

THE 

JUNE 2024

LUTHERAN AMBASSADOR



SPOTLIGHTS

Our congregations are serving
their communities with
generosity and creativity

The bride & body of Christ.

The congregation is a beautiful place.

It's not beautiful because of the architecture, and it's not beautiful because of the people, though I'm sure you are all lovely people who gather in lovely buildings for Sunday worship. Your local congregation is a beautiful place, however, because it belongs to Christ, and it is where God delivers forgiveness to his children. Whether your church looks more like the Notre Dame cathedral or a Home Depot warehouse, it is a beautiful place.

We have always cherished the local congregation in our fellowship, and I hope we never lose sight of its beauty.

"Since it is an irreversible fact that the New Testament speaks with the deepest reverence and the most sacred earnestness concerning just these local congregations," said Georg Sverdrup (*What is the Congregation?*), "it behooves us also to speak with all reverence and respect of this divine institution among us and deem it very highly for the sake of Christ and God."



Scripture uses several metaphors to describe the congregation.

Ephesians 5 speaks of the church as the Bride of Christ, loved by and presented to Christ without spot or wrinkle. Galatians 6 refers to the congregation as a family or household. We believers are "living stones" in 1 Peter 2, who together are built into a holy temple.

But one of the most common ways to describe the local congregation—and one of my favorites—is the Body of Christ. Ephesians 4:15–16 says, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

Your local congregation is a part of the Body of Christ. This body, forgiven and made spotless through Christ, functions as Christ's hands and feet in your community, showing love and offering the promises and hope of the gospel.

This issue contains snapshots of how God is working through a few of the congregations in our association. Our prayer is that these congregational spotlights will encourage you and inspire you. Seeing God at work in so many different places and in so many different ways can remind us of the beauty of the local congregation and the blessing it is to be a part of this Body of Christ. These spotlights can also inspire us to see our home contexts with new eyes. Does your community have a need that your congregation could help meet?

Many different ministries and congregations are featured in this issue. Bethany Free Lutheran in Astoria, Ore., packs hundreds of bagged lunches each week to feed the poor and homeless in their midst. The parish in Dalton, Minn., built an outreach building for their community to use. Good Shepherd Lutheran in Camarillo, Calif., runs a Christmas-themed thrift shop for the people in their community. Many of our churches have active quilting ministries that provide much-needed warmth to those who need it most.

And so many more. We only have space for a few congregational spotlights in this issue, but send us more stories! We always love to hear how your congregations are serving their communities as God's hands and feet.

The congregation is a beautiful place. It is Christ's bride, where you are made perfect by the washing of water and the promise of the Word. And it is Christ's body, where you work together to show your community the love of God.

—Pastor Andrew Kneeland



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EDITOR

Pastor Andrew Kneeland
laeditor@aflc.org

MANAGING EDITOR

Ruth Gunderson
ruthg@aflc.org

CIRCULATION

Liz McCarlson
lasubscriptions@aflc.org

EDITORIAL BOARD

Monica Coyle
Pastor Jerry Moan
Pastor J. Christian Andrews

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3110 E. Medicine Lake Blvd.,
Plymouth, MN 55441
763-545-5631
lasubscriptions@aflc.org

If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not risen—nothing else matters. [Jaroslav Pelikan]

“

The liturgy of a church is nothing other than that church's faith in motion on certain definite and crucial levels.

[Aidan Kavanagh]

If I want to know what God, in grace, concluded concerning my salvation, I ought not to climb up into heaven, which is too high for me, but I can be informed of this through the call that is brought before me in the preaching of the Gospel and that is sealed and confirmed through the Sacraments.

[Martin Chemnitz]

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. [C.S. Lewis]

Is it not excessively ridiculous to seek the good opinion of those whom you would never wish to be like? [John Chrysostom]



NEEDLE & THREAD

A Quilt, a Hat, a Scarf

Calvary Quilters is a small group of people in Fergus Falls, Minn., who love to sew quilts and make other items for people in need. A handmade gift tells a person, “We see you, and we care about you.” In 2023, Calvary Quilters distributed 142 quilts; 17 fleece, crocheted, and knitted hats; 14 knitted and crocheted scarves; 7 appliqued dishtowels; and 22 sundresses made from pillowcases.

Calvary’s WMF program provides shipping costs to mail quilts, hats, and dishtowels to the AFLC Home Mission’s Alaska Mission in Naknek, Alaska, and the quilts help the AFLC missionaries there connect with remote villages. One member of Calvary Quilters, a snowbird who migrates to Texas in the winter, also takes children’s quilts and pillowcase sundresses to Border Missions in Hidalgo, Texas.

Calvary Quilters partner with other churches as well. For example, in conjunction with New Life Church in Alexandria, Minn., Calvary Quilters makes quilts for the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe through the Diamond Willow Ministry in Fort Thompson, S.D. They are hand-delivered in October, when New Life members travel to do work projects at the mission.

Calvary Quilters provides quilts for local and regional ministries. For instance, quilts, hats, and scarves are made for foster care children in Otter Tail County. Foster families get items free from The Connection Closet at Bethel Lutheran Church in Fergus Falls. Patriotic quilts are also made for the Red Cross in west central and northwest Minnesota and eastern North Dakota. The quilts are given to veterans in hospitals and assisted living facilities.

Calvary Quilters usually meet twice a month at the church, but much of their handiwork is done in their homes. They could not do this mission outreach without the help of others. In addition to shipping contributions from our local WMF, we have received grants from other sources to help purchase batting and specialty fabrics. A lot of fabric is donated by congregation members or family and friends of members of the congregation. Each person involved follows the teaching found in Proverbs 31:20: “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.” We share a quilt, a hat, and a scarf—tunics—to say, “We see you, and we care about you.”

—Linda Lein is a member of Calvary Free Lutheran, Fergus Falls, Minn.

CONGREGATIONAL SPOTLIGHTS

Jesus said,
"Whoever has
two tunics is to
share with him
who has none ..."
(Luke 3:11).



SERVING THE COMMUNITY

The quilting ladies of Christ the King Lutheran, Wilson, Wis., gather monthly, usually on the second Saturday. From 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., we meet and enjoy a shared meal and fellowship at noon. Our quilting group may do things a little differently than others because we learn as we quilt. We have a lead lady who picks out patterns and presents them to us for our choice (she has made the pattern beforehand). She then gives us instructions on how to make the blocks and is available to help us out when we have trouble. The group members usually all make the same quilt. Our material comes from the supply that we have (some purchased, donated, or picked up at estate sales and auctions). If we are making quilts for a specific mission, we make them the size they prefer. We add the borders according to the size desired and then assemble our quilts. We sew the top together, add the batting and backing, and then finish the quilt by stitching the edges and tying it. If we haven't made the quilts for a specific place, after we have finished a few, we look at where they may be used.

Over the years, our quilts have been sent to our AFLC missions and the Alaska Mission. We have given some to homeless shelters and women's shelters, to fire victims who have lost their homes, and to shut-ins. We give a baby quilt to each of the babies that are baptized in our church. In addition, we have made baby quilts for hospitals and given smaller-sized quilts (a little bigger than a doll quilt and smaller than a lap quilt) in plastic bags to local police officers to use with children in the various cases they encounter. (This idea was discussed with the department before it was carried out.) We made potholders for all the attendees at a WMF rally that we hosted and have at different times made cloth bags, dresses, stuffed animals, and soft dolls for the Operation Christmas Child boxes that we pack. We always have a great time learning, visiting, and creating as we make the quilts and other special items to give away.

