

NALC News

North American Lutheran Church

April 2017

Popularity is nothing — Faithfulness to Christ is everything

A Holy Week message from NALC Bishop John Bradosky

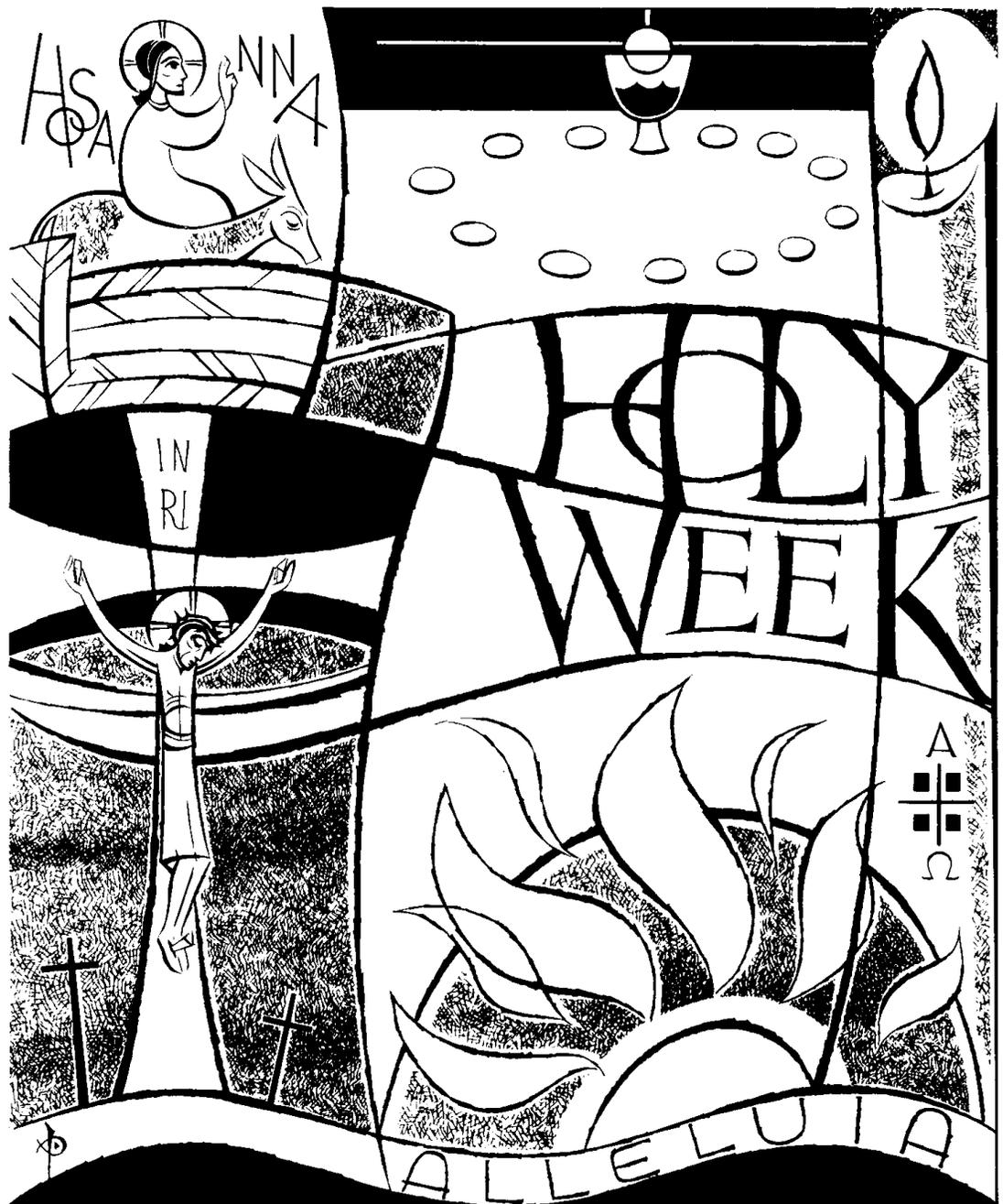
Dear Disciples of Jesus,

I have most often celebrated Palm Sunday as Passion Sunday with the reading of the Passion of Christ narrative in the Gospels. Yet Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a wonderful transition into Holy Week that gives us a foretaste of Easter. It reminds us that the destination of Christ's Passion is the wonder and triumph of the Resurrection — Easter. (Read Matthew 21:1-11)

The crowd is preoccupied with their popular hopes and dreams of the Messiah, while Jesus is focused on faithfulness. They want freedom from Rome. Jesus is offering freedom from sin, death, and evil. They care about the short-term future. Jesus cares about their eternal future.

The power of popularity is subtle and attractive, and it is one of the greatest

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causes of sin in our culture. Being politically correct has to do with being popular — doing what others believe is acceptable, accepting the popular values as the norm. There are plenty of examples in our culture of valuing popularity over principle. Some are even willing to compromise their faith for the sake of popularity.

What happens to the Church when leaders are more concerned with popularity than the Scriptures or our Confessional theology? What happens when Christians vote on what they believe about Jesus and who He is? Chaos and hopelessness are often the deep-seated results.

Faith is our anchor in the midst of life's storms. Scripture reminds us that we are like leaves blown about by the wind when we abandon that faith. Popular opinion changes, trends change, styles come and go, and when they become our compass, our only map, we are lost!

Into this world, our world, Jesus comes contending with the popularity of the crowds. Yet He does so without compromising His identity, His mission, His ministry, and His values. He is led by the Word of God, the will of God, and the power of God. He will not compromise this foundation no matter how loud the applause or the collective political will of those who support Him.

Throughout our Lenten journey the lectionary Gospel texts have focused on the nature and identity of Jesus.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness followed His Baptism, in which the Holy Spirit descended on Him and the Father declared that Jesus is His Son whom He loves and in whom He is pleased. Jesus clearly shows that all the forces of Satan are no match for Jesus or the power of His Word.

We heard the story of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night trying to learn if Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and the one who gives new life, so that he might believe in Him.

The following week we heard about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. After he told her about her life, she heard Jesus'

proclamation that He is the Messiah. She then invited others in her city to hear Jesus, and they came to believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Our next Gospel reading was Jesus' encounter with the man born blind. The man's interaction with Jesus started with him calling Jesus a man, and continued with him confessing Jesus as a prophet, then as Lord, the Son of Man, the Messiah. Meanwhile the entire religious establishment questioned, doubted, and tried to undermine Jesus' identity.

Then we listened to the story of Lazarus. Jesus opened the tomb and called his friend Lazarus from death to life. Jesus boldly proclaimed that He is the resurrection and the life. People believed in Him and the religious leaders saw their own popularity and power fading. They decided to save themselves by killing Jesus.

