiful quilts made by the Women of the NALC and others provide comfort and hope for families who have lost everything.

Several days later, Pastor Gabby said that for each Bible and quilt handed out, there were lots of tears of joy. Recipients know that NALC congregations care and experienced the presence of Jesus that is always with us.

Hurricane Irma

Hurricane Irma has left a 400-mile-wide path of destruction across Florida and the southern states. Thankfully, NALC congregations are again reaching out to our brothers and sisters in the south, providing prayers and support.

The first truckload of cleaning supplies, flood buckets, water, and many other items was sent to Florida from the Carolinas Mission District.

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NALC Disaster Response volunteers pray with those who have lost so much from Hurricane Harvey. Spiritual care including prayer and the gift of a Bible are among the gifts that NALC Disaster Response is able to give to those affected by disasters.

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Your help and prayers are needed as NALC Disaster Response begins the process of response and recovery in the Sonshine, Mid-South, and Carolinas Mission Districts.

Pastor George Johnson of Shepherd of the Woods Lutheran Church in Jacksonville has offered their church to be a staging area. Mary Bates will be assessing the need and identifying ways to help as the water recedes throughout the state.

Information on how to assemble flood buckets and other disaster kits is available on the NALC website. Donations of gift cards, cleaning supplies, flood buckets, mops, brooms, garden rakes, garden hoses, and other items may be sent to the NALC Disaster Warehouse; 810 Main Street; Caldwell, OH 43724.

Watch the NALC website for information on locations that can receive tangible supplies and volunteer teams. For more information on how you can help, go to the website or contact Mary Bates at disasterresponse@thenalc.org or 740-509-1132.

Monetary donations may be given online at www.thenalc.org or sent to NALC Disaster Response; 2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220; New Brighton, MN 55112-2202.

International Relief Efforts

Lutheran World Relief and Water Mission are responding to damage caused by Hurricane Irma on Caribbean islands. LWR and Water Mission are both NALC Recognized Ministries.

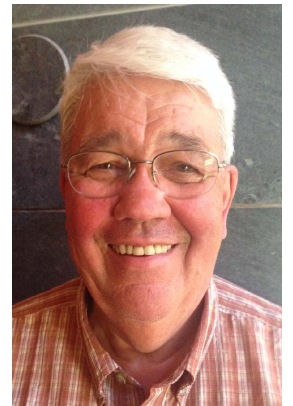
Gifts to Lutheran World Relief may be given online at lwr.org or sent to Lutheran World Relief; P.O. Box 17061; Baltimore, MD 21297-1061.

Gifts to Water Mission may be given online at watermission.org or sent to: Water Mission; P.O. Box 71489; North Charleston, SC 29415.

Nestingen hosts online text study

The Rev. Dr. James Nestingen hosts a weekly streaming-video study of the lectionary Scripture readings called Cross Talk.

The online text study is geared to pastors and offers insights for preaching, but lay people may also enjoy listening to Dr. Nestingen's insights on the Scriptures.



James Nestingen

Dr. Nestingen is a widely respected Lutheran theologian and NALC pastor who has been a featured speaker at recent NALC Convocations.

The Cross Talk study meets live on Tuesdays at 2 p.m. ET. Recordings of the live sessions are also made available to all participants.

Cross Talk is sponsored by St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. You may sign up for the Cross Talk study at the seminary website: www.semlc.org.

Reformation and transformation begin with the Word of God

Dear Disciples of Jesus,

I invite your continued prayers for those devastated by the ravages of the storms in Texas and Florida and the surrounding areas. Please continue to pray as well for those leading our disaster response efforts. I encourage both your prayers and support to meet those needs as we respond with Christ's love in word and deed. These acts of love and care are vital to our witness and prompt me to share this reflection.

Given these current realities and our continued preparation for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I invite you to reflect with me on Paul's words in his letter to the church in Rome.

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2).

These words are helpful as we consider the meaning of the Reformation, both past and present. Martin Luther refused to be conformed to the pattern of the world. The Reformation followed that refusal, but being reformed and transformed is never a completed event. It is the reality for struggling, sinful people who pursue all that it means to follow Christ as his disciples.

Reformation and transformation are never complete, because we are at once saint and sinner. It begins for us at precisely the same starting point as it did for Luther — the Word of God. It is this Word that renews our minds and equips us to discern God's perfect will for us.

