

Big table theology

At our baptism we were commissioned to tell others about this faith we hold dear. I like to say this faith, which we as Lutherans have been given, is welcoming and affirming to those who have not been invited or have been excused from the table. This faith is open to all.

Jesus often taught us truths about his kingdom in the form of stories. Remember when he spoke of someone setting up a great dinner and those who were invited made excuses as to why they couldn't attend? He later says to go out into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame—for there is still room at the table.

As Lutherans we celebrate with Christ what I call a *Big Table Theology*. All are welcome.

Our unique view on scriptural interpretation is to be careful to look at the historical context before applying, and often times misapplying, Scripture to our fellow brothers and sisters. This is a task we don't take lightly. We often refer to this as our Lutheran lens.

Unfortunately many of our evangelical brothers and sisters are seated at a small table. It's a table that excludes many. It's a table where they are told what to eat and how much to eat. In other words, they try to apply Scripture in a very narrow manner. It is intellectually dishonest to try and use the Old Testament to label some people as abominations while selectively excusing others who are also labeled as abominations.

For those at the small table, I jok-

ingly like to add that, yes, they do get to color at their table—but they only get black and white crayons.

But the table where we are seated is big and diverse with deep discussions, laughter, good food and an acceptance of all God's creation. I encourage members of the Alaska Synod to be about inviting. That is, invite those who have not heard the good news and invite those who have heard the wrong message, a message of exclusion.

I commend Lutherans from all over our nation for taking this bold step forward to be in the hands of Christ. Our hands are open and our arms outstretched, inviting everyone to the table. Our hands are not closed and used like a fist to say that you are not welcome.

Thank you for inviting everyone into God's kingdom. □

The Rev. Mark Allred
*Allred is the Alaska Synod's
director for evangelical mission.*

Stand in for Jesus

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses ... (Acts 1:8).

The Acts of the Apostles begins by relating that the risen Jesus spent 40 days showing that he was alive to the community of apostles and disciples. He instructed them about what was in store for them—and us. He promises the companionship of the Spirit and lays out his purpose for the community of his followers: “You will be my witnesses.”

Many have been terrified by Jesus' charge because they suspect it involves some level of public speaking. Yes, perhaps for some but certainly not for all. More fitting to all would be the notion that says being a

witness means to make Jesus present.

We gather in our congregations celebrating the presence of Jesus, believing that the Risen One is among us through the word and sacraments, and that the promised Spirit inhabits our community. We are making Jesus present to each other.

The community then scatters in many directions. One by one we go. And wherever we happen to be, Jesus is looking for us to stand in for him with those fruits engendered by the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness. It's not only what we may say but how we are. Choose deeds from the actions of Jesus.

Words can work wonders when they tell someone of God's mercy and forgiveness sent through Jesus. A sincere “I forgive you” can free a

soul. Simple truth can melt fear and distrust. A sincere “come and see” can open up the possibility for faith. Choose words from the vocabulary of Jesus.

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Dear people of the Alaska Synod:

You are reading this just about the time that my service among you as interim bishop will end. I thank you for that privilege. I have learned so much about the state of Alaska and the challenges to be the church while serving a vast geography with limited resources. Please take heart from the fact that you are on God's mission. Those whom God sends, God promises to empower and sustain.

May God bless you on his way.

The Rev. Don Maier
Interim bishop, Alaska Synod.

Our life together

By the Rev. Wm Chris Boerger, bishop



We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia;

for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints (2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

The story of the gospel at work in the churches of Macedonia continues to inspire the church today. The early church had a form of disaster response. The famine in the Holy Land produced a response from the rest of the church. Paul functions as the one receiving and transporting the gifts of the larger church to the needs of the local community.

The practice of discipleship related to financial stewardship is being closely examined today.

When I was in confirmation instruction, the expectation of tithing one's income was a regular and normal part of the teaching. On the Sunday when I joined my other classmates in affirming the covenant God made with us in baptism, I was given a certificate and a box of offering envelopes. Even in junior high

school I was expected to contribute to the financial needs of the church.