The question of Jesus' identity continued through His passion. The Sanhedrin debated His identity. Pilate and Herod wanted to know who He was. Those who heard Jesus' words from the cross, even the soldiers who watched Him die, asked similar questions. Even following His resurrection, Jesus' own followers had trouble recognizing Him — Mary, at the tomb, the disciples behind closed doors, those on the road to Emmaus, the fishermen on the shore of Galilee.

Instead of the progressive view of the military general mounted on a stallion, Jesus focused the people's attention on the prophetic words of the past and Zechariah's announcement of the Messiah's coming. Jesus decided it was time for this prophecy to be fulfilled, time for this city's most anticipated parade. The people lined the streets, cheering wildly and lifting their voices in song: "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!"

The procession has a powerful impact on the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Scripture says they were "stirred" (the Greek word for an earthquake or an apocalyptic upheaval). The city was in a commotion. They were asking who this was, not because they had never seen or heard of Jesus, but because they wanted to know His true identity.

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This upheaval is the precursor to Easter. When the stone is rolled away, the world's most significant event occurs — the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Yet their loud hosannas couldn't hide the fact that Jesus was not quite the Messiah they expected. In Jesus we see not only the heart of God and the presence of God, we see God in person.

The problem comes when we assert our vision and expectations over God's, when we expect God to conform His will to ours! We expect that our popular vote will change God's will. If you want to know what happens when we live in this state of rebellion all you have to do is read on. It was only a few days later that the reality of unmet expectations for this Messiah turned their "Hosannas" into the new, popular response of "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!"

Jesus' entrance is a clear symbol of the fact that Jesus is King of the Kingdom of God. His resurrection is the evidence of His absolute rule of the Kingdom of Heaven. The rule of Jesus is above all other rulers, powers and authorities. Greater than His rule over every nation, institution or global power is His rule over the hearts and lives of individual people. This is the fundamental building block of His Kingdom!

We can see this validated by the way Jesus is most often found in the midst of people, meeting the deepest needs of their souls — in the midst of selfishness, guilt, illness, sin, loneliness, brokenness and despair. The life-giving power of this King who is Lord and Savior is in His love, forgiveness, redemption and salvation — power that transforms the hearts and lives of those who follow Him.

In the midst of the clamor of Palm Sunday we can also miss the truth that Jesus does not stay in Jerusalem to set up His command center. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus goes to the suburb of Bethany and spends time with his closest friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In the midst of His triumph, all Jesus wanted was to rest in the quiet, loving circle of friendship. In a similar way following His resurrection, Jesus went to find His disciples huddled in fear behind closed doors.

This is so instructive. When I teach about discipleship I remind people that, in the beginning, the Church was an intimate circle of Jesus' friends. In Greece, it became a philosophy. In Rome, it became an institution. In Europe, it became a culture. In North America, it became a not-for-profit corporation! (I don't think that was the progress Jesus was hoping for in fulfilling the Great Commission.)

Some Christians like to gather for the excitement and celebration of Easter, but pay little attention to Jesus, discipleship, obedience and life-long commitment to Him. These are especially difficult in a culture that insists that everything should be easy. In fact, to stay faithful to Christ in a culture that is resistant to the Gospel, and even hostile to Christian faith, will take more than sacrificing popularity; it may cost you everything — even your life. Jesus was honest with His disciples about this. If you want to follow Him, you must be willing to take up your cross! "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (*Matthew 16:24-25*). "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (*John 12:25*).

In the movie, "A League of their Own," there is a scene in which Geena Davis fights with her sister. And she decides to quit the women's baseball league. As she is packing her things, the manager comes to her and says, "Why are you leaving?" But she doesn't answer. More defiantly the manager asks again, "I said, why are you leaving?" "Because I don't like the game anymore. It just got too hard." And the manager says, "It's supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great!"

That's also true of Christianity. The hard is what makes it great, because it forces you to grapple with real issues — life-and-death issues, meaning-and-purpose-of-life issues. It has little to do with whether or not the pastor makes us feel good on Sunday. When we truly know who Jesus is, we are willing to pursue life in Him even when it is hard and challenging.

Jesus wants us to know for certain who He is. Throughout the Bible Jesus is revealing His true identity. It is not a matter of our personal opinion.

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We do not believe that everyone should have their own personal opinions about Jesus, but that all who believe in Him should turn to the only source of authority about His nature and identity — the Bible. Our vote about His identity is meaningless. Jesus wants us to know that He is God in person, the Savior, the only source of redemption and salvation. He is the King of the Kingdom of Heaven He came to proclaim.

We are not saved by theological concepts, but by the person Jesus Christ. It is not our ideas of faith or grace that save, but only faith in the person Jesus Christ. Through the grace of Jesus Christ we receive forgiveness and eternal life.

The nature and identity of Jesus Christ are not only central to our faith but just as essential to our witness. If we are unsure of who Jesus is, how could we possibly tell others about Him? This is the starting place for evangelism and mission, as well.

Some of my most helpful learning regarding discipleship and leadership came as a result of my experience for 34 years as a high school and collegiate sports official. Up until the time I accepted this call to serve as Bishop, I had continued to officiate basketball games. Whenever I officiated a varsity game there was always an observer in the stadium watching our work. After my very first basketball game, the observer came into the locker room and said, “Bradosky, lose the rabbit ears or get out of officiating. (“Rabbit ears” means you are listening to what other people are saying about you.) You are not there to please the fans. No matter what call you make, half the people are going to love you and half the people are going to hate you. And the next call you make, the people that love you will hate you and the people that hate you will love you. If you need to have their affirmation to do your job, then get out of officiating now.” He added, “There is only one opinion in the stands that really matters.” I was naive enough in those days to ask, “Who is that?” He said, “Me, you fool! I understand why you are here and what you are supposed to do. It’s only my evaluation that makes a difference.”

Sports officials spend months getting ready for their season, studying the rules, reviewing game

situations, meeting together, challenging one another and holding each other accountable. If preparation is that important for sports officials, how much more important is it for Christians?

Lent is a time of preparation, a time to engage the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, worship, studying the Word, engaging in self-denial and self-sacrifice. Unfortunately, there are some who believe that we do these things just to make our celebration of Easter even more profound. The greater truth is that we engage in these things, not to enhance our Easter celebration, but for the same reason the official prepares — to stand up against the temptation to be popular and influenced by the crowd, and instead be bold in proclaiming what is right and true, just and faithful.

As followers of Jesus we must remember that we are not in this life to please the crowd. In fact, you can be sure people will disagree with you and sometimes despise you. Followers of Jesus are not to be concerned about the affirmation or the condemnation of others, but to be concerned about pleasing the One who knows why He sent you and what He has called you to do.