It is through the Word of God that we come to know Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life. It is through the Word and the Holy Spirit that we believe in Him. It is the Word that sets us free, as the Word proclaims, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (*John 8:36*).



From the Bishop

Bishop John Bradosky

Luther writes, "The soul can do without everything except the Word of God, without which none of its wants are provided for. But, having the Word, it is rich and wants for nothing, since that is the word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of justification, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of virtue, of grace, of glory, and of every good thing."

This Word of God in Holy Scripture, through the power of the Holy Spirit, leads us to faith in Christ, frees us from all sin, makes us fearless in death, rescues us from the hand of Satan, and endows us with eternal righteousness, life, and salvation. It is this Word that makes us the glorious bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle, cleansed in the washing of water by the Word, that is, by faith in the word of life, righteousness, and salvation, Jesus Christ.

The central theme for the Reformation, and for all evangelical theology today, is Ephesians 2:8-9. But we miss the full meaning of the text if we cut off verse 10. You know this passage. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

But look at the next verse, *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*

Yes, even Lutherans are permitted to speak of good works. The Word does and so did Luther.

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It is through the Word alone that we come to faith in Christ alone, that we are justified and have all we need. Luther clearly defends justification by faith in Christ alone apart from any works. Through faith in Christ we become a new person. Christ dwells in us. However, good works are needed and commanded for the sake of the “outward man.”

Luther writes, “Are we then to take our ease and do no works, content with faith? Not so, impious men, I reply; not so. We are free in Christ, but we are free to be servant of all and subject of all.”

We serve and engage in the many spiritual disciplines, including sacrificial giving, because they assist us in bringing our entire lives into conformity and obedience to Christ and the Spirit.

Luther writes, “For the inner man, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for no other reason than to love.”

Luther makes it clear that a person is good, that is, justified, only through faith in Jesus Christ and only a good person can produce good works. “True, then, are these two sayings: ‘Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works;’ thus it is always necessary that the substance or person should be good before any good works can be done, and that good works should follow and proceed from a good person. As Christ says, ‘A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit’ (*Matthew 7:18*).”

The works done by a person who does not believe in Christ are corrupt because the person is attempting to justify themselves before God on the basis of their own good works. The good becomes evil because it is not love, it is self-serving.

You see, the purpose of being transformed is the renewing of your mind so you know God’s will. But if you know God’s good pleasing and perfect will, then you must act on it. To know His will but refuse to obey it is to build your house on the sinking sand rather than the unshakable rock of Jesus Christ.

Faith in the love of Jesus Christ fills us with His love so we can love others in the name of Christ and share the Good News of the Gospel.

True good works are also necessary because we do not live alone, but in community. We do good works out of love for our neighbor. Because of our faith in Christ, Luther contends that we are free and bound to live our lives only for the sake of others and not for ourselves.

Through faith in Christ we serve others more sincerely and more freely. Our works must spring from faith in Christ, not by asking what we are going to get out of this or how this is going to benefit us. We serve others and find fulfillment in the fullness and riches of our own faith.

The greatest good work of all is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While the world debates absolute truth and relative truth, objective truth and subjective truth, ultimate truth and situational truth, universal truth and cultural truth, the Church must boldly proclaim the transcendent truth of Sacred Scripture for the sake of its own renewal and for the sake of the world. Jesus lives in His Word. The Word is His Sanctuary. We must regard it and proclaim it as transcendent truth — God’s own voice speaking to us.

Transcendent truth is not just one among many understandings of the truth. In word and deed, we regard it as the norm above all other norms for all matters of life and faith, believing it, confessing it and living it. It is our only hope for the church and the world. It is only through the power of this transcendent word that the church will constantly find its source for renewal and reform.

Several others, in writing about the Reformation, have reminded us that the Reformation did not begin with the nailing of the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. The external Reformation of the Church began because of the internal reformation of Luther through the life-transforming power of the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in Luther’s heart.

It is my prayer that the same Holy Spirit and the power of God’s Word would work their inner

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Try it, you'll like it!

By Pastor Carl Nielsen

After returning from the 2017 NALC Convocation in Nashville, Tenn., full of ideas and inspired by many speakers, I decided to use the resource Bishop Bradosky suggested in his presentation called “Disciple-Making Experience.” It’s easy to use and it really worked well in my Sunday Bible class. You can find this resource on the NALC website under “Lutheran Week Documents.”

