

# Faith & Fellowship

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January/February 2024



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**FAITH & FELLOWSHIP**

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# They Will Be My Children

TIM MATHIESEN

Recently, my family took care of three foster kids for an afternoon so the foster parents could attend an event out of town. The kids spent most of the time playing with Legos at our dining room table. My compassionate 15-year-old stated, while we were alone in the kitchen, “We should adopt them!” I thought about how these kids don’t have a permanent home yet. Even though they have a wonderful family who loves them and cares for their needs, they don’t have a father and mother who have committed to unconditionally calling them their children. So, yes, I considered it for a moment. And then, I walked to the table to help one of the boys find some missing pieces for the Lego X-Wing.

As I read Revelation 21, describing the coming of the “New Jerusalem,” I take note of its glorious revealing as a loud voice proclaims with excitement, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people.” I imagine how magnificent it will all be. It will be more beautiful than the most incredible sunset and more majestic than the most brilliant mountain range. However, what jumps out at me are the words, “I will be their God and they will be my children” (v.7b). A couple verses before, God joyfully shouts, “I am making everything new!” Joyful, not because he gets to show off his latest building project, but because the redemption plan that was finished at the cross is now bringing his children to himself.

## Revelation 21:6-8

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”



Joaquincorbalan / Envato Elements

We also need to keep in mind that, in the previous chapter, John witnesses a horrifying scene as Satan deceives nations and surrounds God’s army. In response, God sends fire from heaven, destroying Satan’s army, and throwing him into the lake of fire to “be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10b). There will be great unrest during that time as evil is destroyed and death is defeated by our just and holy God. At the same time, God’s heart will be breaking as some of his creation is sent to eternal damnation (20:14). He loves them and his ultimate desire is to call them his children.

John shares in his Gospel how to become a child of God. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). Starting in Genesis, right after the Fall, God promises the serpent, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15). We see the thread of God’s promise of salvation pulled through the Bible, all the way to the end of Revelation, where God tells John, “Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children” (21:7b).

Did you hear that? The Creator of this universe, our perfect, holy God promises you, me, and all who trust in Jesus, “I will be their God and they will be my children.”

As you receive Jesus, you are his child. I am his child.

John 1 also describes what it means to be a child of God: “Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (1:13). Through the dark moments of this sinful world, the violence of the Last Battle, and the heartbreaking and joyous final judgment, we can know that we have a holy, righteous, and just God who doesn’t simply love us, but calls us his children. Whether we already have a loving earthly family or we are waiting for one (like the three foster kids who spent the afternoon in our home), we can all look forward to an eternal home with our God, who declares with absolute love and authority that we are his children, “not of natural descent... but born of God!”