The One who is evaluating us knows us better than we know ourselves, loves us more than we could ever love ourselves, and has nothing but our best interests in His heart and mind. He judges us only to perfect and equip us, not to destroy us. He is with us and dwells in us. Therefore, we have nothing to fear. His perfect love for us casts out all fear. We can stand strong and remain firm in our witness regardless of the crowd, or popularity or the norms of our culture. Popularity is nothing. Faithfulness to Christ is everything.

May the journey of Lent, this Holy Week and Easter strengthen your resolve to resist popularity and political correctness in favor of faithfulness to Christ and a renewed commitment to boldly profess Him, even in the midst of a culture that is increasingly resistant and hostile to the Gospel!

May the Lord bless the remainder of this Lenten season, your remembrance of the most Holy week of the year and the day that is the central focus of our life in Christ, His glorious resurrection.

It is my joy to share it all with you.

Nominations open for Executive Council and Court of Adjudication

Nominations are now being received for positions to be elected at the 2017 NALC Convocation Aug. 9-11 in Nashville, Tenn.

The Convocation will elect two members of the NALC Executive Council (one lay person and one pastor) and two members of the Court of Adjudication, all to four-year terms.

Nominations are also welcome for the 2018 Nominating Committee. Names received will be forwarded to the NALC Executive Council, which will propose a slate of Nominating Committee members to the Convocation for confirmation.

Brief descriptions of the duties of each position are available on the NALC website.

Congregations and individuals are welcome to nominate individuals for any of the open positions. Please submit nominations by May 1. This will enable the committee to meet the constitutional deadline to make biographical information available to NALC members.

To submit a nomination, complete the Nomination Form available on the NALC website (under the Convocation tab) and return it to the Nominating Committee. Nominees will be asked to complete the Nominee Biographical Form (also available online) and to provide a photo for publication with the biographical information.

Questions may be addressed to the Nominating Committee at nominations@thenalc.org.

Canadian Rockies Theological Conference *Auschwitz and Addis: The Church and Persecution*

“Auschwitz and Addis: The Church and Persecution” is the theme of the 2017 Canadian Rockies Theological Conference May 9-12 in Canmore, Alberta.

Featured speakers are the Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, NALC Assistant to the Bishop for Missions, and the Rev. Dr. Paul Hinlicky, Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies at Roanoke College in Salem, Va.

The conference will consider how the Christian church has in the past become complicit in movements that have led to the persecution of innocent people by those who claim allegiance to Jesus Christ. Dr. Hinlicky will speak about what Christians can learn from the rise of Nazism in Germany. Dr. Buba will address the situation in Ethiopia under the Communist Derg.

The conference is held at the Coast Canmore Hotel in Canmore, Alberta — just outside of the beautiful Banff National Park.



Gemechis Buba



Paul Hinlicky

More information on the conference is available on the Canadian Rockies Theological Conference Facebook page or on the NALC website. You may also contact the conference organizers, Pastor Karl Johnsen at karl@calvarylutheran.ca or Pastor Phillip Gagnon at pphil1961@icloud.com.

‘Raised for our justification’

By Dr. David S. Yeago

North American Lutheran Seminary

Sometimes we find it easier to talk about the cross and our salvation than we do the Resurrection.

Christ “died for our sins” (*1 Corinthians 15:3*); He was “delivered up for our trespasses” (*Romans 4:25*) — we’re familiar with that sort of language, even if we don’t fully understand it.

But when St. Paul goes on to say that Jesus was “raised for our justification” (*Romans 4:25*), it doesn’t sound so obvious.

We know that we are justified freely by faith because Christ “paid the price” for our sins on the cross. And it was certainly fitting that the Father raised Him from the dead. But what does resurrection have to do with justification?

It helps to think that when Christ “bore our sins,” it was less like making a payment and more like engaging the enemy.

Sin has made the human race liable to all sorts of evils — the wrath of God, the accusation of His law, the tyranny of the devil, and death. Amazingly, the Son of God became human and took the part of sinful humanity. Identifying with every sinner, He took on Himself all that torments us, exposed Himself to all those evils. Enduring, He overcame them by His human faithfulness and His divine life.

The Resurrection is the personal victory of Jesus Christ over sin, death, the accusation of the Law, and the abuse of the devil. He has all that behind Him, and only boundless joy and glory before Him.

But since He did not come and die for Himself, but “for us and for our salvation” (*Nicene Creed*), He shares His victory with us. “Because I live,” He says, “you also will live” (*John 14:19*).

He attaches us to Himself through Word and Sacrament, so that by faith we live with Him, beyond the reach of all those enemies. “Therefore,



if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (*2 Corinthians 5:17*).

This means that Christ didn’t only save us by something He did in the *past*. He saves us by His living and acting in the *present*. He died and rose again so that He might be our Lord (*Large Catechism*), our Deliverer. He comes to us in the power of His Easter victory and breaks the rule of sin and guilt and shame and fear — and He doesn’t mind doing so again and again, as long as this life endures.

This is why resurrection and justification go together. *Christ in His resurrection victory is our righteousness*. Righteousness is what we can rely on when we come before God, and what else could that be besides the living, triumphant Christ who died for us?

Dr. David S. Yeago is Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics for the North American Lutheran Seminary.

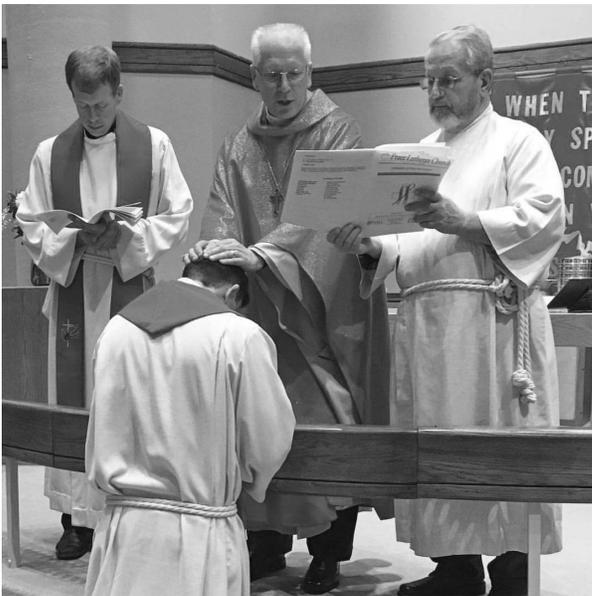


*Miguel Santos
Photographer*

Pastor Juan Portillo was ordained March 11 at San Miguel Lutheran Church in Fort Worth, Texas, where he is called to serve as pastor.



Pastor Christopher Metze was ordained April 2 at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Columbia, S.C. His father, Pastor Tony Metze, was the preacher for the service. Pastor Chris is called to serve as pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran in Monroe, N.C. His twin brother, Pastor Mark Metze, was ordained in 2016 and serves Annapolis Evangelical Lutheran Church in Annapolis, Md.