Breaking into groups of three, people get to know one another by sharing about their lives. Things like their family, vocation or occupation and their congregation. Then folks share what they learned about one another. People in my congregation, many of whom have been members for a long time, learned new things about one another.

After a prayer, you move into a time of looking at Scripture. The Bishop suggested Ephesians 2:4-10. This is a clear and understandable text highlighting God’s grace. It’s ideal for a bunch of Lutherans.

There is an acronym on the back of the sheet with the word **TRIP**.

Thanks — Share one thing in this text for which you are thankful.

Repent — Share one thing in this text for which you need to repent (seek forgiveness).

Intercess — Share one thing this text reminds you to pray for.

Plan — Share one thing that needs to change in your life as a result of meditating on this text.

There are other questions for engaging conversation with participants.

It occurred to me that Bishop Bradosky gave us a wonderful template for Bible study. I started thinking of other questions in the “Getting to know one another” section. These could be easily changed each week. Some examples could be: “What is one

of your hobbies?” “Where did you spend most of your time growing up?” “What attracted you to this church?” “Have you traveled outside this state or the United States?” These questions could really help people know one another better.

Then I started to think of other great Scripture passages for people to meditate on. Some that came to mind are Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 13; Proverbs 2:1-6; Proverbs 3:5-8; 2 Timothy 2:12-17; and Galatians 5:19-25. The list could go on and on. There are many passages that would be worth chewing on.

So open those Bibles and give God’s Spirit a chance to speak into your life and the life of your congregation or other small group. If I can be of help or if you have questions, contact me at revcnn@gmail.com or 805-922-6601.

Pastor Carl Nielsen serves Bethel Lutheran Church in Santa Maria, Calif.

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reforming power and lead us in our lives with our families, our congregations, our extended community and in our ministry to those who have suffered great loss and are beginning to rebuild their lives.

Think of what God did through the life of one person — Martin Luther. He is quite capable of doing other amazing things through your life if you, too, are open to the same transforming power of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit. The need for that continuing reform is just as great today as it was in the time of Luther.

May that same Holy Spirit continue to work his reforming and transforming power in us so that we manifest the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

With you following Christ Jesus,

Bishop John Bradosky

Ebenezer Oromo Evangelical Church

By Pastor Dennis Beckmann

“Coming to America,” a movie from the 1980s, is like the story of Ebenezer Oromo Evangelical Church of Riverside, Mo. (suburban Kansas City).

Slightly over four years ago, a small group of faithful Lutheran Christians from Ethiopia — all of them relatively new to America — began to meet and worship in a home. Seeking to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, they sought a home in a tradition in which they had their roots. Within weeks, the members of St. Matthew’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, an NALC congregation in Riverside, Mo., heard of these faithful Lutherans and offered to share their building. This was the founding of Ebenezer Oromo Lutheran Church.

Today, St. Matthew’s building is the home to three NALC congregations: Ebenezer, St. Matthew’s, and a Micronesian congregation.

In an era, and an area, where congregations are more likely to shrink, these three congregations are all experiencing growth. Praise be to God!

The tiny house church of Ebenezer has grown from a dozen members to 95 as they and Pastor Faisa Atomsa have faithfully reached out in friendship and love to the many Ethiopian immigrants in the greater Kansas City, Mo., area.

As we all know, growth comes with many joys, but also with complications and problems. What do you do with a small building that was not designed to handle more than 200 people worshipping, sharing fellowship, etc. on a Sunday?

The time has come for the fledgling Ebenezer Oromo Lutheran congregation to leave the nest that nurtured them for four years and purchase property of their very own! What joy to grow so much!

Fortunately, an abandoned church was located within one mile of St. Matthew’s. It is an older structure that needs some work and some TLC. But it is ideally located for the people of Ebenezer. It sits on two acres at the end of a dead-end street



with room to expand in the future as more and more disciples are added to the rolls of Ebenezer. Directly across the street is a small park with a playground.

Did I mention that the congregation of Ebenezer is *young*? Worship and fellowship are filled with the welcome noise of children — an unusual characteristic for many churches in North America.

The congregation had been planning to find their own building, and the abandoned former Baptist Church building was ideal. The price was also ideal for a young (in membership age) congregation. The location is also ideal, but it seemed that the timing was all wrong.

The people of Ebenezer had just started raising funds for their future vision of owning their own building in which to worship. God’s timing is never wrong, and it seems that now is the day.