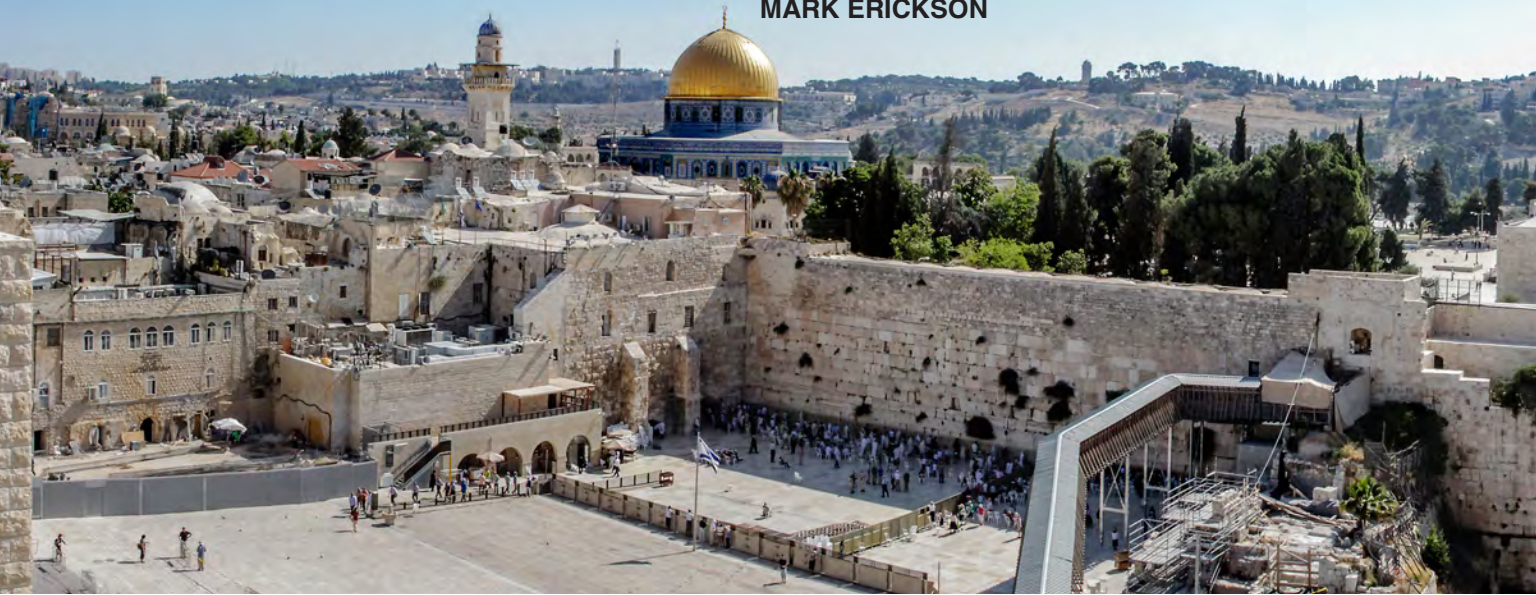
So while we are here, in this broken world, Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). His heart is breaking as he anticipates sending any of his creation to eternal damnation. Does my heart break for my neighbor? As a Disciple-Making Church, we are called to share the love that God has for our neighbors through word and deed, as a reflection of the God who loves them and desires to hold them in his arms as his children.

*Tim Mathiesen serves as Director of Communications & Prayer for the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.*



# Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

MARK ERICKSON



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**Jerusalem** has served as a powerful reminder and symbol since about 1000 BC, when King David made it his capital city. It is a reminder of God's fearsome judgment and his unfailing grace to both the faithful Hebrews of the Old Testament and the Christians of the New Testament.

## Jerusalem as a Reminder

The great Temple in Jerusalem was patterned after the Tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting, which the Israelites carried with them during the Exodus from Egypt under Moses on their way to the Promised Land. It was for them the locus of the presence of God, both literally and figuratively. Through God's continued self-revelation, the people of Israel learned that out of all the peoples of the world, he chose the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be his people (see for example, Gen 17:3-8 and Jer 31:33).

As King David's reign transitioned to King Solomon's, the Tabernacle was retired and replaced by the Temple. Jerusalem became great and highly respected among the surrounding nations. Led by these two kings, God's people showed their obedient response to his love and discipline through their worship, prayer, generosity, and mission. David's and Solomon's writings in Psalms and Proverbs served as reminders of God's faithfulness and justice to his people. It was a Golden Age for Israel.

Soon after Solomon's death, however, the nation of Israel split in two: "Israel" to the north and "Judah" to the south.

Jerusalem was now the capital of Judah, while Israel set up heathen shrines in Dan and Bethel, and appointed non-Levitical priests to discourage the people from returning to worship in Jerusalem.

The northern nation of Israel was largely rebellious and unfaithful to God, despite prophetic warnings of consequential destruction. In 721 BC, God allowed the Assyrians to overthrow them. Judah, the southern kingdom, retained the royal dynasty of King David in Jerusalem and in their worship in the Temple, but later kings led them into disobedience and idolatry as well. God spoke to both rebellious nations through his prophets, but few would listen or repent of their wrongdoing.