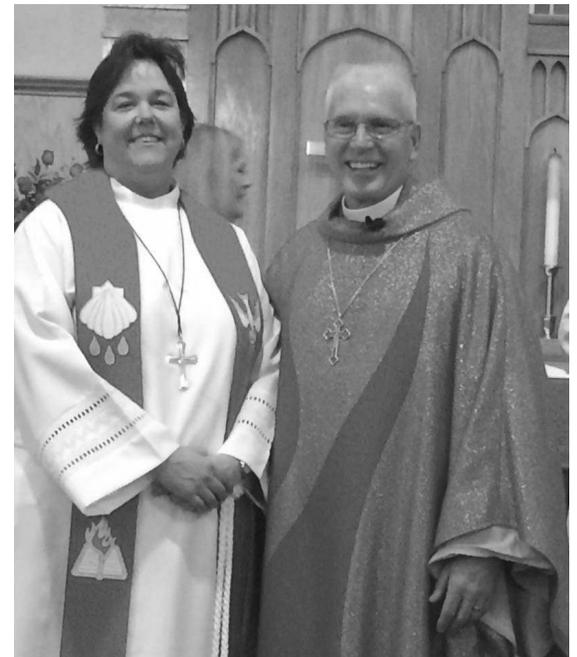


Pastor Orrey McFarland was ordained Feb. 4 at Peace Lutheran Church in Edmond, Okla. He is called to serve as pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Thornville, Ohio.

Celebrating Ordinations



Pastor David Abuya was ordained March 5 at St. Peter Lutheran Church in Benson, Ill., where he is called to serve as pastor.



Pastor Dawn Rister was ordained Feb. 19. She is called to serve as pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in Salisbury, N.C.

Hope in Haiti

By Pastor Brad Hales

Economically, many people are poor. Infrastructure is very little. Hunger is rampant. But even in the midst of these challenges there is light and hope in the country of Haiti.

During the last week of February and the first week of March, several members of Living Water Lutheran Church in Centerville, Ohio; Grace Lutheran Church in Jackson Center, Ohio; and Salem Lutheran Church in West Alexandria, Ohio; along with Bishop John Bradosky and his wife, Kristi, traveled to Haiti to minister with SMI Haiti, a recognized ministry of the North American Lutheran Church.

The group traveled to Guitton, Haiti, where SMI Haiti's compound is located. Guitton is on the Haitian coast on the Caribbean Sea.

Throughout the week these missionaries visited rural villages, handed out rice, prayed and laid hands on the sick, visited orphanages, and cared for and interacted with young children.



Bishop Bradosky was the keynote speaker at a Pastors Conference in Cepres, Haiti, at Pastor Jean Marie's church. The Bishop taught discipleship to over 100 local pastors. Many of these ministers came from long distances to learn and ask questions.

Pastor Jean Marie's church also sponsored a three-night, open-air revival. I had the privilege to preach to roughly 400 to 500 people each night. The first evening I preached on the topic "God is Love." The second evening's topic was "Growing in God." And the third evening's preaching centered on "Living in God."

There were several significant events throughout this mission trip. I would like to highlight a few.

One day, several of the group went to the rural village of Kamitan to help the townspeople clear a field of plantains (looks like a banana, but tastes



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like a potato.) SMI Haiti and its volunteers are working with the community to build a medical center and a church on the land.

One evening, we were able to walk to the very small village of Nanwoch and visit with a dynamic, young clergyman, Pastor Alexander. He was hosting a Kid's Camp and had over 250 children stay overnight to sing, dance, and learn about Jesus.

Then, one afternoon, we experienced an event which most of us had never witnessed. Pastor Alexander and Bishop Bradosky were given the honor of baptizing five adults in the ocean. During the baptisms, members of Pastor Alexander's church were singing in Creole (a Haitian/French dialect) the words, "We die with Christ and we live with Christ."

This was a memorable, unforgettable trip. I can't stop thinking about it and sharing it with my own congregation! I had preconceived ideas about what to expect, but they were quickly dashed once on the ground.

The Haitian people were wonderful! In the midst of their struggles and economic poverty, many know the true wealth, the true riches, and the true inheritance — a relationship with Jesus Christ of Nazareth. To see the Church of Christ growing and flourishing in Haiti is encouraging and breathtaking.



I was equally impressed with the ministry of SMI Haiti. They have been working in Haiti for over 20 years. Their focus on supporting pastors, building churches, funding orphanages, educating children, and feeding people is awe inspiring. If your congregation is thinking about going on an international mission trip or looking at supporting a mission, please consider supporting SMI Haiti. Their website is www.smihaiti.org.

Along with building relationships with the Haitian people and members of our group from Ohio, Louisiana, Illinois and Indiana, this trip was definitely a life-changing experience.

Indeed, there is hope in Haiti.



NALC signs partnership with Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus

By Pastor Gemechis Buba
Assistant to Bishop for Missions

Bishop John Bradosky, Pastor David Wendel, and I have been blessed to meet with the leadership of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), as our relationship continues to grow together in the Kingdom of God. The gift of gathering together face to face to discuss both the joy and ongoing challenges in mission and discipleship has produced fruitful conversations and celebration.



Representatives of the EECMY and NALC pose for a group photo.

It is our joy to announce that the NALC and the EECMY finalized a new, higher and deeper form of agreement in March. The partnership agreement states:

As independent organizations, we have decided to become interdependent. In so doing, we are convinced that we will get mutual benefits from the cooperation and that the result of our joint venture is better than that which any of one of us could have done on our own. We intend to be clear and appreciate what each one of us is offering and benefitting from the cooperation.

We affirm that our partnership is a practical and mutual commitment, with the intention and principle of long-term cooperation. Therefore, we intend to cooperate with each other on the basis of equality, integrity, mutual trust, transparency, respect, accountability, Christian values and involvement.

We take joy in the fact that the EECMY has shown tremendous growth, and the NALC is now strengthening and growing in faith and numbers. We, therefore, realize that both churches need

continued assistance from each other to be able to cope with their growth and challenges each faces.

Being aware that the mission of God takes place in all the continents and that all the parts of the worldwide Body of Christ do need each other, we believe that the EECMY and the NALC can contribute to the ministries of the other.

After much research, work and conversation, our journey has been finalized. Practically speaking, this partnership agreement means we can exchange mission personnel, receive work permits through the EECMY, exchange clergy and mission resources, and provide for strong accountability when we exchange gifts. As this partnership agreement has been rendered, the NALC has already begun preparing to send missionary families to the EECMY to begin work with them.