Trusting in God, Ebenezer made an offer of \$147,000 for the abandoned church and the surrounding property. To this amount, another \$28,000 of repairs need to be made to make the property usable. The offer was accepted, and now the details are being worked out.

In just a few short months Ebenezer has been able to raise \$20,000. The Great Plains Mission District has added an additional \$30,000. A \$10,000 grant

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NALC Senior Ministry Conference

By Pastor Brad Hales

Survey after survey has begun to stir up fear in the hearts of churches across North America. The amount of “gray hair” that can be found in our pews has become a source of worry for many. As the average age of members increases across denominations, “senior” becomes a byword. Leadership teams, pastors, and church councils begin to ask with increasing fervor: “How do we get more young people in our doors?”

I think we are asking the wrong question. Please don’t misunderstand. The youth in our church are incredibly important, and it is imperative to share the Gospel with them. However, what if we saw this increasing “age” in our congregations as an opportunity for discipleship instead of as a negative factor?

There is an interesting passage of Scripture from 2 Samuel 19:31-40 that speaks to this:

Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim; he went on with the king to the Jordan, to escort him over the Jordan. Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. The king said to Barzillai, “Come over with me, and I will provide for you in Jerusalem at my side.” But Barzillai said to the king, “How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? Today I am eighty years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king recompense me with such a reward? Please let your servant return, so that I may die in my own town, near the graves of my father and my mother. But here is your servant Chimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do for him whatever seems good to you.” The king answered, “Chimham shall go over with me, and I will do for him whatever seems good to you; and all that you desire of me I will do for you.” Then all the people crossed over the Jordan, and the king crossed over; the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him, and he returned to his own home.

There is no retirement plan in the Body of Christ. Following Jesus as one of his disciples doesn’t have a minimum or maximum age requirement. Please join us Oct. 17-18 at Reformation Lutheran Church in Culpeper, Va., as we host the NALC’s first Senior Ministry Conference including breakout time, small groups, workshops, and keynote presentations by Gary Pecuch, Pastor Wendy Berthelsen, and myself. More information is available on the NALC website: www.thenalc.org.

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from the North American Lutheran Church has also been generously given, along with another nearly \$6,000 from sister Great Plains Mission District congregations. Ebenezer is now working with a bank to obtain a loan for the \$105,000 balance.

While to many churches \$105,000 does not seem a great amount, imagine that you are a church where close to one-third of your members are children, most of your members have been in America less than three years, and English is your fourth or even fifth language (and many of you are still learning English). Also imagine a church full of young families in their 20s and 30s. To such a congregation, \$105,000 is a very large amount.

As Dean of the Great Plains Mission District for the past three years, it has been a joy to watch the people of Ebenezer as they have grown in numbers, as well as in Spirit. I have learned so very much about discipleship, rekindled my joy in praising God through worship and prayer, and gained the friendship of Pastor Faisa via my walk with the congregation as we work together in mission in our district.

I would like to take this opportunity to ask those of you who read this to support the Ebenezer congregation — first by lifting them up in prayer and second by giving to their building fund if you feel that God has placed this call upon your heart.

To adopt and partner with Ebenezer, please visit www.thenalc.org/GCS.

Temples and Priests

Before and after Christ's resurrection

This is the second in a series of articles on temples, priests and church buildings by Pastor Mark Chavez, NALC General Secretary.

We ended part one of this series with the observation that Jesus' body is now God's dwelling place on earth, rather than the temple in Jerusalem. This began with Jesus' conception in Mary. He is the Son of God, the Word of God incarnate dwelling in the midst of sinners. Wherever he is, God is.

However, prior to the resurrection, Jesus was in one place at any given time. His body, like the Jerusalem temple, was the single dwelling place on earth chosen by God. A radical change occurs with his resurrection. Jesus is now able to be in more than one place at a time. He can be wherever he needs to be to do his Father's will. He can be all over creation simultaneously. He does this most obviously when the Church gathers in thousands of places at the same time to receive his body and blood, but also whenever and wherever two or three gather in his name.

We begin to understand what Jesus meant when he told the Samaritan woman "the hour is coming" when no one will worship the Father on any particular mountain, but "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (*John 4:23*). The temple is still the place to worship God, but rather than a physical structure built by men, it is the body of Jesus raised from the dead. Rather than a place to which sinners must travel, the temple is now a person who comes to sinners.