Eventually, in 586 BC, God allowed the dreaded Babylonians to invade Judah, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem as well as the beautiful Temple (2 Kgs 24-25). Thousands of men, women, and children were resettled in Babylon and, for seventy years, Jerusalem and the Temple lay in ruin.

After the allotted time, God reminded his exiled people of his promises to them by raising up a number of leaders such as the prophets Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Through these leaders, God prepared his people to return to

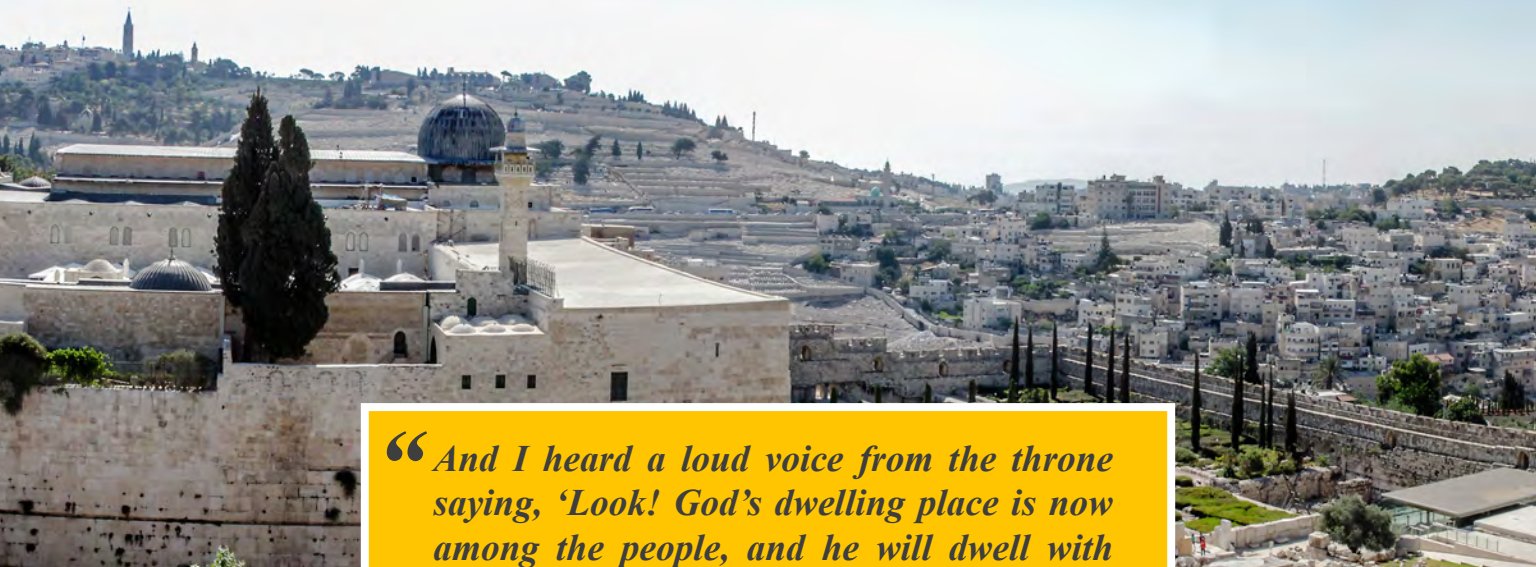
Jerusalem where they would rebuild his Temple. The new Temple, however, fell short of the glory of the first Temple. People who were old enough to remember the older Temple wept in despair (Ezra 3:10-12). In response to their disappointment, the prophet Haggai encouraged these faithful people with a Messianic prophecy.

"The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty. —Haggai 2:9

This "Second Temple" in Jerusalem would eventually be enlarged and decorated by King Herod the Great. Although the construction, which had been started in about 20 BC, was still unfinished when the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD, the prophesied glory was, of course, to see the days of the Messiah Jesus before its destruction.