—Dawn Johnson, Christ the King Lutheran, Wilson, Wis.

This quilt was prayerfully made for you by the Quilters of Christ the King Free Lutheran Church, Pipestone Minnesota.
"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:16



Can mission work be accomplished through a passion for quilting? The women at Christ the King Free Lutheran Church (CTK) in Pipestone, Minn., have such a passion, and their talents provide multiple ways to bless people in the name of Jesus. Their quilts go to Union Gospel Mission, which provides help and housing to the homeless and struggling, and are also donated and used as fundraisers for local ministries, including ATLAS, Volunteers in Mercy, the Hospice House, and the Good Samaritan Society. They make baby quilts, and provide large quilts to CTK's graduates based on the themes that are special to the students. Every quilt contains the message, "This quilt was prayerfully made for you by the Quilters of Christ the King Free Lutheran Church, Pipestone, Minnesota. 'For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.' John 3:16."

In addition, our quilters make fidget quilts that are about four squares by four squares and contain all kinds of sensory gadgets such as zippers, buttons, pockets, belts, elastic, and Velcro. Because the fidget quilts are smaller, they can be made quickly and provide a good means to teach people the basics of sewing and quilting. These quilts have proven to help those who are nervous or need sensory stimulation, and have been given to a local manor that houses those with disabilities (the Good Samaritan Village) and even to the ER of a local hospital that makes them available to people struggling with addictions. Jesus said in Mark 2:17, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

One other project we've undertaken to bless the congregation has been making center pieces for the fellowship hall tables. These are made for the seasons and also provide a simple way for others to learn the elements of sewing and quilting.

This ministry currently involves eight women who primarily sew at home, communicate during the month, and formally meet monthly at the church to connect and complete their projects. Many of their needed materials are donated, organized, and kept in a designated room of the church. CTK's current quilters are Kathie Keller, Colleen Krusemark, Mavis Remund, Diana Ulk, Linda Bruns, Barb Westerbur, Joanne Griebel, and Delilah DeZeeuw.

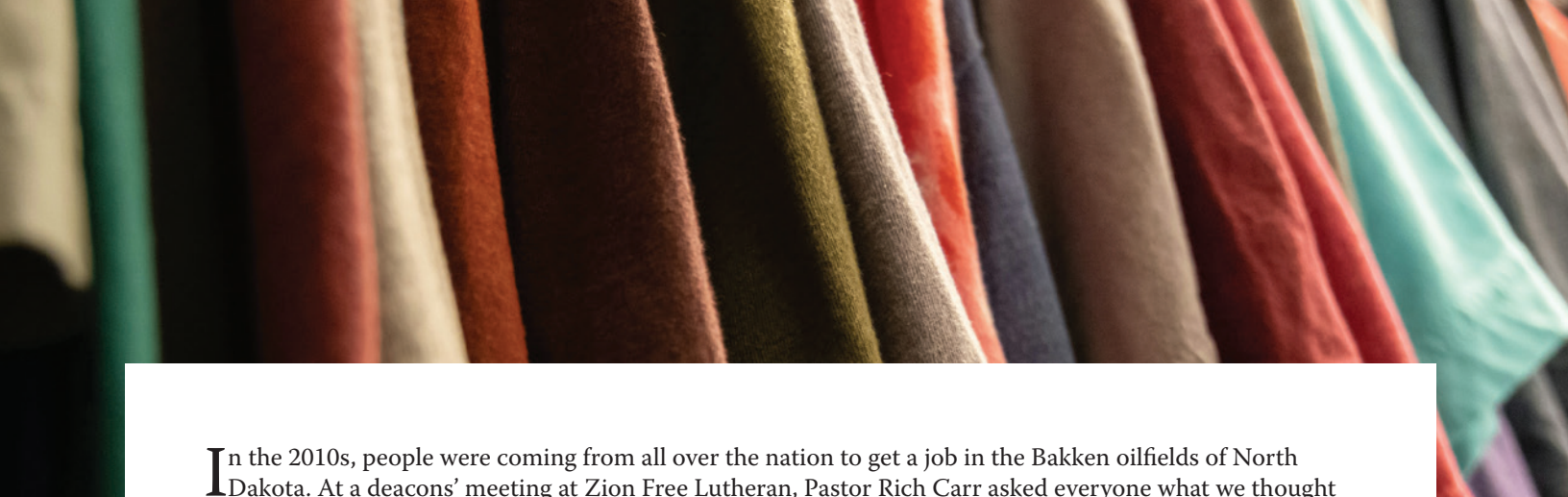
—Pastor Tim Johnson,
Christ the King, Pipestone, Minn.,

STITCHING WITH CARE

On mission in Pipestone, Minn.



Pictured are some of the quilters from Christ the King Lutheran (from right) Kathie Keller, Mavis Remund, and Colleen Krusemark. They are pictured with Pastor Tim Johnson.



In the 2010s, people were coming from all over the nation to get a job in the Bakken oilfields of North Dakota. At a deacons' meeting at Zion Free Lutheran, Pastor Rich Carr asked everyone what we thought about starting up a clothing room where much-needed affordable winter clothing would be available. I heard myself say, "Yes," thinking I would do it for three months and close up.

One small room in the basement was opened up for this purpose. Just a week or two later, we had the room so full of clothes that Zion gave us a bigger room. That one was full in no time, too.

The local Baptist pastor called me one day and said he had a lady in his office with no winter clothes at all, only flip flops for shoes, and very little money. I said I would be there in 10 minutes. When she got there, it was 10 degrees below zero. We found her a nice coat, and she said that was all she could afford. Then we got her boots, snow pants, shoes, and a few pairs of socks. She started crying and said she could not afford all of this. I told her it was a gift from God, and that he did not want our money. He wants our souls.

Very early on, it was clear that God was in charge of the Clothes Closet, for there have been and are so many miracles happening. The one that really got me, however, was when my sister was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. I spent the last three to four months of her life with her. On a Friday night, she said she would like a walker because she was falling too much. On Saturday morning, there was a walker leaning against the door of the Clothes Closet with a cross on it. I know that God did not put it there, but he did inspire someone to. No one had donated a walker in five years, and we did not have a place to put one if someone had. When I saw that walker, all I could do was cry.

Another time, a high school class donated \$120 and asked us to buy Bibles with the money. It purchased so many that I let the class know that we would never be without a Bible to give away for free.

When Zion moved to its new location, they sold the old Zion building to the Clothes Closet ministry. We went from two rooms to two floors. Today, we have 47 clothes racks, and our walls are lined with shelves. The kitchen is full of food, and upstairs is filled with furniture. We are open two days a week.

We sell our adult coats for 50 cents and our kids' coats for 25 cents. The money we get is used to buy winter clothes for kids and give them to anyone who needs winter gear. This winter alone, we gave away more than 200 coats.

Miracles happen every day we are open to them—but then, isn't life itself a miracle? I know life is better when I can let go of my plans and let God fulfill his. God puts us in the right place to serve him.

—Rick Raan is a member of Zion Lutheran, Tioga, N.D.

CLOTHING THE POOR

North Dakota Coat Closet
and more run out of former
Zion Lutheran building





A UNIFIED MISSION

Area churches join in a mission project that involves generations of volunteers

Our WMF is a small group of five to seven women who meet monthly on Saturday, and serving the Lord Jesus through sewing is our primary goal. Together, we make blankets and quilts to share with our missionaries, communities, and neighbors.