The shift is even more radical when we listen to what Scripture reveals about Jesus' resurrected body:

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ... **Now you are the body of Christ and***

individually members of it."
(1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27)

Wherever Jesus is, so are the Father and the Holy Spirit:

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, **for he dwells with you and will be in you.** I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and **we will come to him and make our home with him.**"* (*John 14:15-20, 23*)

The apostle Paul, listening carefully to Jesus, rightly concludes the body of each believer is God's temple:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (*1 Corinthians 3:16*)

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
(*1 Corinthians 6:19-20*)

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (*2 Corinthians 6:16b*)

No church building is a primary structure. All buildings are secondary. The primary "structure" — the new temple — is Jesus' body and the bodies of His disciples. More about the priests in this new temple, and the implications for mission and discipleship in part three.

Reflections on visit to Malawi

By Pastor Allen Schoonover

Pastor Ralph Easterhaus and I flew into Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, on Saturday, June 24. Malawi is surrounded by Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Tanzania.

We spent the first week in Lilongwe (population 2.2 million), and the second week in Salima (population 400,000), a town east of the capital on Lake Malawi, just north of Chipoka.

Since we were in the Southern Hemisphere, Malawi was in the middle of winter. Highs were in the upper 70s and low 80s, and evenings were in the mid-50s. Since few buildings are air conditioned, this made for a perfect teaching climate!

Until 1964, Malawi was part of the British Commonwealth. Now it is an independent republic with an elected president. However, vestiges of its colonial days still remain. The national language for business and government is English (including signs on most buildings), but the usual spoken language is Chewa (pronounced “chay-wa”). People drive on the left side of the road, and steering wheels are on the right side of the front seat. People wait in “queues” at stores, and you fill the tank in the car with “petrol.”

Speaking of driving, the major roads in Lilongwe (and between the capital and the outlying towns) are all two lanes with very little side apron to them. Roads into the villages are dirt and very bumpy. Except in the downtown area, sidewalks are nearly non-existent. Many pedestrians walk alongside the road, as do scores of bicyclists, flocks of goats, and an occasional ox- or donkey-drawn cart. Many roadside vendors and impromptu markets crowd the streets and intersections. Traffic signals and signs are few and far between. Both street lights along the side of the road and street signs designating the names of specific roads are rare. Cars and trucks use their horns regularly (and loudly!) to make their way through the congestion.



Pastor Alex Chambaro and Pastor Ralph Easterhaus pose with children in front of a typical village home.

Housing for the vast majority of people is very simple. There is some Western-style housing (behind walled compounds) primarily for the wealthy, the government leaders, and the diplomats. Nearly 90 percent of Malawians live in three or four-room, single-story brick homes. The poorest have thatched roofs, and those with more income may have a tin roof. There are few furnishings in the average home. Most people sleep on woven mats rather than beds. Less than half of these homes have electricity. Few have inside running water or plumbing. Most kitchens are outside, attached to the house; some are larger for the entire village.

Most villages raise their own crops and tend communal flocks of goats and chickens. Aside from subsistence farming, there are few commercial or manufacturing jobs. There are some jobs available in the service industry. Others tend small stalls in markets along the road or in the Old Town part of Lilongwe. There are few multi-story buildings in the capital. We saw a new five-story hotel being built, and even the government buildings were only two-stories tall. In Salima, we didn't see any multi-story buildings.

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Our host for the first week, Pastor Alex Chambaro and his son, Leonard, picked us up at the airport and brought us to our hotel. There, we unpacked, settled in, and exchanged some money (the Malawian currency is called a “Kwacha” and trades at 720 per U.S. Dollar).

Our accommodations both weeks were very comfortable. We were grateful for the mosquito netting, although we needed it more in Salima than we did in Lilongwe. Breakfasts were included with our lodging. We ate lunches with the pastors (the first week, Alex also took us to local Western-styled restaurants), and we purchased dinner in the hotel restaurant.

Everyone we met exuded a genuine warmth and hospitality that set us at ease right away. It was a little disconcerting, though, to be in the clear minority. We saw very few Westerners during our time in Malawi, although Alex reported that many from India and China live and work in Lilongwe.

This first week we taught at Pentecostal Evangelical Ministries, a group Alex founded after leaving the Assemblies of God church community in which he had served for many years. He felt God calling him to leave his settled and comfortable ministry to begin this new venture. He and his colleagues have planted over 100 new congregations throughout Malawi, and his church in Lilongwe where we taught is the “mother church.” Approximately 150 pastors and evangelists attended. Both men and women participated, though more men than women.

