

CORE Connection

News from Lutheran CORE

January 2013

“The Lord is with you.”

Horrifying news engulfed us as 2012 drew to a close. We learned of mass murders of children in Connecticut, shoppers in Oregon, first responders in New York, and even a church worker in my state of Pennsylvania. As citizens and politicians seek solutions to the epidemic of violence, the most pervasive form of violence against the innocent goes largely unnoticed and is even endorsed: the unrestricted killing of nascent life, which is now required to be covered by insurance companies on pain of severe penalties.

Seeking the protection of nascent life is often characterized as a “war on women,” yet the real war on women is the massive number of sex-selective abortions performed—especially in Asia and Africa, which is skewing the male-female mix in some countries. *Christianity Today* (December 2012) estimates that 163 million girls were aborted in Asia because their parents wanted a male baby. That is the equivalent of the total female population of the United States. Congress is divided over whether and how to ban this practice here.

It is therefore refreshing that when the Joint Commission on Theology and Doctrine of Lutheran CORE and the North American Lutheran Church issued a “word of counsel” regarding nascent life, they focused on the promise an angel gave to a young mother also facing an unplanned pregnancy: “The Lord Is with You.”

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“This is what we are called to speak to every woman with a child in her womb,” the document declares. “The Lord is with you,

regardless of the circumstances of your pregnancy. We urge the NALC to commit itself as a church, as the Body of our Lord on earth, along with those joined with it in mission in Lutheran CORE, to be with you as well. We seek to attend to your needs, to help you, to guard you, and to guide you that you may bear your child in a community of love.”

One of the great lies about us who have worked to protect nascent life is that we abandon the mother and child after the birth. In fact, social agencies devoted to the mother and child were formed by compassionate Christians long before the court decisions opened the floodgates of legal abortions. And although the media now label us “anti-choice,” focusing attention almost exclusively on the mother's situation, I consider myself “pro-choice” as well as “pro-life.” I just want the child to have a choice, which she will not have unless she is permitted to be born.

The document from the Joint Commission is not a “social statement” intended to speak on behalf of Lutheran CORE or the

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“The Lord is with you.”

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NALC to the larger society. Instead it is addressed from the Holy Scriptures to our constituencies. God’s Word is a higher authority than a vote by any church meeting, and the Joint Commission asks us to listen attentively to what the Bible teaches us about life.

This word of counsel is not intended to change laws but to change hearts. One would expect that new attitudes will result in different laws, but even now we Christians have the power to be that “community of love” the document challenges us to create. The “public church” is expressed not in political lobbying by its leadership but in its

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open proclamation of God’s Word of Law and Gospel. Lutheran CORE and NALC do not expect to influence the political process directly, but to speak God’s Word to the baptized saints who gather around Word and Sacrament, who will exercise their Christian vocations as citizens.

We therefore urge you to open your Bible and prayerfully consider how you can answer the call of this document, “The Lord Is with You.” How can you create a “community of love” for those carrying God’s gift in their wombs, guarding and protecting this miracle of life?

For the text of the document “The Lord Is with You,” click [here](#) or write to our office for a printed copy if you do not have internet access. Please share this document as widely as you can. It will make a great study resource for adult forums, Sunday School classes, and similar gatherings.

Pr. Steve Shipman, director of Lutheran CORE, can be reached at sshipman@lutherancore.org or 570-916-7780.

Pittsburgh hotel to host Convocations

The Sheraton Station Square Hotel in Pittsburgh, Pa., has been chosen as the site for the 2013 Lutheran CORE Convocation, the annual Theological Conference, and the North American Lutheran Church Convocation.

The Lutheran CORE Convocation will be held Tuesday, Aug. 6. The theological conference will begin the evening of August 6 and continue all day August 7 on the topic, “On Being the Church in These Precarious Times.” The NALC Convocation is scheduled to run Thursday and Friday, Aug. 8-9. Other groups such as the Seven Marks Society may meet on the preceding Monday.

Lutheran CORE Director Steve Shipman noted, “This will be our first gathering outside a congregation, as only a limited number of congregations have the personnel and facility to host a week of events such as these. Being in a major city with the availability of public transportation opens many opportunities to make this part of a family vacation.”

Watch the Lutheran CORE website for more information on the Convocation, including special rates at the hotel. As soon as information for registering for the events and the hotel is available, it will be posted on the Lutheran CORE website.

MissionConnect: A congregation in Indiana and a church in Ethiopia

The Lutheran CORE Steering Committee seeks to remind congregations of the challenge that Lutheran CORE and the NALC make to member congregations to support one local and one international mission partner. This article continues the narrative of congregations that are making this kind of direct mission connection.