We decided to try a new project this year: making mittens out of old sweaters and lining them with fleece. This was a bit challenging, and our seam rippers never left our sides! We set a lofty goal of 100 pairs of mittens, with the plan of sending them to our mission in Alaska and sharing some with a local mission for the homeless.

We joined forces with ladies from another church's sewing group. Between the two groups, we sewed on a weekly basis on a Wednesday or Thursday after school, sometimes twice a week for a period of two months. The other church group had sewn these mittens the year before and taught us how to make them, sharing the pattern and getting us started.

The mittens are made from wool sweaters, wool coats, or wool scarves, and lined with fleece. After using up all the wool from our closets, we started searching the thrift stores, buying anything that was available—not always wool or even partly wool. We ended up using any sweater that was tightly woven.

We did accomplish our goal, and with God's help, we exceeded it by making 140 pairs of beautiful and very warm mittens. In the process, we met some new friends.

Something else happened by changing our usual routine: other people from our church joined us. One young man was very interested in learning how "sweater mittens were put together," and three kids from our kids' club and youth group joined us. Some of these young people had never sewn before, so we started them off with the basics: how to thread a needle and knot it off, or how to sew on buttons (each mitten had a button to secure the cuff). Praise God that he gave us an opportunity to share with the younger people, and in the process of sharing about sewing, we had the opportunity to share about Jesus. We always include a Scripture verse with each homemade craft, and the mittens had Isaiah 41:13 on them: "For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you."

In keeping with our desire to serve God through our sewing, we would love to offer our assistance to any WMF group that would like to make mittens. If you are interested in having a couple of us come or at least visit with us about the project, contact us through our church, Christian Free Lutheran in Wheatland, Iowa. Call 563-374-1002.

—Betsy Von Muenster, Christian Free Lutheran, Wheatland, Iowa.



FEEDING THE HOMELESS

Bethany Free Lutheran congregation packs brown bag lunches for hundreds in Astoria, Oregon



God has blessed Astoria, Ore., with many beautiful natural wonders and a year-round mild climate. The natural beauty and mild temperatures attract many different people from many different walks of life, especially the homeless.

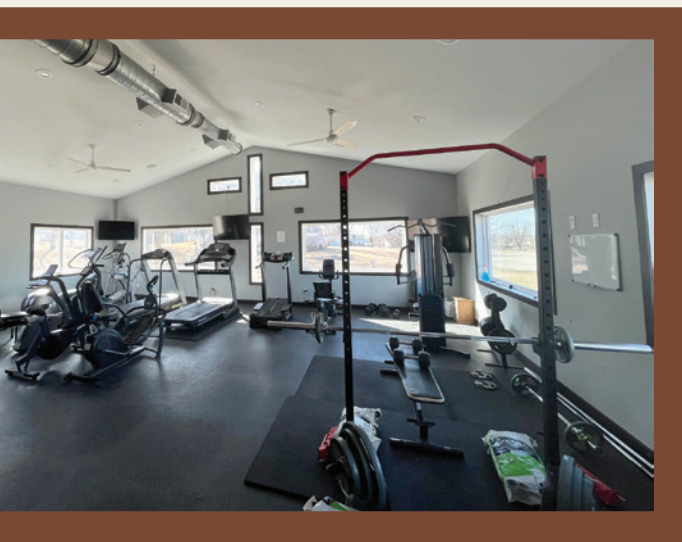
It would be easy to point out that Christians should be doing something to help those who struggle and are most vulnerable. Some try just randomly giving away money, food, and shelter. This rarely works, as often the “cure” to poverty and homelessness can incentivize the recipients to remain in their position. Unfortunately, this reality sometimes makes people feel helpless to provide any meaningful aid.

One woman in our congregation, who has two homeless grandchildren in other areas of the country, decided she was going to do something about this problem. She started preparing brown-bag lunches to give out to the homeless. These lunches didn’t just have physical food; there was spiritual food in each bag as well. Each lunch had stickers on pudding cups and on the outside of the bag, reminding those eating the lunches that Jesus loved them. She also ensured that each lunch had either a tract or a page from an old *Our Daily Bread* devotional. In time, the program grew from preparing 50 lunches a week to well over 300 lunches with more than 12 volunteers helping.

What makes this project different from just giving out free food is that we are planting “gospel seeds” with every person who partakes in the lunches. The lunch becomes a tool to transmit the gospel. An unintended consequence of this program is that it also provides a Christian community to those who pack the lunches. From about 1:30–3 p.m. every Tuesday, you will normally find a small group of mostly seniors gathered together, prepping and packing lunches, sharing their lives, and, when we are done, praying together. Many have commented that the best part of the process is when we finish and gather together to share our hearts and pray for each other and the lunches.

The program has had its growing pains. We have recently streamlined our process and reduced the number of lunches to 200 per week in order to afford making lunches the entire year. Change can be hard, but with the modifications we have now put into place, the program is poised to continue strong for many years to come.

—Pastor Rich Carr, Bethany Free Lutheran, Astoria, Ore.



THE ROCK

Dalton Parish gives its neighbors a place to meet, fellowship, and exercise



In 2019, a few people from the Dalton Free Lutheran Parish started to plan and pull together an idea for an outreach building. Thanks to the generosity of people throughout the parish, construction began the following summer across the parking lot of Zion-Sarpsborg Free Lutheran Church on the north end of Dalton, Minn. The purpose of constructing the building was simple: to provide the greater community with a family-friendly space to gather, exercise, study, play, and even grab a snack with friends and neighbors. To that end, The Rock was built with two distinct halves. The east side of the building is for fellowship, games, and food. The west side is a workout facility with free weights, treadmills, stationary bikes, and more. Whether people are there for a cup of coffee or to workout, the entire facility is free for the public to use. The parish's youth group also helps supply and sell snacks and beverages at The Rock as a low-key fundraiser and to help with community outreach.

The Rock gets quite a bit of use from a wide variety of people. Families have used it for reunions and birthday parties. Students have used it as a place to study, exercise, and grab a snack between confirmation and the midweek Bible study. Neighbors have become acquainted with one another as they finish exercising. The Rock is also used by Productive Alternatives from both Fergus Falls and Perham, an organization that helps adults with disabilities find local employment.

Pastor Mark Johnson and I join with others in the Dalton Parish in celebrating that people appreciate, respect, maintain, donate to, and utilize The Rock on a regular basis. It's a rare day that the building isn't used in some capacity.

Pastor Mark commented, "The Rock has been a tremendous addition to our ministry and outreach in our community and area. It is exciting to see people making connections, meeting for coffee and prayer, and taking time to have fellowship with each other. We are very thankful to have this ministry tool to use to God's glory!"

—Pastor Dan Hurner, Dalton Parish, Dalton, Minn.



FEEDING BODY & SOUL

Ruby's Pantry connects Zumbrota church to local community

It's interesting that when God calls us to get involved in his work, it often starts out feeling just like everyday life. That's how it felt when my son called from college with pure excitement about all the food he had just obtained in one haul. Food filled his dining room table and chairs and spilled onto the floor in abundance. "It's from Ruby's Pantry!" he said. "Look it up, you'll love it!" His words rang true when we discovered that this faith-based nonprofit aims to share the love of Christ through food. They accomplish this through once-a-month distribution sites, primarily at churches and run by volunteers, where they provide large shares of food for a small donation. They also offer a prayer area for guests, church literature, and praise music throughout the distribution. With the closest site being only an hour away, this ministry seemed like an excellent fit for our fun-loving, service-oriented congregation and community. God did not waste any time assembling a leadership team whose gifts and talents aligned perfectly with this mission, and, although we had many questions, he faithfully met our needs—including a base of more than 100 monthly volunteers from our church and community.