We spent the second week in Salima, a medium-sized city near Lake Malawi. The lake reminds me of Lake Michigan by its size and the waves we saw during our Saturday afternoon visit. The beaches are a popular destination throughout the year for those with the means to travel. As a result, you will find many western-styled hotels along the lake. We walked the beach and enjoyed a relaxed conversation with our host for the second week, Pastor Phillip Phiri.

Pastor Phillip Phiri is the leader of the evangelical ministry “Pillars of Fire.” He went to seminary in



Worship at Pentecostal Evangelical Ministries in Lilongwe.

Nigeria several years ago before founding his church. It has now multiplied to six “branches.” He was a gracious host and made our time with the pastors and evangelists of his community very enjoyable.

Sixty-five men and women attended the conference in Salima. We met in one of the villages about 6 km outside of town. During the week, the building is used by an orphanage. On the weekends, his church rents the space for their services. The smaller, more intimate setting allowed for more discussion and conversation, especially after each teaching session. Ralph and I would ask if there were any questions, and as the week progressed, this Q&A time became longer and longer.

Each weekend Ralph and I worshiped in local congregations. Both of us preached, and the services were incredibly worshipful. The first weekend, worship at Pastor Alex’s church lasted four hours — but it didn’t seem like it at all. It was filled with music by several singing groups of all ages, four testimonies from worshipers about God’s presence and activity in their life, an offering, a sermon from each of us, and a thank-offering for us for the week of teaching we were leading. I was touched by this thank offering because the people don’t have much, but nearly everyone came forward to give something. One gentleman gave a plastic ballpoint pen as his offering, as he didn’t have any

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money to share but he wanted to give something in support of what we were doing. It was interesting to experience their prayer time. When Pastor Alex said, "Let's pray," the entire congregation broke out in prayer together. It sounded like the first Pentecost Luke describes in Acts 2.

The second weekend, we worshiped with two of Pastor Phiri's congregations in two of the smaller villages outside of Salima. At both churches, the members greeted us as we drove up, singing beautiful Christian songs in Chewa (the native language of Malawi). These churches were smaller than Alex's congregation, but just as warm and welcoming. Music at these services was a *cappella* and included beautiful harmonies. Each service was closer to two hours long, but the Holy Spirit was clearly evident in both ministries.

The participants both weeks were thrilled to receive a Bible in the local language, Chewa. In some cases, the pastors/evangelists didn't have a Bible. In other cases, the ones they had were well worn from long use.

It was clear from what both Alex and Phillip said to the conference participants that they will treasure these new Bibles and the bookmarks our children made. It is crucial that they have this important tool for their ministry. This gift also affirms their calling to be pastors and the seriousness with which they take that calling.

We finished our conference in Salima on Thursday. Alex and his son brought us back to Lilongwe. On Friday, we met with representatives from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi (ELCM). We thoroughly enjoyed our two-hour long visit with them. We shared the history and ministry of the NALC and our desire to work with them should they want similar teaching conferences in the future for their pastors, evangelists, and/or laypeople.

We met with the Rev. Feston Phiri, Director of Training, and the Rev. Evance Mphalasa, the Assistant General Secretary. Both are involved with personnel development for the pastors, evangelists, and key lay leaders in the church, and will be the perfect people with whom to work to organize future ministry training seminars. Two NALC pastors are



Worship in one of the congregations served by Pastor Phillip Phiri in a village near Salima, Malawi.

hoping to work with them in January 2018, for a women's seminar.

It was abundantly clear to both of us that the Holy Spirit was guiding our time in Malawi. I felt that guidance most clearly as I was teaching, as I adjusted what I said and how I said it to make my presentations more approachable to a non-English speaking audience. We also were keenly aware of the Holy Spirit in the vibrancy of the pastors and leaders, and in their descriptions of their ministry with the people. Healings and exorcisms are very common, and people's testimonies about this during worship each weekend was both heartfelt and well received by worshipers. God is active and alive for them. Thanks be to God!