Bethel Lutheran Church of Noblesville, Indiana, is a congregation of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) on the northeast side of Indianapolis. Fourteen years ago they began developing a new 33-acre campus, which will enable them to grow as the city continues to develop around them. Total attendance between four weekly services ranges from 360-390 people. A Saturday night service is casual country. The Sunday morning services are traditional at 8:00 AM, blended at 9:30 AM, and a praise service with a praise band at 11:00 AM.

Mission is a major emphasis at Bethel Lutheran, according to Senior Pastor Doug Gast. The logo of the Missions Committee is B³ – Blessings Beyond Bethel. A mission emphasis on the fourth Sunday of every month keeps a mission focus out in front of the congregation.

On the fourth Sunday of October 2012, which was Reformation Sunday, the congregation held a Missions Faire. Seventeen booths were set up in the fellowship hall, with displays about the various missions that the congregation supports—local and domestic as well as international. People visiting the fair were given a



Congregation members and visitors check out the many informational displays at the 2012 Missions Faire highlighting missions supported by Bethel Lutheran Church in Noblesville, Ind.

passport, which they could have stamped at each of the displays. Children who had every one of the boxes stamped received a gift.

Locally the congregation supports a food bank, provides holiday meals for the needy, and collects Christmas gifts for senior adults and children, who otherwise would not

receive a gift. They also operate a food and baby pantry, which serves the hungry as well as mothers with infants. Last year this pantry served over four thousand people.

The congregation enjoys a mission partner relationship with two other congregations here in the United States. They recently sent a financial gift to Iglesia Luterana San Pedro in Miami, Florida. This congregation is served by Pastor Eddy Perez, who is a member of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee and Dean of the Caribbean and Hispanic Mission District of the North American Lutheran Church.

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Indiana congregation partners with church in Ethiopia

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Bethel members prepare Christmas give-away packages for their food and baby pantry mission outreach.

Bethel has also established a partnership with Living Faith Lutheran Church in Wabash, Indiana, a new mission start of the NALC. The youth groups of the two congregations will be going on a canoe trip together to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota next summer, and Bethel passes on its Vacation Bible School material to its mission partner.

Financial support of the NALC Theological Education Fund comprises the third portion of Bethel's



The Iglesia Luterana San Pedro mission partner booth at Bethel's 2012 Missions Faire.

domestic mission efforts. Bethel wants to help ensure that there will be biblically faithful Lutheran pastors in the future.

Bethel's international efforts involve support of Lutheran World Relief and Water to Thrive, an organization that builds water projects in Ethiopia and Sierra Leone in Africa. Their main international partnership is with a congregation of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus ("Place of Jesus").

Pastor Gast was part of the group who attended a theological conference and revival event last spring in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and then traveled to the northern town of Dese, stopping to visit several Christian churches along the way. These churches are all located in heavily Muslim areas.

One of the congregations they visited is in the town of Senbate and is served by a young pastor by the name of Gobena Degefa. Pastor Gast remembers standing in their small, square church building on the edge of town. The fields around the church were filled with a cash crop, which the congregation is growing to help defray costs. Pastor Gast shared that as Pastor Degefa was speaking, "This feeling washed all over me, like the Holy Spirit washing over me. I got tears in my eyes. It was overwhelming." He asked the guide if he could share with the group that he felt that God was calling him to develop a partnership with this particular congregation.

So far Bethel Lutheran has sent a gift of financial support, which will enable the Ethiopian congregation to hire an evangelist, conduct their Sunday School, and provide for the orphaned children within their care. Bethel Lutheran is looking forward to the time when they will be able to increase their support after they

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Indiana congregation partners with church in Ethiopia

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have met all obligations to the ELCA. (Bethel Lutheran left the ELCA in early 2012 to join the NALC.)

The Missions Faire on Reformation Sunday was preceded by an Ethiopian night two weeks prior. The evening started out with supper. A woman who used to have a catering business went on the internet and found recipes for all kinds of Ethiopian food. Then Pastor Gast shared pictures and told the story of his trip and the history of Christianity in Ethiopia. He said, “The theological conference was wonderful, the trip to Dese was terrific, and the visit to Lalibela, a place where eleven churches were carved out of stone, was beyond belief.” When the Muslims were taking over Jerusalem in the twelfth century, the Ethiopians carved these churches to replicate churches in Jerusalem.