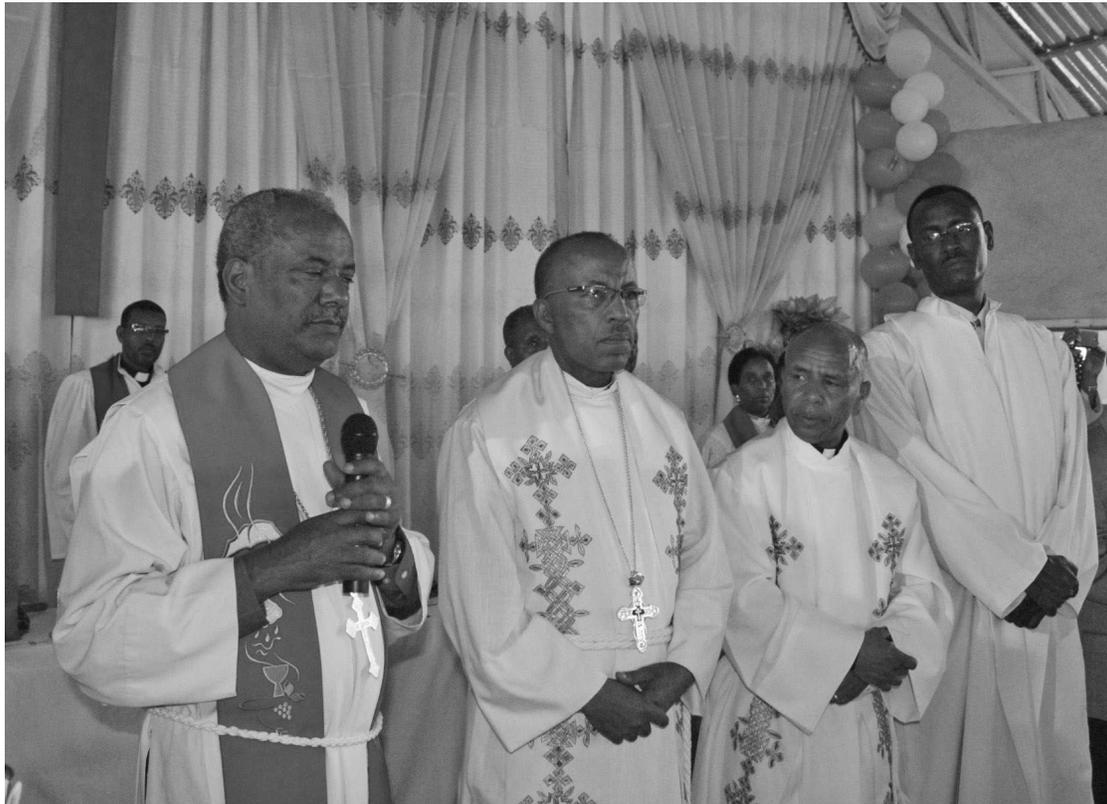
It is a great joy! Bishop John Bradosky and President Yonas Yigezu look forward to the future and ongoing relationship. We are trusting that, as our relationship grows, the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be advanced by the work of the Spirit.

Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus installs new leaders

*By Tsion Alemayehu
EECMY Communications*

Church leaders and Synod Presidents from the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus gathered on March 6 at Hossana Gofer Meda Mekane Yesus Congregation to install newly-elected church leaders and members of the Judiciary Commission.

The EECMY 20th General Assembly Jan. 22-28 elected the Rev. Yonas Yigezu as President of the church for a four-year term. The assembly also elected the Rev. Dr. Kiros Lakew and Mr. Bacha Gina as Vice President and Treasurer, respectively.



The Rev. Dr. Wakseyoum Idosa, outgoing President of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, (left) speaks at the installation service for the Rev. Yonas Yigezu, newly-elected President of the EECMY (second from left).

The EECMY is the largest Lutheran Church body in the world, with about 8 million members. The EECMY is in Full Communion with the NALC.

The Judiciary Commission was established at the 2013 General Assembly. The main task of the commission is to resolve internal conflicts within the church and to advise the church on legal issues. Nine members of the Judiciary Commission were installed at the March 6 ceremony.

The Rev. Dr. Wakseyoum Idosa, outgoing President of the EECMY, joined with other pastors in praying for these newly-elected leaders, asking God to help them to do their work according to His will and for the benefit of the people.

Dr. Nigussu Legesse, African Secretary for the World Council of Churches, brought a

congratulatory message on behalf of the the Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tvei, General Secretary of the WCC. Representatives from Wycliffe International and the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church also congratulated the new President of the EECMY, and said they are looking forward to working with him.

Tarekegn Ose, Hossana City mayor, also congratulated the church for this democratic transition of power, which provides a good example for others.

The South Central Synod, West Gibe Synod, Ambericho Bilate Synod, Hossana Gofer Meda Mekane Yesus Congregation and Rehobot Congregation gave several gifts to the outgoing President and newly-elected leaders.

The Preaching of Christ

But how are people to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. — Romans 10:14-17

In my first article of the new year, I extended the following invitation:

Now that we've spent 2016 focusing on topics and issues of pastoral ministry and leadership as I see them in the NALC, I would like to invite you — pastors and members of the NALC — to send me your questions regarding pastors, pastoral leadership, congregational life and leadership — and when possible and appropriate, I will address my articles in 2017 to your suggestions! E-mail your questions and suggestions to me at dwendel@thenalc.org.

In response to the invitation, I received the following comments from an NALC member:

"Something that has been on my mind and in my heart recently is how much I enjoy hearing the Word of God preached from the pulpit. We are a small church and use supply ministers so I have been experiencing a wide variety of sermons. The ones that ring truest to my heart are the ones which are taken straight from the Scripture and are related to our lives right now! My question is, **'How is this focus on Scripture in sermons being addressed in pastoral preparation?'**"

We would like to be able to say that preaching in Lutheranism and in the NALC is at a high point in the history of the Christian Church, but most realize that is not the case. Increasing secularization in our culture, the desire to be "entertained" in worship, the lack of Biblical literacy and knowledge among pastors and laity, and the movement in recent



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

decades away from preaching for salvation to preaching to support a social or political agenda has in many ways robbed preaching of the power and passion that comes from truly Biblical preaching, taken straight from Scripture, as the living Word of God speaks to our lives right now. In most every Christian church today, there are cries lamenting the decline in worship attendance and participation. There are surely any number of reasons for this decline. Could one of the reasons be a decline in the quality and faithfulness of preaching?

In the North American Lutheran Church, we do realize that there is work to be done regarding a return to preaching that is Biblical — discerning both Law and Gospel in the Scriptural text, convicting us of our sin, announcing to us our Savior, and setting us free to live new lives in Christ Jesus. As the reader asked, "How is this focus on Scripture in sermons being addressed in pastoral preparation?"

First, of course, we have one of the finest preachers in Lutheranism today serving as president of our seminary and teaching our seminarians (future pastors) how to preach faithful, passionate Biblical sermons.