I know that my own faith was strengthened, and that God answered my prayer to learn from the participants as much (or more) than I gave them. I will treasure my time in Africa for the rest of my life, and I'm confident God will use it in my teaching and preaching from now on. I look forward to going back again whenever the opportunity presents itself. The need is certainly there, and the pastors with whom we spoke are interested in continuing this partnership. ALWM is committed to an ongoing relationship with local churches. I can't imagine there not being an opportunity to go again, especially if the ELCM is open to our coming.

Pastor Al Schoonover serves Bethel Lutheran Church in Noblesville, Ind.

Congregationally Focused, Intentionally Connected

As I am writing these articles in 2017 in response to questions about the NALC and our shared ministry, the question this month is one recently posed by a Roman Catholic bishop. In our conversation about the NALC, he asked, “Explain to me the Core Value of being Congregationally Focused?”

The notion of a church body being “focused on congregations” was something new to a Roman Catholic, used to a more hierarchical focus. Having just returned from our NALC Lutheran Week where representatives from 250 congregations gathered together for theological education, a mission festival and our Convocation, it seems useful to spend a bit of time considering, “What does it mean to be Congregationally Focused?”

In explaining the NALC’s four Core Values, the NALC website states: “We strive to be a church that is organized to facilitate the ministries of local congregations in a posture of servanthood and a spirit of partnership, through the provision of resources, connections and information.”

What is important is that this Core Value reminds us that mission and ministry happen in local contexts as congregations reach out person-to-person — “life-to-life” as we say in our discipleship initiative.

We have a Bishop, deans and Mission Districts to “facilitate the ministries of local congregations.” We do this “in a posture of servanthood and a spirit of partnership.” This means congregations do not exist to serve a hierarchy, but all in the NALC serve in a “spirit of partnership.”

Unfortunately, not all understand Congregationally Focused in this way.

It is a mistake to understand Congregationally Focused to mean “congregationally independent.” There are “independent” congregations in Christianity, and there are associations of



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

independent congregations. However, this is not how the NALC understands Congregationally Focused, nor is this how we understand the Church, the Body of Christ, or the Lutheran understanding of the local congregation.

The NALC’s constitution states:

3.04 To carry out its witness to the world, the Church structures itself both as congregations and in wider and more universal bodies. The NALC derives its character and polity both from the sanction of its congregations and from its nature as a manifestation of the universal assembly of all believers. The NALC understands itself to be within the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

This interconnectedness is well-explained by St. Paul in Romans 12:1-8, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. Although Paul is speaking of the interrelationship of individual baptized Christians, it is clear that it relates, as well, to the whole Body of Christ in the world. All are baptized into Christ, all have been given gifts to build up the Body of Christ and to glorify God in the world. God did not create us to live as single, solitary Christians in the world, but as members of the one Body of Christ. Similarly, God intends that each community of faith be connected with each other.

This is true for each congregation in the NALC, but it is also true that God intends the NALC to be

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connected with and seeking fellowship in Christ with other Christian communities. Which brings us to our annual NALC Lutheran Week just completed in Nashville, Tenn.

What a gift and blessing it was to gather with more than 650 other Lutherans representing 250 congregations for learning, inspiration, challenge and deliberation!

It is one of the strengths of the NALC that every congregation may send their pastor and at least one delegate to participate fully in the Convocation of our church body.

In the past, we yearned for a voice in the deliberation and decision-making of our predecessor church bodies. In the past, it was common for pastors and congregations to sense that decisions were being made “on-high,” then forced upon members who disagreed with these decisions.

The NALC was constituted to involve each and every pastor and congregation in discernment, deliberation and decision-making. Every major decision of the NALC Convocation requires ratification by a two-thirds majority of NALC congregations.

But is every congregation involved and participating fully? As I said, out of our 421 NALC congregations, 250 were represented at the Convocation. That means 171 of our congregations were not represented by a pastor or lay delegate.

It is unfortunate that some congregations and pastors continue to misunderstand Congregationally Focused as “congregationally independent!” We have congregations that have never participated in any aspect of our Lutheran Week — have never participated in our annual Mission Festival, have never sent a pastor or lay delegate to our annual Convocation.

And yet, it may be these very same congregations and pastors who have a sense they are isolated, alone and without resources for mission, outreach and renewal. Yes, there is a financial cost to participating in the Lutheran Week. Yes, small

congregations with tight budgets may find it a challenge to fund the participation of their pastor and lay delegate each year in the Lutheran Week. Yes, this is why the NALC as a whole subsidizes the Lutheran Week to keep congregational costs as low as possible. But it’s worth it! The Lutheran Week is worth every penny!