Bethel Lutheran Church members enjoyed Ethiopian food prepared by a local caterer, and listened as Pastor Douglas Gast shared stories and photos of his trip to Ethiopia in April

Pastor Gast said, “We are striving to make mission as strong, as exciting, and as inviting as we can.” He describes the trip to Ethiopia as “the trip of a lifetime.” He found the people to be welcoming and warm and the “the most joy-filled people I have ever met.”



Bethel Lutheran Church has sent a financial gift to assist the congregation of this Mekane Yesus church in Senbate, Ethiopia, so it can hire an evangelist, conduct Sunday School, and provide for orphaned children in their care.

He further commented, “No wonder the Church is growing like crazy when you have that kind of spirit. The Holy Spirit is moving strong. I asked the president of the Mekane Yesus Church to bless my Bible, which he did. That Bible is a sacred treasure.”

For information regarding how you could visit the church in Ethiopia, contact Rachel Sosebee, NALC Administrative Assistant for Missions, at rsosebee@thenalc.org or 614-777-5709.



Pr. Doug and Terry Gast with their guide, Pr. Belete Demessew, and his children, Misrak, Genete, and Ammanuel.



IMPACT

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Training church leaders in Ethiopia

Confirmation students raise money to support seminary students

By Pastor John Conrad

Wondimu Babu is an evangelist from Ethiopia. After 15 years of serving in the field as an evangelist, he is currently a student at the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus seminary in Addis Ababa.

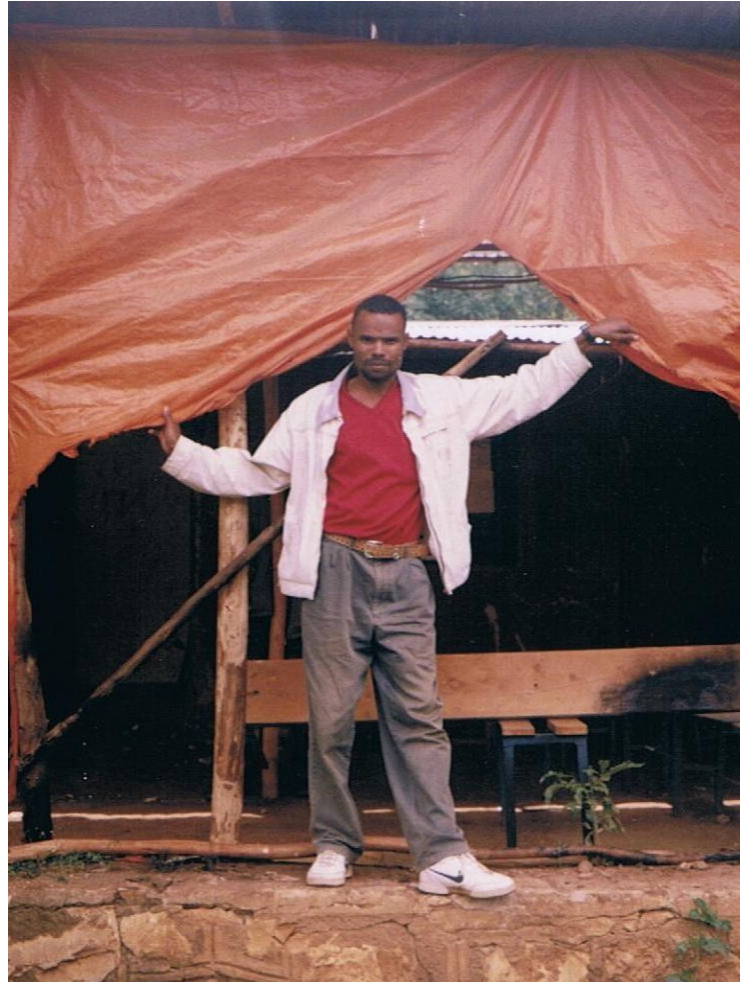
He is a man of God, tested like gold by fire. He has been burned, tortured, bitten, and left for dead. His church is one of about 85 that have been burned in the past few years. Miraculously, although scarred, he is alive, strong, and still serving the 2,500 member Gulale congregation. He also serves at 12 preaching posts.

Wondimu's story is not unusual for the Ethiopian Lutheran Church, which goes by the name Evangelical Ethiopian Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).

Because Ethiopia is at the horn of Africa, it functions as a gateway for Islam into sub-Saharan Africa. For centuries, Christians have been the primary presence here. Still, Islam is very strong in many areas. Undeterred by the risk, many Christians continue to reach out to their Muslim friends, even with the reality of ongoing persecution.

According to Rev. Abdi Tadessi, Director of the Christian-Muslim Relations Division of the EECMY, about 30% of the students plan to focus their energies on reaching the Muslim community.