Today the practice of teaching financial stewardship has fallen to the bottom of many congregations' to-do lists. We know that an older generation came to the issue of tithes and offerings from a different perspective. Today people want to know how their financial support makes a difference. So it's important that we communicate the results of our members' generosity.

At the same time, it's important to say that the biblical concept of tithes and offerings shows the tension between regular giving and special giving.

Mark Allen Powell, 2012 Northwest Washington Synod Assembly keynote speaker and professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, notes that the tithes of the biblical witness were the gifts used to support the regular work of the temple and the

faith community. Offerings were gifts over and above the tithe. Thus, my participation in my local congregation means that my tithe will go to that church. The ministry of the community of faith is supported by my tithe.

As special needs arise my offerings are used to support these needs. They do not replace the tithe. These offerings are the thanksgiving for the blessings I have received.

I remember as a youth trying to figure out if certain offerings could be counted as part of my tithe. Powell says no. The point is not meeting a financial requirement, but sharing in the work of God.

That is what the congregation at Macedonia was doing. They were responding as God's people to the needs of the saints in other parts of the world. It was not a decision of "discretionary spending." It was a response of faith. That faith is still responding through us today. □

The road to Malual

The South Sudan Community Restoration Mission Team from Kent [Wash.] Lutheran Church lived the 2012 Lenten season in Ethiopia and South Sudan. It is no surprise that we observed people in difficult situations:

- Money is needed to secure clean water.
- Ethiopia has more unemployed than we do. If the South Sudanese have any wealth, it is their cows or goats.
- Health care is sketchy in Ethiopia

and nonexistent in South Sudan's villages.

• In Malual, the South Sudan village that served as the group's temporary home, the food supply is corn. Imagine that as a constant diet.

In faith, I and other members of the South Sudan Community Restoration Mission Team traveled the road to Malual. There was no doubt in any of us: God was directing us

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Rediscover Macedonia

A spirit of gratitude and generosity

By Mary Lindberg

Welcome to “Rediscover Macedonia,” Northwest Washington Synod-style. “Rediscover Macedonia: A Spirit of Gratitude and Generosity” is an ELCA stewardship emphasis being interpreted in unique ways by synods across the U.S.

The ELCA picked a great story for the emphasis. What is it? Take time to read it in 2 Corinthians 7:16–8:1-7.

Here’s the trailer: In the first century, Macedonia was primarily a rural community in northern Greece along the trade route created by a great road, the Via Egnatia, from Greece to Constantinople. The Romans built this road after establishing Macedonia as a province with a capital at Thessalonica after 148 B.C.

During Paul’s time the Macedonians experienced many struggles, including poverty and illness. Paul founded several churches in Macedonia, including Philippi and Thessalonica. He came to know these people well through his visits and letters.

He wrote to the church in Corinth: “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity

on their part” (2 Corinthians 8:1-2).

The abundant joy and overflowing generosity referenced by Paul was in response to a financial appeal for the church in Judea, which was experiencing a famine. It is this spirit of joy and generosity that Paul lifts up to the Christians in Corinth.

Today our churches are connected by our faith in Jesus Christ and the spiritual blessings we receive from each other through the Spirit. As Christians this is part of our spiritual DNA: gratitude, abundant joy, generosity.

Members of Northwest Washington Synod churches pooled their gratitude, questions and joy last fall as they expanded the idea

of stewardship to include creation. In September, as the first step of our Macedonia emphasis, we held a Care of Creation conference at St. John United Lutheran Church, Seattle.

Kari Lipke, an intern for St. John United and the Faith Action Network, wrote about what she learned at the conference:

“On Sept. 24, I listened to Paul Johnson, a professor at the University of Washington, Seattle, present data on anthropogenic (human-created) climate change: due to the effects carbon dioxide and methane emissions have on the atmosphere, most of the Arctic ice will be gone by 2040, and global warming will



Bishop Wm Chris Boerger (left); Paul Johnson, professor at the University of Washington, Seattle; and Lee Bjorklund, a member of Bethany Lutheran Church, Seattle, at the Care of Creation conference.