## Jerusalem as a Metaphor

Even today, the Temple remains in ruins. Still standing is its western wall, now known as the Wailing Wall. The absence of the Temple has clearly changed Judaism in that there is no longer a central place of worship where



***“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’***

*—Revelation 21:3*

**”**

animals may be sacrificed as instructed by the Torah (the written Law of the Jews). The “reminder” of Jerusalem has since become more of a “symbol” as a result of the teaching ministry of Jesus and of his apostles, especially Paul and John (the disciple Jesus loved).

We read in John 4 of a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Her question was whether one should worship in the Temple as the Jews insisted, or if it was acceptable for people to gather on Mount Gerizim as was advocated by the Samaritans. Jesus asserted that true worship will one day take place “in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), indicating that future worship would no longer treat location with any importance, but that true worship would be genuine and personal.

The letter of Paul to the Galatians is an appeal to a Christian congregation that is apparently moving to embrace the law once more, forsaking their free gift of grace through faith in Christ.

In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul draws an analogy for his readers, comparing their attempts at keeping the law of God perfectly to the “present city of Jerusalem” (4:25), which remains in slavery to the law. Whereas, a person who lives by faith is free from that law and is

like the “Jerusalem that is above [which] is free” (4:26). “Present Jerusalem,” in that time, was stuck in the mire of their many laws, while the unseen “Jerusalem that is above” freely offered a life that was pleasing to God apart from law-keeping. This is the gospel Jesus gave to the Samaritan woman.

### **Jerusalem as a Promise**

The Revelation concludes with a stirring vision of the destruction of the whole of fallen creation. But in contrast to the nightmarish happenings on earth, John describes a “New Jerusalem” emerging from a “New Heaven” (Rev 21:1-2). It is a beautiful sight to behold, but there is no Temple in the city! As quickly as John notes this, he understands that “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its Temple” (21:22). He then follows with the oft-repeated line expressing the fulfillment of God’s greatest desire: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’” (21:3). The promise is repeated again in verse 7, but personalized even more, “Those who are victorious will

inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”

The message of Jerusalem is that this world, and life as we know it, is finite and will suddenly and completely dissolve into nothing one day. At that time, the eternal destinations of all people will be revealed. As Christians, we need not fear this eventuality because God promises us a return to the final Jerusalem where we can worship in his presence. As we consider the symbol of Jerusalem today, our concern should be for those who do not heed its warning, nor trust in its promise: friends, neighbors, family, any who do not yet put their hope in God’s goodness and trust in his perfect justice.



*Rev. Mark Erickson is a retired pastor of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, living with his wife Kristin in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.*



# Grace... the Greatest Gift

KIRSTEN HOLZNER



**A**s the air ambulance landed on the tarmac in Paris, France, I was placed on a gurney and rushed to a major hospital in downtown Paris. The icy February air bit at my cheeks, so different from the balmy warm air of Bokoro, Chad, where I'd been just a few days earlier. Betsy, my "miracle baby," born after we waited seven years and through two pregnancy losses, was in the arms of our missionary friend Agathe—a midwife as well as a French citizen. Her presence and caretaking was God's blessing for the flight and for the next 24 hours as the hospital didn't allow me to have my infant daughter with me on the maternity ward.

An ultrasound was done, and the physician matter-of-factly told me, "There is very little hope for this pregnancy. The baby's size is only second percentile for what she should be at her gestational age of 26 weeks, and there is so little amniotic fluid. If she is to be born now, you cannot expect that she will live. This just isn't a healthy pregnancy." (I'd been sick with malaria in November as well.) Three days before, I'd been working to prepare our home in Bokoro for our guests from Triumph LB Church (Moorhead, MN and West Fargo, ND), pushing myself through a terrible headache, weakness, and

dizziness. I ignored the symptoms, but I couldn't ignore the regular contractions that tightened around my abdomen and radiated painfully into my back.