The people of First Lutheran Church, a NALC congregation in Floresville, Texas, have a history of being active in missions. In prior years, they built water wells in Ethiopia. This year, they heard of the need to support students at the EECMY seminary. It costs only about \$2,000 a year to cover all costs for a student to attend seminary.



Ethiopian evangelist Wondimu Babu in his burned church.

Sylvia Gadd, lay catechist at First Lutheran, made a point of enlisting the participation of the confirmation class when raising funds. The class of five students went before the congregation on a Sunday morning to share the need.

The students then created a bulletin board with envelopes that said "Ethiopia Seminarian" and were numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. People were invited to take an envelope from the bulletin board, fill it with their contribution and place it in the plate. Envelopes

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Texas confirmation students raise money to support Ethiopian seminary students



Confirmation students from First Evangelical Lutheran Church have taken leadership in raising money to support seminary students in Ethiopia.

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numbered 1 to 63 provided support for one seminary student. Envelopes 1 to 89 covered two students; 1 to 141 covered five!

They first hoped to support the equivalent of one student: \$2,000. That goal was quickly reached. They've now raised over \$11,000.

As encouraging as that may be, Dr. Belay Olam, president of the seminary in Addis Ababa, shared the extent of need. The Ethiopian church made a commitment to sever its financial support from the ELCA following 2009. Now some students survive on barely a subsistence level of food from day to day. Support for over fifty more seminarians is urgently needed. Without additional support in the near future, they will have to leave the seminary before completing their studies.

The Missions Office of the NALC is recognizing First Lutheran, Texas as a venue for seminary support. Those who would like to send financial support may do so by sending their support directly to "First Lutheran Church", 1406 6th St., Floresville, TX 78114. Contributions may be designated to an Ethiopia seminary or another global seminary.

Pastor John Conrad is also available to those who would like to take an active role in advocating on behalf of international seminary support. Contact him at 830-393-2747 or JTCSwede@gmail.com.

Theological conference to feature Carl Braaten and Robert Jensen

Renowned Lutheran theologians Dr. Carl E. Braaten and Dr. Robert W. Jensen are the featured speakers for the Canadian Rockies Theological Conference April 8-11 in Canmore, Alberta. Canmore is about 50 miles west of Calgary near Banff National Park.

"Noted theologians Carl Braaten and Robert Jensen will share with us their thoughts, concerns and hopes regarding the Church of Christ around the world especially in relation to what it means to be a Lutheran nowadays," organizers explain.

The conference will also feature Pastor Greg Musselman, vice president of Voice of the Martyrs.

More information on the conference is available by contacting Pastor Phil Gagnon at 780-458-6012 or pastorphil@me.com.

Revisiting the *Facts on Growth* study

Odds are that many of you have not taken the time to check out the findings of a 2010 survey on church growth conducted by the Hartford Institute of Religion Research. Despite some of the criticism associated with the “church growth” movement of the last century, I think we can all agree that growth is essential to being obedient to Christ’s Great Commission in North America. So I’ve decided to highlight what I consider the most helpful insights from that study. (The complete study can be found at www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org, then clicking on *Facts on Growth: 2010*.)

Current Ministry Challenges

The report on church growth, authored by Kirk Hadaway, is based on an analysis of responses from over 11,000 randomly sampled congregations in the United States from over twenty-five traditions. The report identified a number of technological and demographic shifts that challenge congregational ministry today. North Americans are less likely than ever before to belong to off-line social organizations. The digital age has increased the odds that the typical American is not a part of any voluntary group or community that actually meets physically. I just read in the *New York Times* that there are

now one billion people on Facebook, which has only been available for seven years!

Children and teens, especially in middle and upper middle income households, are over-programmed. Between team sports and extra-curricular school activities there is very little discretionary time left for church activities and groups.

Also, fewer people are moving, thus there are fewer new member prospects in the community.

The changing landscape of the American family has added to the challenge congregations face when trying to reach out to residents in their surrounding communities. The new demographic realities include: 1) 44% of American newborns are now born to single mothers, 2) fewer adults are choosing to marry, and 3) of those who marry, fewer are choosing to have children.

The aging of the American population in general and of mainline Protestant churches in particular has made it even more difficult to reach younger adults, youth and children. Generational barriers are real. A congregation with a median age of sixty or sixty-five will have a difficult time reaching single adults or couples in their thirties or forties.