The Rev. Dr. Amy Schiffrin is well-respected as a preacher and teacher of preaching and we are blessed to have her helping to prepare our future pastors. Each of our seminarians also serves a year of internship under the supervision of an experienced, proven pastor and preacher who,

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together with the lay internship committee, provides the seminarian with much feedback that helps the new preacher to improve and be prepared to preach and teach faithfully on a weekly basis.

It is not enough, however, to simply focus on the training of future preachers. There is work to be done to support, assist and encourage all pastors to become even stronger as preachers who preach sermons grounded in the Word of God — and only in the Word of God!

This is why the first NALC Pastors Conference was, in fact, a “preaching” conference, made possible through a generous unsolicited gift from an NALC family who wanted to strengthen preaching in our new church body. The entire focus of this first conference was Biblical preaching, with lectures, study of the Scripture lessons for Lent, Holy Week and Easter, and practical opportunities for pastors to preach sermons and receive feedback from professors and colleagues.

Each subsequent NALC Pastors Conference has provided time for intensive Bible study aimed at assisting pastors in their preaching. This is one real-life, practical reason for encouraging — and maybe requiring your pastor — to attend the Pastors Conference! It will benefit your pastor’s preaching — and therefore your congregation! The next NALC Pastors Conference will be Jan. 30 - Feb. 1, 2018, in San Antonio, Texas.

Another suggestion for strengthening and supporting preaching in the NALC is for pastors to form parish preaching groups. Pastors often receive little helpful feedback on weekly sermons, other than an occasional “Nice sermon, Pastor.” As with any task, skill or ability, preachers will be blessed by in-depth, considered reflection on their preaching.

Pastors, why not form a parish preaching group made up of a variety of individuals from the congregation? Meet once a month before and after a particular Sunday sermon. Before the sermon is prepared, study the assigned lessons together. Discuss what in the text engages both pastor and people. What in the Biblical text do the folks not understand? Where is the “rub” in the Biblical text? Where is good news? After this engagement, the

pastor prepares and preaches the sermon. After the Sunday, the group meets again and the pastor listens to reflection and response. Was the sermon heard as the pastor intended? What do hearers remember most from the sermon? Did the folks hear both Law and Gospel in the sermon? How did the sermon speak to daily life — and the hearers’ daily lives?

Because preaching is so vitally important, pastors will want to continue to hone their skill, even after 30 or 40 years of preaching! Such a parish preaching group helps pastors to be more effective preachers, but also helps congregations to better understand how to hear and receive sermons — how to be active listeners, open to the Word of God!

Finally, we are seeking to strengthen and support good preaching in the NALC by our emphasis on the truth and authority of the Word of God, especially as it relates to discipleship. If you haven’t heard it before, then hear it now: we are a Great Commission Church! We have no other mission than the one given to us by our Lord: that we go and make disciples, baptizing, teaching all that Jesus has commanded us (Matthew 28).

At the heart of discipleship is an encounter with the living Lord Jesus Christ, who is God with us. Jesus comes to us specifically, intentionally, in Word and Sacrament. Just as Martin Luther said, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God,” so too are our lives to be shaped, formed, held captive to the Word of God — and nothing and no one else!

The life of the disciple and follower of Jesus is to be Word-centered — as we are to abide in His Word, remembering and teaching all that Jesus has commanded us. Everything we are doing in the NALC regarding discipleship and disciple-making is centered on the Word of God. Getting pastors and laity in our congregations deeper into the Word of God will only serve to strengthen and support preaching!

The more we are reading, hearing and receiving the Word of God, the more we will hunger and thirst for preaching that is Biblical, deep, transforming and faithful. If you would like to encourage better

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Your heart follows your treasure

By Pastor Dona Johnson
NALC Stewardship Task Force

But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

— 1 Chronicles 29:14

On Consecration Sunday 2016, at the conclusion of our stewardship campaign, our worship leader stood up, turned to the congregation and said, “I need to share this with you. I am 42 years old. I am baptized. I’ve served in the church my entire adult life. And I confess to you that I have never read the Bible. I don’t even have a Bible of my own. This year in our transition to the NALC — the open forums, the deep discussions with pastor — the Scriptures were opened to me. So, this week I went out and bought my first Bible. And with my three children, I am beginning in Genesis, and together we are reading the Bible cover-to-cover. And this morning, for the first time in my life, on Consecration Sunday, I am pledging to give a weekly amount of money to God’s mission at Christ the King.”

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (*Matthew 6:21*). We will spend our time and energy in protecting and taking care of what we value most in this life. Your heart will follow your treasure. You can’t avoid it. You can’t prevent it. And as the writer of 1 Chronicles tells us, when we give to God in treasure we are giving something that came from God in the first place. We are only giving back to God what God has already given us!

Talents, time, energy, witness and money are always by-products of discipleship. It is easy to get distracted by numbers and budgets or be tempted to take shortcuts in stewardship practices, but best practices in stewardship are opportunities for transformation — opportunities to be fully engaged in God’s Word, to be stretched and challenged in our faith, where both pastor and congregation can grow together in giving to God.

Overflowing Generosity

Stewardship is a year-round and 100 percent commitment. It is not a once-a-year fund-raising program. It is first and foremost an act of worship and an expression of our faith. Paul states, “Think of us this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mercies” (*1 Corinthians 4:1*).

At Christ the King Lutheran Church in Centerville, Ohio, both our stewardship team and council downloaded the NALC’s *Overflowing Generosity* materials and used them to shape our stewardship emphasis for October 2016.

As I share with you how our leadership introduced *Overflowing Generosity* this year, I want to emphasize that there is no magic formula. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, in the context and giftedness of each congregation.

Our approach was a full-court press:

1. Our finance chair assembled a prayer team to pray during the week and before Sunday services.
2. The stewardship team downloaded Pastor Eugene Grimm’s program and prepared letters and mailings.
3. As pastor, I engaged our council, finance and stewardship members in an open and honest conversation on where each of us were in our own giving. You cannot lead others with conviction where you have not gone yourself.
4. I downloaded all four Bible studies and used them to develop a sermon series and themes from the texts.

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5. Bishop John's video was used to introduce *Overflowing Generosity* during our first week's mission moment.

6. I led the four-week downloadable Bible study. Our study engaged members to critically think about faith, money and lifestyle changes.

7. Each week one member shared a personal faith story — reclaiming the practice of testimony.

In praise and thanksgiving to God, our 2016 results exceeded our expectations with a 16 percent increase over last year's estimate of giving.

We can now work toward increasing our giving to the NALC and to local and global missions.

I encourage each of you to go to the NALC website and download the new stewardship materials. If you have questions about how to introduce year-round stewardship to your congregation, please contact the Stewardship Task Force.

In the months ahead, we will roll out additional materials and will eventually create a library of Christ-centered resources for year-round stewardship!

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preaching in the NALC, encourage your pastor and congregation to be involved in our Life-to-Life Discipleship initiative! Ask your Mission District dean for more information.