We are now entering our fifth year of this program. The opportunity to share God's love and joy with the community on a monthly basis has been a great gift. It has also been a unique opportunity for different generations to work together and build relationships while being the hands and feet of Jesus. It is a wonderful demonstration of fellowship and the way that all the gifts and talents God has given each person work together to accomplish his mission. Every single person on site is important. Glory to God!

We can never really know the full impact that this mission has on the community. One of the beautiful things is that it allows us to set the table for God to do his work far beyond our walls. We often hear encouraging stories of his work in people's lives on-site or once the food leaves the parking lot, but this is likely just the tip of the iceberg. We do know that God continues to bring about one-third of our volunteers from outside our church family, and about one-third of these guests are new to our distribution each month. This provides a unique opportunity to build relationships with volunteers and returning guests. Our Facebook page, with 3.7K followers, is an excellent platform for sharing the love of Christ and staying engaged with the community between distributions. We are also able to share any leftover food with local food shelves and mentor several new locations that have also started distributing in southern Minnesota.

This mission provides nourishment for not only the body but also the soul. It exemplifies fellowship, provides the opportunity to build relationships, shares the love and joy of Christ, and ultimately gives people the opportunity to know him and to make him known. God is good. For more information on Ruby's Pantry, please visit rubyspantry.org.

—Christine Haferman, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Zumbrota, MN

MODELING CHRIST



Trail Life gives boys lessons in basic life skills & character formation

The Lord calls each of us to a particular congregation—not just to attend but to serve and minister to each other and the surrounding community. He has called me to be a part of Trinity San Antonio Lutheran Church; and not only has the Lord called me to San Antonio, Texas, but even more specifically to a north-side neighborhood called Timberwood Park. Serving in this community isn't a replacement for the local congregation, but it is one of my vocations. My north-side community is the mission field where I've been called to be salt and light. The Apostle Paul writes, "The body does not consist of one member but of many" (I Corinthians 12:14). He speaks of the different gifts and callings that each precious member of the body has. While he is directly referring to the church, we can also see this passage speaking to our lives in the broader communities God has called us to. What gifts has God given you to serve both your congregation and your community?

I have the privilege of serving in several capacities at Trinity San Antonio. I serve as an elder and Sunday school teacher, and I coordinate our altar guild. However, I also have the gift of serving as chaplain and patrol leader for Trail Life Troop TX-310. If you're unfamiliar, Trail Life USA is a rapidly growing Christian, male-only scouting organization. Here, boys learn all the skills and virtues you might expect

in scouting: knots, fire-building, tent camping, patriotism, stewardship. However, it is also explicitly Christian, and Scripture is taught in every lesson. Their motto is "Christ-Centered. Boy-Focused." While we have seen a few families come to Trinity through Trail Life, I see the benefit as more external to the congregation. As chaplain, I can bring the teaching gifts God has given me to boys who may or may not be active in a local congregation. Each meeting begins and ends with prayer and a brief message from the Word. Once a month, we have a Worthy Life meeting where the lesson, instead of being about some outdoor skill or character trait, is from the Bible and about Christian living.

Growing up in a single-mom household, I learned many basic skills through scouting. It was also a place where I saw manhood modeled. Sadly, that modeling is vanishing within some organizations or often lacks focus on the true Man, the Godman Jesus. I want to encourage you that many of you have good gifts from our Heavenly Father (and your earthly fathers) that boys are desperate for today. I would encourage you to share those gifts with a local Trail Life troop. Not only can it be a wonderful time with your own boys, but you could be Christ to a boy who needs him.

—David Hein, Trinity Lutheran, San Antonio, Texas





KEYS TO SUCCESS

Emmaus serves its community through transitional housing

Over the years, the two-bedroom, one-bath house on the campus of Emmaus Free Lutheran, Bloomington, Minn., has served in various capacities. In the summer of 2018, however, the house received a new purpose and mission: to become the House of Hope. Emmaus would partner with two local organizations—Together for Good, which creates pathways for the church to come alongside vulnerable families in Christ-centered ministry, and the Metro Hope Healing House, whose mission is to restore families and support mothers with children by ending addiction.

The House of Hope has become a home to mothers with very little to their name as they work to get established in a new job, find new housing, and develop a support structure that will set them up for success during this time of transition. The House of Hope ministry offers many ways for our church to come alongside these mothers by providing for their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs and giving them a community.

Before a new mother and child move in, the house is fully furnished and stocked, ready for them to move in. A lot of work is needed to make this happen, and many people generously donate their time and resources. There is a list of repair and maintenance jobs that need to get done, and volunteers show up and are willing to help with whatever is needed: cleaning out the gardens around the house, patching and painting walls, washing windows, sewing curtains, and rekeying the house. Items are donated that the mother can take with her as she sets up her next home, kitchen equipment is provided by the women's ministry team, quilts are given by the church quilters, and local businesses supply nursery items, a pantry, and bathroom and laundry supplies.

Throughout the mother's 12–18 month stay at the House of Hope, there is a team of women that comes alongside her and meets weekly or biweekly to help support her spiritual, financial, and physical goals by offering encouragement, prayer, and mentorship along the way.

The church community has also supported the mothers in various ways throughout their time in the House of Hope. The church provides meals, youth provide childcare, and we receive constant donations of age-appropriate toys, diapers, and clothing (as the children may go through many sizes during their stay with us).

Each mother and child who comes to the House of Hope brings new opportunities for church members to get involved with this life-changing ministry. It has been a blessing to see how God's plan works out perfectly by using people with just the right skills for each task needed to accomplish his work in the lives of these families.

—Karla Rachac, Emmaus Lutheran, Bloomington, Minn.



GIVING AWAY THEIR EXCESS

“Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”

—Psalm 50:14–15

Many years ago, I worked with a congregational treasurer who lived by the motto, “It’s only money, honey.” What he meant was that it was fruitless to spend so much time and energy worrying about something that began and ended with God. The amount of value we put on money is foolish. And the power we allow money to have in our lives is silly. “It’s only money, honey.”

I can’t tell you the number of sermons I’ve preached over the years on the bondage of the unholy dollar. Striving for more of them consumes us, and the lack of them concerns us. As John D. Rockefeller reportedly said, “How much money does it take to make a man happy? Just one more dollar.” When a dollar becomes our god, then we become the embodiment of Jesus’ “rich man,” who can’t enter heaven.

Over the years, I have encountered a host of different budgeting styles. I’ve seen budgets that emphasize savings, budgets that lean toward programming, and budgets that prioritize facilities or maintenance. But it wasn’t until I arrived at Living Faith Free Lutheran in Larimore, N.D., that I encountered a non-budget budget. What I mean is a budget that addresses the cost of ministry while keeping any potential fear of lack at bay—because, at the end of every leadership meeting, they give away their excess.

Now, I’m not talking about arbitrarily draining their account each month; they do leave money in the account to cover their foreseen obligations. But apart from that, they look at their list of outside needs (mostly in the AFLC), and divide up their excess. Thousands of dollars are simply given away each month, in faith that God will supply their future needs the next month. A savings account is only created if a large project of some kind is expected. So when one of the leaders references Psalm 50, they mean it—and practice it. They trust in a God who “owns the cattle on a thousand hills.”