Lindberg, an ELCA pastor, serves Lutheran Community Services Northwest.

accelerate tremendously once that occurs. There will be pain and suffering. The process is in motion. We cannot prevent global warming but only mitigate it, thereby hopefully reducing some of the effects.

“In the face of such a reality, Johnson cited this final statistic: 33 percent of Americans believe that anthropogenic global warming is ‘a very serious problem.’ While 58 percent believe it is a ‘serious problem,’ it is typically not until we are willing to add that extra adjective ‘very’ to the phrase that we become motivated to work personally and politically for change.

“A few days after Johnson’s presentation at the conference, word came through the international press that Wagari Maathai, the ‘Tree

Mother of Africa’ and the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, had died.

“Maathai believed that restoring the environment—in her case by planting trees in a ‘green belt’ to stop desertification and restore water supplies—would lead to economic stability for the poor. That would, in turn, dissuade people from joining factions prone to war and other violence. Maathai’s Green Belt Movement planted 30 million trees and launched the democratic movement in Kenya. The group also inspired the U.N. to launch a worldwide effort that resulted in 11 billion trees being planted.

“In *Dirt! The Movie*, Maathai gave insight into how she and others were able to sustain their activism in

the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. She told the story of a hummingbird that carried one drop of water at a time to fight a forest fire while animals like the elephant asked why it was wasting its energy. ‘It turns to them and tells them, “I’m doing the best I can.” And that to me is what all of us should do. We should always feel like the hummingbird,’ Maathai said. ‘I certainly don’t want to be like the animals watching as the planet goes down the drain. I will be a hummingbird. I will do the best I can.’”

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Life in a time of climate, economic and social change encourages us to be both hummingbirds and Macedonians. We are to be stewards of creation, addressing needs with the gifts we’ve been given.

At the Care of Creation event, participants learned about greening their congregations in many ways—from recharging electric cars in their parking lots to gardening on parking strips to creating wildlife sanctuaries on their properties.

So what’s next for the synod’s Rediscover Macedonia emphasis?

• **Save the date:** Diane Jacobson will serve as keynote speaker at the annual Synod Stewardship Event on Sept. 29. Jacobson, director of the ELCA Book of Faith initiative, wrote a dynamic Bible study for Rediscover Macedonia.

• **Video clips:** Filmmaker Mary Peterson will be working on short videos to help congregational members figure out where their offerings go in service to our shared ministry.

Now you know that Rediscover Macedonia: A Spirit of Gratitude and Generosity is not a travel opportunity or a mystery emphasis. Rediscover Macedonia reminds churches that stewardship is not about what we have, it’s about what we share. □

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to do so. We were attempting to relieve suffering. We were trained to build filters for clean water. We were ready to teach sanitation. We brought economical improvements.

But by the second day in South Sudan we knew things weren’t going to happen as planned. It was clear that we wouldn’t be accomplishing clean water for those in need. Where had we erred? What had we failed to consider? Our answer (and I speak for the whole team) is “yes”: we are still confident that God directed our every moment, every action and every word.

While we focused on filters for clean water and a compostable latrine, God guided us to offer children’s books and teachers. As we looked for men to help build water filters, God chose the pastor in Malual to step up his leadership and the young men to begin considering how they could make a difference for the future.

In our perspective we were pro-

viding a fishing boat, nets, sewing machine and corn grinder to stimulate the economy so one day the village could afford a school. God supplied the village with those items so they would be more able to sustain day to day healthy living.

As one team member said, “God’s grace intervened at every turn.” And now as we ask, “What’s next?” we rely on this same truth. God’s grace, wisdom, strength and courage will intervene at every turn.

We went on this first mission trip because our congregation’s membership includes South Sudanese families. We went to their first home to help their people because God opened the way.

We aren’t done. It wasn’t just a one-time excursion for a small group. God will keep opening the way. Listen and pray God’s way forward. □

The Rev. Jane Prestbye
Prestbye is pastor of Kent [Wash.] Lutheran Church.