At the Lutheran Week in Nashville, participants heard deep and meaningful teaching about the redeeming work of Jesus, our Savior and Lord. At the Mission Festival, the theme was “Renewing Congregations Through the Word of God,” as we heard from pastors, congregations and international church leaders how the Holy Spirit is working through God’s Holy Word to renew, energize and grow congregations in faith and numbers. If your congregation is stagnant, in decline and in need of renewal, you missed a wonderful opportunity if no one represented your congregation at the Mission Festival.

As part of the Mission Festival, congregations of each Mission District met for an evening of reflection and conversation about the challenges and blessings of ministry in your area, in your context for ministry.

Throughout the week, we were built up as Bishop Bradosky shared his vision and commitment to the Great Commission, challenging us and encouraging us to join together in the NALC as we seek to be disciples and make disciples.

We heard two powerful sermons in our Lutheran Week worship, the first by President Yonas Yigezu of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the largest and fastest-growing Lutheran church body in the world, and the second by Presiding Bishop Fredrick Shoo of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, the world’s second-largest Lutheran church body. As we face troubling and unique challenges in our North American, increasingly secular context, these sermons uplifted us as we sought to hold fast to the truth and authority of God’s Word in the face of opposition and persecution.

Throughout, we heard about “Moments of Mission” calendars and notecards presenting mission around

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the world, focused on the NALC's Great Commission Society. We were reminded and invited to live out our Core Value of being Mission Driven by becoming a member of the society with regular donations throughout the year to support our mission congregations, global workers and missions of all kinds.

By the way, notecards and 2018 calendars are still available. Contact the NALC Administrative Office at nalc.mnoffice@thenalc.org or 651-633-6004 to order.

All of this, and so much more, was offered at our 2017 Lutheran Week.

What was most moving, however, were the continual testimonies of attendees — in elevators, in hallways, at mealtimes: “I never knew what a blessing it would be to participate in the Lutheran Week. I’m taking so much home with me, I hope I can represent our congregation again next year!”

Pastor George Johnson, senior pastor of Shepherd of the Woods Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Fla., summed it up adequately saying, as I paraphrase, “In the past, national assemblies were places where the larger church showcased the larger church, national activities and the need for funding the national church. At the NALC Lutheran Week, the focus is on resourcing and encouraging the local congregation.”

That does sum it up! That’s what it means when we say the NALC is Congregationally Focused. The NALC is, thankfully, more than a loose grouping of independent congregations. The NALC is an interconnected community of congregations with a faithful Bishop, shared mission and ministry, ecumenical and international inter-Lutheran relationships and commitments. The NALC, in all its parts, serves in “a spirit of partnership,” focused on resourcing and encouraging the local congregation.

The NALC Lutheran Week is one important means through which this congregational focus is manifested. Plan now for your congregation to participate in our 2018 Lutheran Week, Aug. 13-17 in Denver, Colo.

In the meantime, get involved in your local Mission District. Invite your Mission District dean to visit your congregation. Partner with other NALC congregations in your area. Send someone to the Congregational Renewal Conference in Columbus, Ohio, Nov. 13-14. Encourage your pastor to attend the NALC Pastors Conference in San Antonio, Texas, Jan. 30-Feb. 1. Join the NALC Great Commission Society.

Together, we are the Body of Christ. Together, we are the North American Lutheran Church. Thanks be to God!



Youth and Family Ministry Update

Monthly webinars will be offered on the second Tuesday of each month at 2 p.m. ET. The webinars will also be archived at faithwebbing.com.

The “NALC Youth Leaders” Facebook group is growing. Join the conversation. Check out the recently posted message from Bishop John Bradosky to the NALC Youth Ministry Symposium in Nashville, Tenn.

Don’t forget to share the Holy Families website link with the parents in your congregation: www.holyfamilytime.com.

Life Promotion Quakes are a great experience. Quake dates for the upcoming school year have been announced. Want to coordinate attending with other NALC congregations? Connect with others in the “NALC Youth Leaders” Facebook group. For more information on Quakes visit quakeevent.com.

Gary and Laurie Pecuch have served in youth ministry for more than 35 years at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio. They serve the NALC as youth ministry coaches. They provide a variety of resources for NALC congregations free of charge through their website, faithwebbing.com. You may contact them at faithwebbing@gmail.com.



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