It can be a challenge at times, especially for the treasurer, and the cost of doing business today is different than in years past. But this congregation wants to live in the “promised land,” trusting in God rather than the bank or some credit card. Though small modifications are necessary at times, the principle of generosity rules their budget. Their confidence in a God of provision doesn’t waver. After all, “It’s only money, honey.”

—Pastor David Johnson, Faith Free Lutheran, Larimore, N.D.



Camarillo church's Christmas shop gives presents and the gospel message



MORE THAN A GIFT

Two years in a row, our church has hosted a Community Christmas Shoppe, partnering with a local non-profit and several other churches to bless 150 low-income families.

For an entire Saturday in December, our fellowship hall is converted into a toy shop. Round tables are stacked with donated gifts—board games, Lego sets, stuffed animals, action figures, art supplies, sports equipment, dolls, and hot wheels. Brand new bikes, tricycles, and scooters line the wall.

As families arrive, they're welcomed into the sanctuary, where a chalk art presentation draws them into the Christmas story. Two pastors take turns proclaiming the gospel message to scheduled groups of guests. Each presentation is translated into Spanish and ends with an opportunity to call on Jesus as their Savior. As the drawing concludes and Christmas music swells, a spotlight illuminates the completed chalk picture of a baby, wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger.

When the presentation ends, kids are directed to the playground and craft station, while shopping hosts guide parents through the toy shop. Each family receives a set number of points to "shop" with, and toys are tagged with a point value. Hosts help select gifts based on the age and interests of the kids. After "checking out" and bagging toys away from little eyes, members of a prayer team pray over requests from each family. A wooden cross is covered with slips of paper that carry specific needs as they are shared, some in Spanish and others in English, such as "My cancer," "Our marriage," and "My son's depression." Many individuals are moved to tears.

A hot cocoa bar, candy canes, and volunteers wearing Santa hats bring extra smiles as kids meet up with their parents. As they head toward the exit, families receive a box of non-perishable food items from a local food share program. They walk to their cars, arms full and hearts blessed.

Six hundred and eighty gifts, 150 families, 365 kids, 120 volunteers, four partnering churches, two languages, and one gospel message. All these unite to shine the light of Christ and the joy of Christmas in our community.

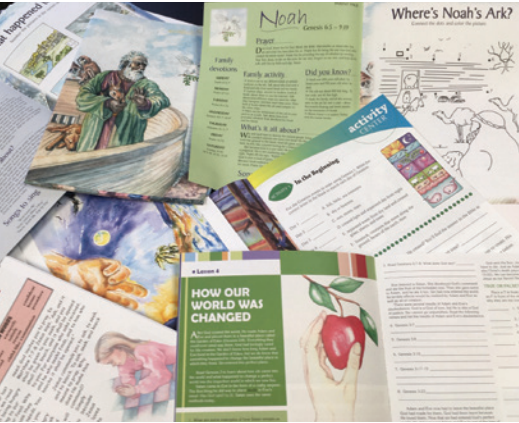
The impact reaches far beyond what's seen and experienced on a Saturday in mid-December. Two families now attend the Spanish-speaking church that meets on our campus. Dozens of event volunteers are making a new tradition of serving together with their families during the busiest season of the year. Everyone has a place to serve, whether that be donating a gift, hanging Christmas lights, offering a prayer, sorting toys, greeting guests, translating Spanish, giving out Bibles, or re-stocking gift tables. Several pastors have also developed friendships and strategize new ways to partner for Kingdom purposes. Seeds of the gospel are planted in the hearts of old and young alike.

A warm cup of cocoa, a box of food, and a new soccer ball may look different than the "cup of cold water" that Jesus talks about in Matthew 10, but the spiritual significance remains—gifts given and needs met in the name of Christ yield an eternal outcome and righteous reward, all because of the gift of God in Christ Jesus.

—Pastor Chad Friestad, Good Shepherd Lutheran, Camarillo, Calif.

Building a strong foundation.

BY LEEANNA LUNN



Suggled up on the couch, surrounded by four children and a squirming baby on my lap, I was walking them through snippets of the Psalms. My 4-year-old had a major disappointment for a toddler: the ketchup was gone. After an initial cuddle, I was showing him (and, consequently, his siblings) how God wants us to bring our emotions to him so he can hear us and help turn our hearts and minds back to him.

“Hey!” my oldest interjected. “We read that verse in Sunday school yesterday: Psalm 4:3! Mr. Allen was talking about how God hears our prayers and how we should watch for him to fulfill his promises! Just like you’re saying, Mom!”

There are few things that bring me as much joy and peace in this confusing world as knowing that what I believe and teach as a parent is being upheld in my children’s Sunday school classrooms.

When the AFLC was first founded, one of the top priorities was having our own Sunday school curriculum. Our “founding fathers,” if you will, had seen the destructive consequences of children being taught from materials that did not uphold their parents’ and their congregations’ beliefs. Indeed, it is a common belief to this day among those who were a part of the old LFC that this is a primary reason why the denomination left its biblical foundation: successive generations were not taught what that foundation was but instead were being taught by curriculum from outside conflicting sources.

Because of our history, we are eternally grateful to God and the AFLC that we have a solid Sunday school curriculum. Ambassador Publication’s curriculum thoroughly and systematically teaches the solid foundation the next generation can build their lives upon. We begin by acquainting the smallest children with the most fundamental Bible stories so they can learn the power of God and his love for us as sinners. We then dive into the life of Christ in order to encourage growth in our relationship with him. The children move forward to learning about the basic doctrines of the Word, and then the doctrines of our Lutheran faith through the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed. Now that the broad strokes have been painted, we dive deeper into the faith with overviews of the Old Testament, the New Testament, a study of Christ throughout the Bible, the Book of Acts, and finally a further overview of Scripture.

With the foundation for life presented, children are well prepared for confirmation and can spend that time in intense study of what it means to be a Christian and a Lutheran and to understand what they are espousing as members of the congregation. They leave the children’s ministry fully equipped by the Word of God for a life of faith and good works.

We have worked hard at Ambassador Publications to ensure that our curriculum is not only biblically sound but also easily accessible to teachers across the AFLC. We do our best to keep costs low and quality high and frame our lessons so they can be applicable across a wide range of children for those congregations with multiple grades in a class at one time. Work is constantly being done to create resources that will further assist congregations in their task of training the next generation in the faith.

The importance of building upon the strong foundation of God’s Word cannot be overstated. It is our mission at Ambassador Publications to assist you in doing just that. We are here to help, so please reach out with your questions and concerns. Thank you for your support as we join together in this mission for Christ.