I hope this provides some information and insight into preaching in the NALC and how we are seeking to strengthen the proclamation of the Word of God in our church. It is a task critical to the vitality and well-being of our congregations as "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the preaching of Christ!"

Again, if you would like to ask a question or raise a topic related to ministry in the NALC, send me an email at dwendel@thenalc.org.



By Gary and Laurie Pecuch

Webinars: The next faithwebbing.com webinars will be at 2 p.m. ET on Tuesdays, April 18 and May 16. The topics are Biblical self-esteem, "Love Languages," and personality temperaments. Webinars are free. All you need to do is join in. The webinars continue to walk through the Faith Skills listed in the *What's In Your Bag?* book as well as the *Faith Skills* list. Need a list or help finding the webinar link? Email us at faithwebbing@gmail.com.

NEXUS Institute: There is an excellent opportunity for some high school students this June. The NEXUS Institute at Grandview College in Des Moines, Iowa, received a grant from Eli Lilly to put together a theological academy for high school students. Their goal is to bring the best, deep-thinking teenagers together to spend a week with them exploring faith.

The experience is a week long and will be offered three times in June 2017. The dates are June 11-16, June 18-23, and June 25-30. Students only attend one week. It is a totally free experience once students get to Des Moines. There is even a possibility that the institute could help with airfare. For more information contact us or go to www.thenexusinstitute.org.

Youth Ministry Adult Training Symposium will be held Aug. 7-8 (prior to the 2017 NALC Convocation) at the Sheraton Music City Hotel in Nashville, Tenn. Registration will take place in conjunction with Convocation registration. We are hoping to have all Mission Districts represented. Detailed information will be available soon and will be widely distributed.

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.

A new building for Reformation Lutheran Church in Culpeper, Va.

Reformation Lutheran Church in Culpeper, Va., is celebrating a new worship facility.

The congregation, which has grown rapidly over the last decade, has moved into a 12,000-square-foot building.

This renovated structure, which once housed a cooperative electric company, is located near the local hospital, elementary school, and a grocery store.

The facility includes a sanctuary, offices, Sunday school rooms, a chapel, and a large community room where the church's daily "drop-in" senior center, "The Place," gathers.



A new fellowship hall with a commercial kitchen was added, as well as a steeple to help identify the building as a church.

Reformation currently has five weekly worship services — at 6 p.m. Saturday; 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. Sunday; and noon and 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday.

Pastor Brad Hales serves the congregation.

You can learn more about Reformation Lutheran Church at culpeperlutherans.org.



Thanks for Answered Prayers

By Pastor Mark Chavez
NALC General Secretary

Many of you recently learned by email that my beautiful wife, Jocelyn, died on March 6. She had endured a devastating degenerative neurological condition for more than seven years. For the past several years you, and many others beyond the NALC, have faithfully upheld Jocelyn and our family in your prayers. We thank you for your steadfast love and care for us. We especially thank you for your prayers for Jocelyn as her life came to an end in this creation, and your continuing prayers as we mourn her death.



Mark and Jocelyn Chavez

Your prayers have powerfully sustained and carried us along in the hands of Jesus for several years. In all our family has experienced, including the death of our son, Kevin, four years ago, not once, not even for a moment, have I ever been or felt alone. Jesus keeps all His promises, especially to be with us “always, to the end of the age.” He keeps His promise for me in and through your prayers.

You have been a powerful witness to the abundant love our Lord Jesus pours out through the members of His body. A few years ago, Jocelyn’s doctor ordered a health care team to come into our home to see if we could improve our care for her. One member of the team was a social worker, who asked about our support system. I told him all our children and grandchildren live within 15 minutes of our home, and we often gather as a family. I told him about the love and support from our families of origin.

Then I started describing how the Church steadily supports us, beginning with our pastor, Luke

Seamon, and our congregation in Lancaster, Pa., Reformation Lutheran Church. I told him about our support from Bishop John and the entire NALC staff, and from NALC congregations and pastors. I told him leaders in several other churches and movements in North America were praying for us.

As I began to tell him the Church around the world was praying for us, including Christians in remote areas of Ethiopia, he stopped me and said, “I’ve never met anyone with as much support as you have.” The social worker was visibly moved in hearing about the love of Christ for us through your prayers.

Our good Lord answered your many prayers, giving Jocelyn the faith and courage to endure her illness, and giving us the faith and strength to care for her. A few weeks before Jocelyn’s death, I began asking people to pray specifically that she would die peacefully, in Jesus, in her sleep. Her condition was

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such that the pain could have intensified in the final weeks. Instead, it lessened to almost no pain.

Jocelyn was at a very high risk for aspiration. Her doctors said she would likely die of pneumonia. Her home hospice nurse thought she would likely have some buildup of fluid in her remaining hours. He supplied us with medications we would need if her breathing became heavily labored, and carefully instructed us about what to do. Your prayers were answered. Her breathing in the last 24 hours was just slightly labored. Not once in the last couple days was there any indication of fluid in her lungs nor any coughing.

Our daughter, Ruth, a nurse, was in the room when her mother died. She said she had never seen such a peaceful death. You can hear how Jocelyn died by listening to Bach's Mass in B Minor. All you need do is listen to the *Et Incarnatus est* and *Crucifixus* in his setting of the Nicene Creed. The gradual slowing and softening of the chorus in those parts until there is utter silence is exactly how peacefully Jocelyn fell asleep in Jesus.

Of course, if you do listen to that part of the Mass, right after the peaceful silence you will hear the glorious joy of our Lord's resurrection, and the hope of Jocelyn's resurrection, as well as ours and all the saints.

Our good Lord also answered two specific prayers from children in Jocelyn's last hours in this creation. Our grandson, Roman, kissed and said goodnight to his Mimi on Sunday, the night before Jocelyn died. On the way home that night he told his Mom, our daughter, Cecilia, that he wanted to see Mimi right after getting out of school on Monday afternoon. Cecilia tried to explain Mimi might not live that long. The hospice nurse had told us midday on Sunday that he expected Jocelyn to die during the night or sometime Monday morning. Roman responded, "Yes she will. I am going to pray to God tonight that Mimi lives because I have something more I want to say to Mimi."

Midmorning on Monday it was very evident that Jocelyn was near death. Cecilia questioned whether she should pull Roman out of school early. She decided against that, and Jocelyn surprised her

nurse by living into the evening. A friend picked up Roman and his sister, Gabby, when school let out, and brought them straight to our home. Roman and Gabby came running into our bedroom to say goodbye to Mimi. All of us adults left them alone in the room with her.