The rarely-utilized airstrip in Bokoro was quickly prepared as the small MAF plane came to fly me out for medical care in the Chadian capital of N'Djamena. The French doctor there diagnosed me with malaria, amoebic dysentery, and strep throat. No wonder my body had gone into premature labor! By God's provision, she had access to medication that slowed down the contractions, but she insisted I needed to be airlifted out of the country for further treatment.

The visiting team from Triumph jumped into action. Along with our LBIM missionaries on the ground in N'Djamena, Pastor Jeff Seaver and the others mobilized prayer for this unborn baby and our family in crisis, as well as taking a trip out to Bokoro to pick up some necessities for the family, and to close up our place for the foreseeable future.

Back in Paris, I felt overwhelming peace. Another pregnancy so soon had been an unexpected surprise after waiting so long for Betsy; I had been amazed to realize God was blessing me with two in two years! Now, recognizing that it might

actually be taken away, I felt resigned to his will and his purpose. I was so thankful for my restored faith and for the community of believers upholding us in prayer. I was able to pray, "not my will, Lord, but yours be done!" Two years earlier I'd been struggling with doubt and dark discouragement. It was the last year of our first term in Chad, and we had suffered many losses and set-backs during that time. But God had remained faithful to me despite my faithlessness and had given me a fully restored faith by the time Betsy was born. Now, in this moment of crisis, I knew I could rest on his unfailing love.

When I was stabilized enough to travel, the Paris medical team cleared me for the overseas flight as long as I flew first class to be able to stay fully reclined. By this time my husband and our two older children, Lucas and Hans, had joined me. After a brief stay with "friends of a friend" in the missionary community, we were all booked on a flight back to Fargo. Once there, I was immediately admitted to the hospital and told to prepare myself, that this delivery would most likely be premature and by C-section. But something miraculous happened. Every time they did an ultrasound, the amniotic fluid had increased, and the baby was



***“The beauty of being his children is that we can trust in both his sovereignty as well as his goodness. We can rest in his love, knowing that because we are clothed in Christ, we are wrapped in his love, and each and every one of us is his ‘beloved.’***

*— Kirsten Holzner*

**”**



showing growth. They discharged me after a few days, telling me I must absolutely stay on complete bed rest and that every few days I must come back for another ultrasound because I was still likely to deliver prematurely. Again, the prayers of many were answered, and little by little the baby continued to grow and somehow thrive!

That baby, who just 11 weeks earlier was so compromised and clinging to life inside of me, was—by the grace of God—born full-term and full size. She grew to be the tallest of the women in our family, and recently competed in the state championship race for high school cross-country. She excels in every way. Every year on her birthday, I tell her the story of her perilous beginning and miraculous birth. It is good to recount what God has done for us, with thankfulness.

Three months after her birth we were back in Bokoro, arranging for a “naming ceremony.” The mats were laid out, large platters of food prepared for all our guests, and hot sweet “chai” distributed to welcome each one. Before my women friends and I distributed the platters of food, Marcos stood and held up little Kathryn Grace for all the gathered Arabic-speaking neighbors and Bilala friends to see. With the words of his testimony, he

glorified God and shared that she is called “Naima” (the Chadian Arabic word for “grace”) because her birth was a gift from God that we neither expected nor deserved. Likewise, he explained, God had sent his own son, “Isa al-Masih” (the Chadian Arabic word for Jesus Christ) to be our substitute and take the punishment we deserved by dying on the cross. He is our grace... the greatest gift we could never earn on our own merit!

Now I know that this story could have easily ended with the loss of my precious girl. I have stories of loss and grief as well that I could share, for our God is glorified just as much when we experience loss. It is in his faithfulness that we can have hope and show others that same comfort that we received. The beauty of being his children is that we can trust in both his sovereignty as well as his goodness. We can rest in his love, knowing that because we are clothed in Christ, we are wrapped in his love, and each and every one of us is his “beloved.”