Event will honor Robert Lee

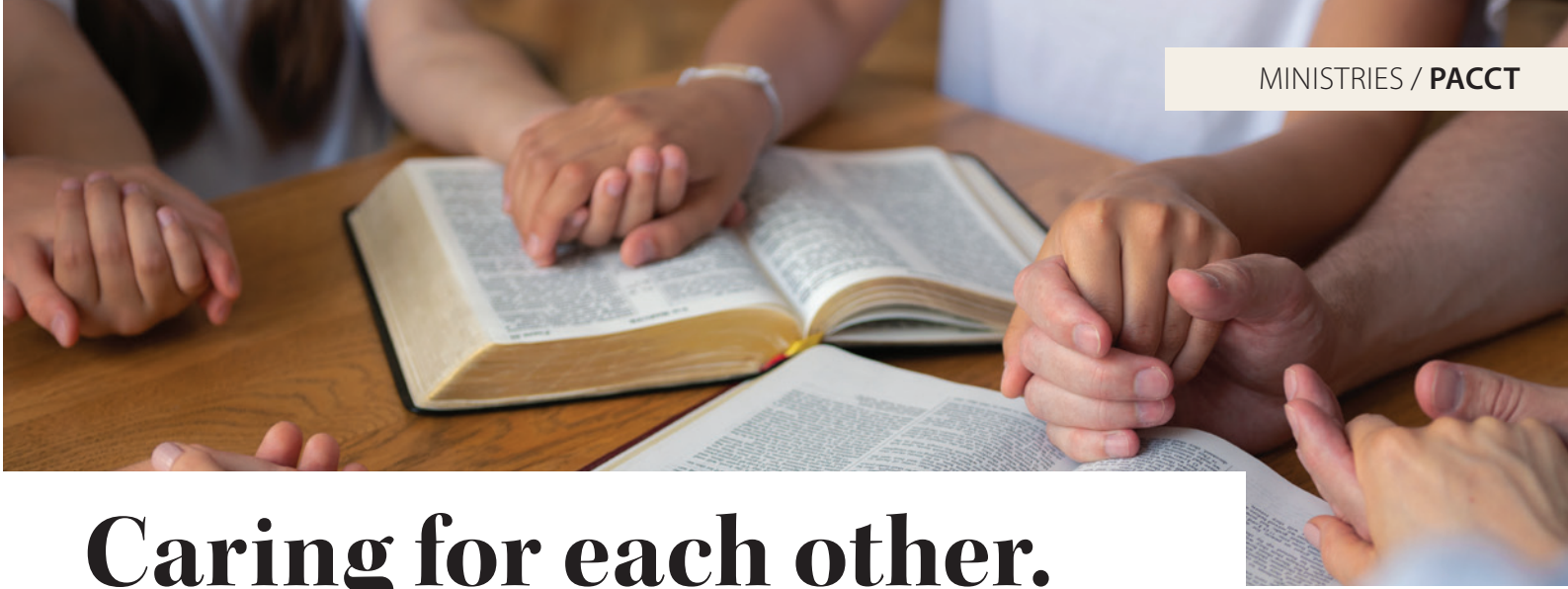
• Special Event:

Pastor Robert Lee will be honored at the 2024 Annual Conference for his work on the forthcoming book on the history of the AFLC, *From Freedom to Life*. AFLC Parish Education will host a reception on Wednesday, June 12, following the evening service. All are welcome.

• Interview:

An interview with Pastor Robert Lee will be held from 3:15 to 3:45 p.m. on Thursday, June 13, in the Student Life Center.

Lunn, a member of Word of Life, Upsala, Minn., serves on the Parish Education Board.



Caring for each other.

The Pastor and Congregational Care Team (PACCT) members include pastors and lay leaders and their wives who come alongside AFLC pastors and their wives and families, congregational and ministry leaders, and congregations—including you—to offer support and encouragement. What does that look like in practical terms? Congregations seeking a pastor have a resource called the Pastoral Call Process Toolkit that provides sample surveys, letters, questions, and suggestions to help the church as they conduct their search. Introductory material is available on the PACCT website. Follow-up conversations with a PACCT member can help the church define their needs.

PACCT members who have experienced deep loss help others process grief through GriefShare, a practical Christ-centered and video-based support group program that equips lay volunteers to encourage and comfort people going through bereavement. GriefShare materials point to Christ as the ultimate source of healing.

PACCT members come alongside pastors to support them through phone calls, emails, and cards. We pray with pastors and congregations. We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

Here are a few scenarios of our involvement. Keep in mind that PACCT doesn't step in to solve problems. We serve as a sounding board, facilitators of sorts, to help congregations help themselves. Before we do anything, we pray and ask our Heavenly Father for wisdom in how to proceed.

- A church whose pastor resigned was struggling to find another pastor, and requested PACCT's help. One of PACCT's couples was put in contact with the church, and after several phone conversations, this couple was invited to visit the church and present the Pastoral Call Process Toolkit. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, church leaders grew in understanding their congregation's dynamics, desires, and needs as they reviewed the materials and utilized some of the surveys. The congregation took some necessary and healthy steps forward. While they were without a pastor for some time, they grew and shepherded themselves in the interim. In reality, it was an example of lay leadership at its finest.

- Another church struggling with internal conflict also reached out to PACCT for help. Church members had drifted away, and the church council was struggling to address multiple issues that surfaced. Many conversations revealed some unhealthy patterns. Problems were defined, and potential solutions were considered by the congregation itself, using the Scriptures and under the Holy Spirit's guidance. Remembering that much conflict comes from spiritual warfare and attacks by Satan, PACCT encouraged a positive attitude as spelled out in Ephesians 4:2–5, "With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ..."

- A church experienced the loss of one of its spiritual leaders, and its members were having a tough time navigating their journey of grief. A PACCT member was contacted to come alongside them. Using the principles in the GriefShare program and much prayer support, this family is moving forward and growing closer to God on their grief journey.

What's *exciting* about being a part of PACCT? Congregations and people have needs, and we get to help meet them. We are available to meet with you. PACCT resources are available on our website. We look forward to greeting pastors and congregation members at the upcoming Annual Conference this month and invite you to stop at our resource table and introduce yourselves!

PACCT Mission & Members

Purpose statement

- While you serve Christ, our team is standing with you.

Members

Pastor Marlin & Joyce Harris
Tom & Linda Mathre
Roger & Lindsay Benson
Wayne & Jane Smith

Resources Webpage: aflc.org/pacct

Gospel-motivated service.

BY PASTOR MICAH HJERMSTAD

Many years ago, I heard a sermon on the prophet Isaiah's call in Isaiah 6. Dr. Joel Rolf was the preacher, and I don't know this for sure, but I think it was his first chapel sermon after becoming dean of our Bible College. It also happened to be my first year of seminary.

I don't remember the details of the sermon, but the Lord used that moment to instill in me a deep appreciation for that text, and so I refer to it often. I appreciate Isaiah's humility. When confronted by the holy God, Isaiah's reply is to confess his sins and exclaim, "Woe is me!"

I'm also very grateful for what happens next. In Isaiah's vision, one of the seraphim takes a burning coal from the altar of God, touches Isaiah's lips with it, and declares, "Behold ... your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." What a beautiful picture of God's mercy and grace!

Finally, in response to God's atoning love, Isaiah answers God's call to serve, "Here I am! Send me." It's a remarkable exchange, and what I love so much about Isaiah's response is that it's done in view of God's mercies. Isaiah wasn't guilt-tripped into serving. This was a gospel-motivated response, born out of gratitude and praise for what God had done for him.

As I look around the AFLC, the needs are great. So many congregations need a pastor. Others are hurting financially. There were so many open spots for nominations to national boards and committees in last month's *Ambassador*. It was a joy to meet Pastor Iran recently (pictured at left), the president of the AFLC in Brazil. He stressed their need for more pastors and missionaries. There are needs in places like Canada and Alaska, too.

It's tempting to be discouraged by all of that, to wring our hands with anxiety, lament every missed opportunity (perceived or real), and blame any number of cultural trends for our shortfalls. However, I think that's shortsighted, and it distracts from the gospel. In truth, God is at work in beautiful and powerful ways all over the place. We follow his call in our roles as neighbors, employees, spouses, parents, and children. And when it comes to specific ministry roles, there are so many people in the AFLC who are serving well, and I praise God for their willingness to answer God's call.