The next day, Pastor Luke told me about their family prayers the night before. After dinner he asked their daughter, Emma, if there was anything she wanted them to include in their prayers. She responded with things that sounded to Luke to be things she thought her parents would want to hear. Luke said, "Yes, Emma, we will pray for those things, but is there anything in particular that you want us to include in our prayers?" She was quiet for a few moments and then said, "I think we should pray for Jocelyn." I asked Luke what time they had prayed on Monday night. It was 7 p.m., exactly when Jocelyn's breathing began gradually slowing down and finally stopping about ten minutes after the hour.

Praise the Lord! Jesus binds us together as one, all generations, with incredible intimacy, love and tenderness.

Jocelyn was a personal evangelist to me throughout our marriage. Her most memorable witness to me was, "Take your eyes off Jesus and all hell breaks loose!" Bishop John, in his sermon for Jocelyn's service, reminded us the opposite is just as true — "Keep your eyes on Jesus and all Heaven breaks loose!" Now her witness is doubly memorable.

Jocelyn was very close to her large family in Philadelphia (she has nine siblings), especially her identical twin sister, Evelyn. When we married, I was in the Air Force stationed at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. We lived in Crofton, Md., more than a two-hour drive to Philadelphia.

I resigned my commission a few years later to go to seminary in St. Paul, Minn., much further away from her family. We loved Minnesota in the spring, summer and fall, but never did adjust to the bitter cold winters. After seminary, I was assigned to the ALC Eastern District, and my first call, in Glen Burnie, Md., was only a few minutes closer to Philadelphia than Crofton.

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Nearly 12 years later, after 19 years of marriage and always living more than two hours from Philadelphia, I accepted a call in East Petersburg, Pa. It is about 90 minutes from Philadelphia. It was good at last to be in the same state as Jocelyn's family.

I received a phone call from out of the blue one year into my second call, in May 2000. A member of the newly-elected Board of Directors for the WordAlone Network asked if I would interview along with two other people for the position of Executive Director of the newly-organized reform movement. I was caught off guard and said, "I don't think so, but I'll pray about it, and talk with my wife."

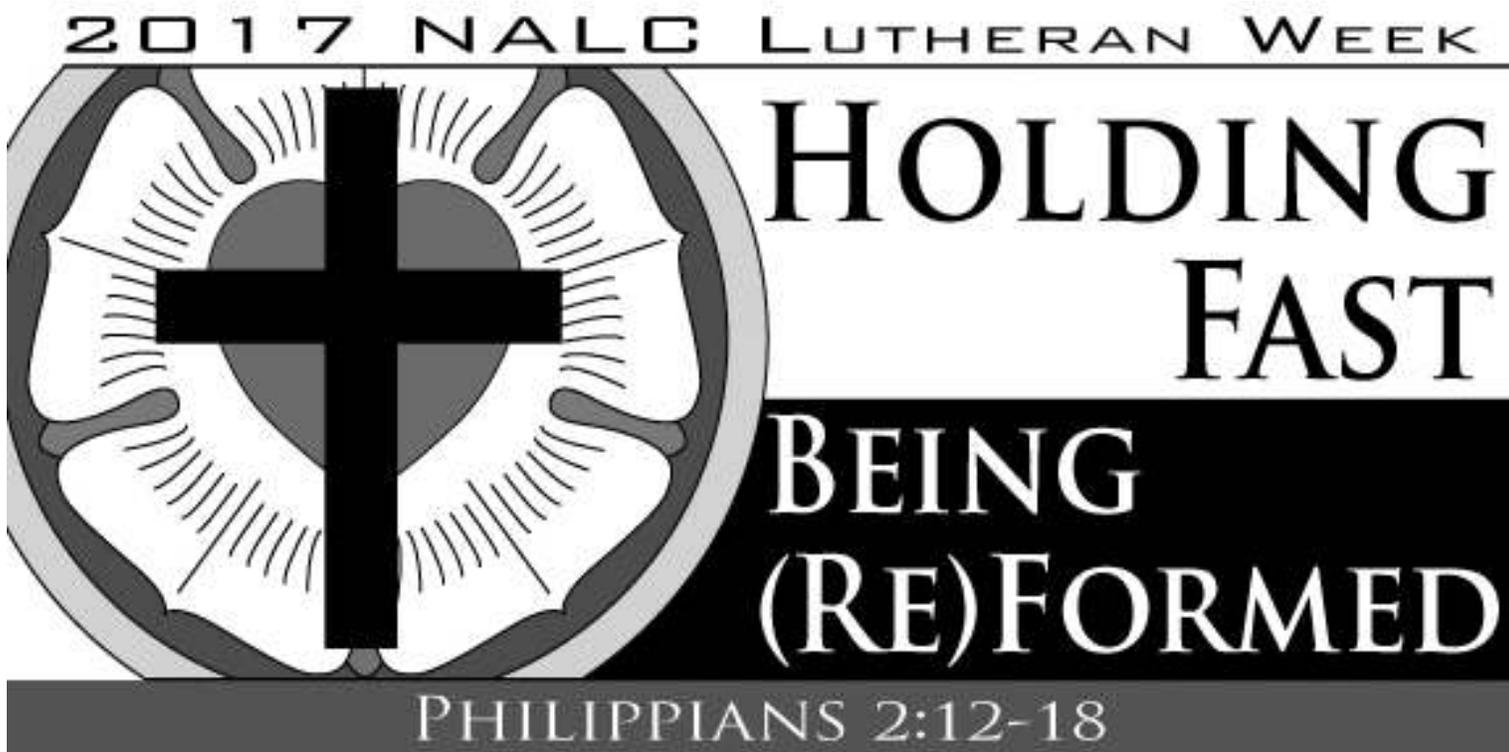
That evening I told Jocelyn about the unusual phone call. I told her the Executive Director would need to live in Minnesota and establish an office in the Twin Cities. She asked what I was thinking. I said I would tell the board member, "Thanks, but no thanks." Jocelyn wanted to know my reasons. I said we were just one year into my new call, I loved the congregation I was serving, and we were off to a good start in our ministry together. I also

said I didn't want to disrupt our family and start our children in a new school district for the second time in two years. I reminded her that we knew we didn't like Minnesota winters. Finally, I reminded her that after 19 years we were closer to Evelyn and her family than we had ever been.

Jocelyn listened carefully and said, "Why wouldn't you at least interview for the position?" At first, I didn't believe she was serious. I kept questioning her, slowly realizing she was completely open to a new and challenging call from our Lord that would once more move us far away from her family. I was not open to His call. Jocelyn was again my personal evangelist. I thoroughly enjoyed serving congregations. Had she not encouraged me, I might not have considered any other ministry. I would not have served for WordAlone or Lutheran CORE.

Jocelyn was such a blessing to me, our family and many others. Our children's childhood friends are writing and telling us that Jocelyn was their second Mom. I am so thankful the Lord gave us more than 35 years together in marriage, six children and seven grandchildren. Thanks for your continuing prayers. Thank and praise Jesus for answering your prayers.

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