God is indeed doing a new thing in us. He has us on his mission, whether that is in Bokoro, or Paris, or Fergus Falls, Minnesota; wherever he leads us! Today you may feel weak. You may feel tiny and insignificant, just clinging to a chia-seed of faith. That’s okay. Although this

world is broken and we experience the consequences of sin and suffering, we also get to share the beautiful promises of God! The book of Revelation tells us that one day, “They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (21:3-5). Our sovereign, omnipotent, holy God promises, “... I will be their God and they will be my children” (21:7).

God is the author of life, and he is also the author of faith. He does the work in us and through us if we are willing to look to him to sustain us and wait on him to act. He can bring forth life in the least expected ways and cause it to flourish, just like the desert rose blooming in dry season in the Sahel region of Chad.

*Kirsten Holzner is a former missionary to Chad, alongside her husband Marcos and four children (2001-2012), and currently a student at Lutheran Brethren Seminary and a part-time Parish Nurse at Good Shepherd Lutheran Brethren Church in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.*



PhotoGranary / Lightstock

**New!**

## Bible Study Resource

Welcome to the first of many resources provided by *Faith & Fellowship* magazine! Our goal is to provide a practical resource for you, your small group, or your family that can be easily implemented and applied, centered on the theme of each issue of the magazine.

For this issue, we've created a **four-week Bible study on Revelation 21:1-8**, along with discussion questions and companion videos. It is our hope and prayer that these will serve you and your congregations as you dwell in his Word and seek to join Jesus on his mission.

Each week, read Revelation 21:1-8, read the devotional, and answer the reflection questions. An action step is provided for you or your small group to live out what you have been learning over the previous four weeks. Companion videos are also available for you on our website at [www.CLBA.org/magazine](http://www.CLBA.org/magazine).

### WEEK ONE: GOD'S DWELLING PLACE

Where is God? That is our constant cry as human beings. For the Christian, seasons of suffering or doubt can cause us to question God's proximity to us. For the non-believer, every upturned stone in their search for meaning is also an unwitting attempt to answer the same question: Where is God? They think, "Happiness eludes me, so I guess God is not here." But in verse 3 of our passage, John gives a more cogent answer. "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Where is God's dwelling place? It is with his people! Immanuel is not far off, but with us. He became one of the riffraff and ragamuffins that make up this teeming sea of humanity. In his holiness, he didn't distance himself but drew near to us, and he has the scars to prove it.

#### Reflection Questions

1. Read John 1:14. What do you observe about the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling among us?
2. What are some "stones" humans overturn in their search for ultimate meaning?
3. How might your neighbor need you to "draw near" to them?

### WEEK TWO: THE SEA WAS NO MORE

In the ancient Near East, the sea was seen as a force of primordial chaos, the embodiment of fear and anxiety and disorder. This is why ancient mariners wrote "There Be Dragons" on the uncharted waters of their maps. With no GPS nor depthfinder, it's easy to let your imagination run wild. Here in verse 1, John says that "there was no longer any sea." He is getting a glimpse of a world free of threats to our wellbeing. This is paradise restored, and his language is emphatic: NO MORE death (not just less death). NO MORE crying (not just fewer tears). NO MORE pain (not just fewer cancer patients). For believers, this is our future, too: A sin-free, un-fallen world where—as J.R.R. Tolkien puts it—everything sad will come untrue.

#### Reflection Questions

1. What "sea" (evil forces of disorder, unknown, chaos) do you face? What "sea" does your neighbor face?
2. How does sin bring disorder and chaos to our lives and the lives of others?
3. Read Colossians 2:13-15. What happened at the Cross? Why is this good news?