I don't mean to make light of those in our midst who are in real need. It is serious, and we need to pray that God will send workers into the harvest. I just don't want our call for workers to be reactive to any kind of desperation on our part. The call to ministry needs to be rooted and fueled by the gospel of the God-man who made atonement for our sins. Georg Sverdrup put it so well, we "have found the Lamb of God who bears the sins of the world, and there are many who need to find him!"

Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). I'm prone to focus on the lack of workers, but I praise God for the plentiful harvest. God's Word is mighty to save, and there is no shortage of opportunities to share that message. Isn't that exciting?

The holy God has atoned for your sins in Jesus Christ. Our families, neighborhoods, and souls around the world need to hear that message. Join with me in praying the prayer of Isaiah, "Here I am! Send me."



Pastor Connely Dyrud (from left), Pastor Micah Hjermstad, Pastor Iran and Janisley Goes.

Ministry Opportunities

If you are interested in hearing more about the various ministry opportunities in the AFLC, please call the President's Office at 763-545-5631 or send an email to: president@afc.org.

Hjermstad, a member of Grace Free Lutheran, Maple Grove, Minn., is the AFLC president.



• CELEBRATING 45 YEARS

Sticking to the mission.

BY KIRK RAUTIO

Purchased in 1979, the Association Retreat Center marks the 45th anniversary of the AFLC's decision to create a place to "come away and rest a while" (Mark 6:31), following the example that Jesus set for his disciples. As many people were coming to Jesus, making it hard for them to even sit and eat, Jesus instructed his disciples to come away to the desert *with* him to rest a while. Those who invested in the Association Retreat Center back in 1979 had this vision as well: an earthly place where people could come away and rest with Jesus. The goal was that ministry groups large and small—youth, families, churches, college students, couples, etc.—might have a place to dig into the Word of God and invest in their relationships with Jesus Christ. This place was also meant to have a deep Kingdom impact, where people could bring friends and loved ones who wanted to learn about Jesus.

Now as we reflect on our last 45 years, with more than 11,000 people each year who cross our entrance for a day, weekend, or week at a time, we are asking ourselves if we are still true to this mission. Are we steadfast in this vision? Have we answered the call? We believe the resounding answer is yes. People are coming away from the busyness of life to rest. Souls are coming to the Kingdom. And our staff is utilizing friendship evangelism to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Can we do more? That answer is and always will be yes, as well. What, then, should we do? I believe the answer is to "call on him" (Psalm 17:6). We know that we have a steadfast hope in Jesus. And we continue to remain steadfast in him, always abounding in the work that he has called us to do (I Corinthians 15:58). It is in that work, day by day, that we call on him to empower us to do his work because we know that he will answer us. He will listen closely to us and show us the faithful love of our Father. We cling to him, and he directs our steps as we remain in him.

We ask that you join us in this mission through prayer. Pray for those who come to us from near and far: Osceola, Minneapolis, Iowa, Indiana, Europe, Brazil, even Egypt, and so many more places. Pray that we will faithfully provide them a place to come, rest, and meet Jesus. Pray that we will not be a distraction from that mission. Pray that we will have our buildings ready, our food prepared, and that our structures would be supportive while they are here. Pray that we will minister well to our workers as they serve, and that they will be encouraged to come away and rest at Jesus' feet, too. Pray for the next 50 years! Pray that we will be preparing for those who need to come away and rest. Pray that we will listen to the spirit as he moves and directs. Pray for wisdom as we plan. Pray for donors as they give.

We pray for you, too. We pray for your churches, homes, and groups as they plan to come away to meet Jesus. It is vitally important, wherever you are, to find time to rest. It does not have to be at the ARC, however, we would love to see you. But please take time to see Jesus, to sit at his feet, to "come away and rest."

ARC History

- **1954–1979:** Radar base for the United States Air Force.
 - **1979:** Purchased by the AFLC for \$200,000. Bob Dietche was hired as the first director.
 - **August 1980:** First AFLC Family Camp held at facilities.
 - **2004:** Celebration of the ARC's 25th anniversary.
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- **Website:** aflc.org/arc-camp

Rautio is the executive director of the Association Retreat Center, located near Osceola, Wis.

FLBCS graduates class of 2024

The Free Lutheran Bible College and Seminary, Plymouth, Minn., held a commencement service on April 27. After a week of finals and end-of-year packing, 40 students received Diplomas in Biblical Studies from the Bible College and one seminarian, Scott Olson, received a Master of Divinity. Olson had served his internship year at Our Saviour's and Reiner Lutheran, Thief River Falls, Minn.

Greeting faculty, staff, family, and guests was Asher Cheek, the FLBC student body president.

Pastor Steve Snipstead, a member of the Board of Trustees, brought the commencement address from Zechariah 13:9, the theme verse for the 2023–24 academic year.

Bringing special music during the service were both the Bible College Proclaim Choir, which sang “My Hope” and the Concert Choir, which sang, “Grace Alone.”

Following the ceremony in the Student Life Center, guests were welcomed to a reception and receiving line, where they could greet graduates.



ABOVE: Bible College graduates join in singing a hymn during the ceremony.
NEAR RIGHT: Ellen Dalager receives her diploma from Dr. James Molstre, dean of the seminary.
FAR RIGHT: Kailee Clapp, Breanna Heinrichs, and Asher Cheek pose with their diplomas.
CENTER: Pastor Steve Snipstead brings the commencement address.





TOP LEFT: Graduates form a receiving line. TOP RIGHT: Seminary graduate Scott Olson reads the Scripture passage from Zechariah 13:9. ABOVE: Graduate Kiana Olson is greeted by Soren Grotberg. NEAR LEFT: Three students gather to pray together on the quad following the commencement. FAR LEFT: Family and friends celebrate the graduates. CENTER: Members of the Proclaim Choir sing during the service.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Pastor Don Gillespie, who serves Zion Lutheran, Ashkum, Ill., has announced his plans to retire on Aug. 1.

Pastor Kent Sperry has resigned from Prince of Peace Lutheran, Beulah, N.D.

Alisha Kneeland has been hired as the executive assistant to the AFLC president.

The AFLC President's Office was recently informed of two deaths from 2023.

Rosalie Ness

Rosalie Ann Ness, 84, of Oregon, Wis., died June 16, 2023. Born June 23, 1938, in Minnesota, she was the daughter of Alton and Joey Mork. She married Allan Ness Aug. 8, 1959, in Eau Claire, Wis. She was a lifeguard, social worker, teacher, and librarian. They served congregations in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota before joining the AFLC in the 1990s. They served Bethany Lutheran in Brodhead, Wis., then retired in 1999. Surviving are her husband, Pastor Allan Ness; three children, Elizabeth (Tom) Stenslien, Timothy (Regina) Ness, and Lisa (Jeffrey) Weber; one sister, JoAnne Rawlings; and five grandchildren. A service was held Sept. 23 at St. John's Lutheran Church, Oregon, Wis..

Dana Chandler

Dana Sue Chandler, 86, of Amarillo, Texas, died March 17, 2023. She was born Sept. 21, 1936, in Stanton, Texas, and married John Chandler March 14, 1955, in El Paso. They served congregations in New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. They joined the AFLC fellowship roster in 1988 and clergy roster in 2001, and served King of Kings Lutheran, Lewisville, Texas. Surviving are her husband; one son, Timothy (Enid) Chandler; one daughter, Mary (David) Forsberg; nine grandchildren; and twelve great-grandchildren. A service was held on March 24, 2023, at Brooks Chapel in Canyon, Texas.