As congregations lose members and experience general decline, they also tend to lose a sense of focus and purpose beyond their walls. The Hartford Institute’s director, David Roozen, said that today a congregation’s growth and/or decline are “primarily dependent upon a congregation’s *internal culture* [italics added], program and leadership, and therefore a

Pursuing Great Commission Evangelism in Your Congregation

The overall financial impact of the last four years on congregations has been significant. The 2010 study states, “Congregational economics are much more precarious today than in 2005.” The current weak economy has impacted congregations in a number of ways besides reducing discretionary income, and thereby reducing charitable giving. Many adults are having to work multiple part-time jobs resulting in less available time for volunteering and participating.

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Revisiting the *Facts on Growth* study

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congregation's own ability to change and adapt."

Suggested Ministry Strategies

Of the variety of strategies for congregational growth identified by the study, there are five that I think are of particular note. First, as a way of connecting with the unchurched, many growing congregations are offering parenting classes, special events and retreats, marriage enrichment opportunities, and sports ministries. According to Kirk Hadaway, "Most important to growth is the ability of congregations to attract younger adults and families with children."

Second, growing congregations provide scheduling options and flexibility as a way to connect with increasingly busy households. Obviously, this is a strategy much more difficult for smaller congregations to manage. But the days are long gone when you can expect most of your members or "prospects" to be available on the same evening or even Sunday morning.

Third, growing congregations offer small groups (offered at different times, of course) to integrate and disciple busy people. And the larger your congregation the more essential small groups are.

Some direct quotes from Kirk Hadaway, the author of this study:

+ "Most important to growth is the ability of congregations to attract younger adults and families with children."

+ "At least part of the explanation for mainline decline (as opposed to relative evangelical growth) is the lack of a clear motivating purpose...It helps to stand for something."

+ "In terms of the character of worship itself, the descriptors most strongly associated with growth are 'joyful,' 'innovative,' and 'inspirational.'"

+ "Congregations that involved children in worship were more likely to experience substantial growth."

+ "The primary way people first connect with a congregation is through someone who is already involved."

Fourth, growing congregations are more likely to offer contemporary music in worship as well as innovative approaches to worship. Please note this does not mean that *traditional worship music* is out, it just means that it is far less likely that a congregation will grow if it *only* offers *traditional worship music*. The study noted that the character of worship in growing churches can be described as "joyful," "innovative," and "inspirational." Growing churches are also much more likely to involve children in worship.

Fifth, congregations that are growing have a clear and motivating sense of purpose, a vision for where they are going.

It is no wonder then, that the above strategies offer flexibility

and options that make it easier for congregational members to connect with each other and to invite and welcome others. Hadaway says, "The primary way people first connect with a congregation is through someone who is already involved."



Pr. Brandt welcomes comments and questions. Contact him at donb@oursaviorssalem.org

Upcoming events

February 3-5, 2013	Bloomington, Minnesota	Augustana District LCMC and Institute of Lutheran Theology annual Theological Conference for pastors will explore the unique Lutheran voice within the changing culture of church and society. Speakers include Steve Paulson, Mark Granquist and others. Details available at www.augustanadistrict.org .
February 10-12, 2013	San Diego, California	LCMC Ministry Board leadership conference for pastors and congregational leaders at Penasquitos Lutheran Church, San Diego, California. The theme of this year's conference is "Leadershift: Navigating Transitional Waters."
April 8-11, 2013	Canmore, Alberta Canada	"Braaten and Jenson Uncorked!" presented by the Canadian Theological Conference at the Canmore Radisson. More information and registration available by emailing Pr. Phil Gagnon or calling 780-458-6012. Reserve a room at 1-800-967-9033, promo code CANROC.
April 12-13, 2013	Western Pennsylvania	"Transforming Congregations through Discipleship: A Discipleship and Evangelization Event" featuring Rev. Dr. Michael W. Foss. Contact Pr. Mark Werner , (724-423-2590). Event will be held at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Export.
April 29, 2013	New Hope, Minnesota	"Forde Fest 4: The Canon of Scripture—A Guide for the Perplexed." CrossAlone District LCMC is sponsoring this conference on Gerhard Forde, a famous theologian and professor of church history at Luther Seminary, from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM at Holy Nativity Lutheran Church, 3900 Winnetka Ave N. To register contact Stew Carlson (651-207-3939), Brad Jenson (218-625-2430), or Meg Madson (763-475-0577)
August 6 to 7, 2013	Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	Lutheran CORE Convocation and the CORE/NALC Theological Conference on "Being the Church in these Precarious Times." More information will be forthcoming.
August 8-9	Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	North American Lutheran Church (NALC) Convocation. More information will be forthcoming.



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