APRIL MEMORIALS

Bible College

Ruth Claus, Marion Nibbe, Irene Peck

FLAPS

Greg Schmitke

Home Missions

Pastor Paul Nash

Seminary

Randy Erickson
Orville Aune

World Missions

Pastor Jerome Elness

WMF

Irene Peck



FLBC hosts spring campus days

High school junior and senior students were welcomed to the Free Lutheran Bible College April 12–14 for the spring Campus Days event, which gives prospective students a chance to experience life on campus. Students were welcomed on Friday with an evening vespers service. On Saturday, they participated in sample classes, met potential future classmates, and were offered opportunities to engage in recreational opportunities like recreational tournaments and roller skating. On Sunday, students were welcomed at area AFLC congregations.



AFLC BENEVOLENCES January 1-April 30, 2024

FUND	REC'D IN APRIL	TOTAL REC'D TO DATE	% OF SUBSIDY	PRIOR YEAR-TO-DATE
General Fund	\$34,640	\$164,850	36	\$139,881
Evangelism	10,846	40,620	30	47,525
Youth Ministries	26,094	64,535	42	57,126
Parish Education	11,517	78,110	42	41,054
Seminary	26,034	107,511	38	95,564
Bible College	32,861	151,124	32	132,594
Home Missions	39,827	126,127	30	104,714
World Missions	31,444	133,237	27	138,656
Personal Support	81,987	294,542	38	259,835
TOTALS	\$295,250	\$1,160,656	34	\$1,016,949

For additional financial information for each department, go to www.aflc.org/giving



The weaker brother.

BY DR. PHILL HOOPER

A common problem that impacts our churches today is what to do with matters of conscience when the Bible doesn't specifically forbid something but doesn't specifically command it. From fundraising on church grounds (is a rummage sale too much like "money changing in the temple"?) to whether it's okay to dance in a modest way, we've all seen enough difference of opinion in the church to know how disagreements like these often go.

Stereotypically, one side comes out completely against something. Church grounds should be kept sacred and non-commercial, period. Dancing involves bodily movements, which may lead to sensual thoughts. When the conviction is strongly against some behavior, spiritual pride can easily show up: *I know* this is wrong, and I am willing to abstain from it. The church at large often sees such people as more spiritual, "stronger" believers because they're willing to give something up for the sake of conscience.

Then there is the other, more measured view: the church is not the same thing as the temple; using it to raise funds is not forbidden in the Bible. How can dancing, so long as its movements are chaste, be bad when King David danced? Yet spiritual pride might also show up here: *I know* where God's lines are, and I should be free to act within the boundaries of God's Word. The church at large isn't usually as impressed with this kind of view; however, one isn't actually giving something up for the sake of conscience.

Make no mistake: both positions on

these issues can (and are) held by Christians of good faith who love Jesus and love his Word. In terms of our congregational communities, however, what do we do when such divisive questions arise? When both sides "know" they are right?

First Corinthians 8 provides needed guidance for situations like these. The divisive question that Paul was addressing there was whether it was appropriate for Christians to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. This was an everyday concern, since leftovers from sacrifices ended up in the meat markets. Today there is no danger that tonight's meat loaf was Aphrodite's leftovers, so Paul's answer to the question may appear to be of limited use to us. How he handles the divisive situation, however, informs our present-day divisions.

"Knowledge puffs up," he says, "but love builds up" (8:1). Humility and love set the tone.

Contrary to our common perception, Paul describes those whose consciences are against something—in this case, eating meat sacrificed to idols—as being "weaker," not stronger (8:7). Their consciences are sensitized because of their own personal baggage, instead of any special, super-spiritual insight. This makes sense: if I cannot do everything that the Word permits me, it is likely my own personal problem. Conscience tells me not to do something, and I shouldn't go against conscience—but God hasn't spoken against it. I shouldn't be admired. I need extra patience and accommodation from my fellow believers.

Paul describes those whose consciences permit something—again, eating meat sacrificed to idols—as "stronger" in

conscience. They are free to do everything that the Word permits them to. At the same time, this freedom needs to be humbly limited, in order to prevent causing problems for those whose consciences are "weaker" (8:9).

One might expect Paul to tell the "stronger" Christians to avoid offending their "weaker" brothers or sisters. Today, we certainly worry about causing someone outrage by doing something they are against. In contrast, Paul is concerned that a person whose conscience doesn't permit them to do something might see a fellow believer doing that thing and be tempted by peer pressure to go ahead and do it, too (8:10). It is wrong and harmful to do something if we can't do it in good conscience. Therefore, those, who in good conscience, are free to do something need to be willing to limit when and how they use that freedom to help provide the accommodation that other believers need. If my conscience is free to hold a fundraiser at church, I shouldn't push for it if it might inadvertently pressure someone to join in against their conscience. In love for my fellow believers, I choose to limit what I do to what will be helpful for others as well.

So then, even if the Bible doesn't clearly say whether we can do something or not, it speaks volumes about how we are to be *toward one another*. Faced with divisive issues, let's do our best to walk together, acting, first and foremost, in Jesus' love.

Hooper serves St. John's Free Lutheran, Duluth, Minn.

SOMETHING TO SHARE

Praying with Jesus.

BY KIRSTIE SKOGERBOE

Have you ever tried to imagine Jesus sitting with you? I did once last summer. It had been a rough week, and too many thoughts and worries were chafing my mind. After praying one evening, I remembered an exercise I had come across that suggested imagining Jesus in detail. So, I looked across the table, and began. I started with his hands—his fingers and the lines on the skin. But I hadn't made it far past that when things started happening in the image that I wasn't dictating. The hand moved across the table, took mine, and covered it with his other hand. Then I looked at his face and saw that his eyes were closed. Inexplicably, I knew this meant he was praying for me, and that even after this moment, he would still be praying.

The experience moved me because it reminded me of something Scripture affirms: Christ prays for us. Romans 8:34 tells us explicitly that Jesus is “at the right hand of God ... interceding for us.” What endless, bottomless hope streams from those words.

Jesus' prayer for us assures me of forgiveness and salvation. The Apostle John writes about Christ's intercession in a specific way when he says, “My little children ... if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (I John 2:1). This means that Jesus is constantly applying his saving work on the cross to us through his prayers to the Father. He is standing before his Father on our behalf, advocating for our forgiveness. And the Father loves the Son (John 5:20); he will do what he asks. We are forgiven each day because Jesus prays for us, just like he did for his

persecutors from the cross.

Jesus' prayer for us also reminds me that when we pray, we pray *with* Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his book on the Psalms, “If [Jesus] takes us with him in his prayer ... if he lets us accompany him on his way to God and teaches us to pray, then we are free from the agony of prayerlessness. He wants to pray with us and to have us pray with him, so that we may be confident and glad that God hears us.” Discouragement overpowers me when I believe that prayer is my work and that it's up to me to figure out how to do it. Jesus' prayer for us is an invitation for us to let him teach us by joining him in a work he is already doing on our behalf. In practice, this means that the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms are never cop-out prayers, but the bedrock of our communication to God.

Jesus' prayer for us often gives me the most hope when prayer is difficult. There are innumerable reasons why it can be hard to pray, but whenever this happens, we can hear Jesus say, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32). When you're struggling to pray, know that Jesus will never stop praying for you.

“Consequently,” the Word promises, “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Skogerboe, the digital communications coordinator for the AFLC, lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.