### WEEK THREE: WITHOUT COST

I remember a test I once took in seminary. One of the questions was true/false, and the statement was simply this: "Grace is free." How would you have answered? It was intended to be a trick question. From God's perspective, grace is actually incredibly costly. It cost him the life of his only beloved Son. For believers however—the beneficiaries of Jesus' work—grace is free, given through faith and not by works. It is received, not achieved. That is the truth John reminds us of in verse 6: "He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.'" In a transactional world where everything must be paid for and earned, Jesus offers waters of eternal life without cost. They are not for sale, but offered as a gift, obtained not by doing but by believing.

#### Reflection Questions

1. How does a transactional mindset differ from a grace-centered mindset?
2. In what ways does "performance-ism" (the belief that your identity rests on your achievements) affect you on a day-to-day basis? Does it ever infiltrate your relationship with God?
3. Read Isaiah 55:1-5. What do you notice about "the waters" offered here? How should this impact our witness for Christ (see verse 5)?





## Revelation 21:1-8

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

<sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

<sup>6</sup> He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. <sup>7</sup> Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. <sup>8</sup> But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

### WEEK FOUR:

#### THE FIERY LAKE OF BURNING SULFUR

Verse 8 is one we might be tempted to gloss over: “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all the liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” When it comes to faith in Christ, the stakes are eternal. As C.S. Lewis puts it in *The Great Divorce*: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’”<sup>1</sup> Even in Christian circles the idea of hell is an unpopular one, yet perhaps this is for the wrong reasons. Jesus doesn’t use hell as a scare tactic to frighten people into heaven. Fear is never of the Lord (2 Tim 1:7). Yet the reality of hell can awaken compassion, even grief, within us for those who have yet to experience the Source of all love and goodness and salvation.

#### Reflection Questions

1. Contrast John’s descriptions of heaven and hell in this passage.
2. Read Matthew 25:31-46. What do you notice about the final judgment? What distinguishes the sheep from the goats?
3. How would you respond if a skeptic asked you, “How can a loving God send people to hell?”

### WEEK FIVE to EIGHT:

#### ACTION: Blessing Others

As a group, identify four families that you know who need to experience God’s love and grace right now. As God draws near to us, let’s draw near to those around us and share the love of Jesus. They might be a part of your church family, a co-worker, a classmate, or an unbelieving neighbor. Over the next four weeks, find a way to uniquely bless each family (one family per week). Maybe it’s working together to provide a meal. Maybe it’s inviting a lonely elderly couple to join you on a sledding outing. Or maybe it’s blessing an exhausted young couple by providing childcare, so they can enjoy a date night. Continue to build these relationships by praying for them on a regular basis, sending encouraging cards, and sharing your faith as the Lord leads.

#### List the names here:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

### COMPANION RESOURCES:

#### ONLINE VIDEOS and PRINTABLES

To assist you as you organize and lead your family, a small group, or Sunday School class through this study, **companion videos** and **printable PDF** files are available online for you to stream and download.

**GO TO:** [www.CLBA.org/magazine](http://www.CLBA.org/magazine)



**As you use the resources** and think of any way we can improve this resource, please let us know.

**Contact:** [clb@CLBA.org](mailto:clb@CLBA.org)



*Rev. Luke Kjolhaug is Pastor at Elim Lutheran Church in Osakis, Minnesota.*

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*, 75. New York: HarperCollins, 1946.

## CLB Shared Ministry: Contribution Report

**\$3,200,000**

2023-24 Fiscal Year Goal

**49.5%**

**\$1,585,611**

Received Through 12/20/23

The CLB Fiscal Year ends April 30, 2024.

View the latest contribution report at  
[www.CLBA.org/give-online](http://www.CLBA.org/give-online)

# Stewardship & Partnership

**DOUG ROGNESS**

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...*

—Philippians 1:3-5

**G**ospel partnership is a vital part of the ministry at Triumph Lutheran Brethren Church (Moorhead, MN and West Fargo, ND). God has equipped Triumph to do many things in his kingdom, but we can't do it all! Strategic partnerships are essential to extend our reach across the street and around the world. We at Triumph partner with organizations in our community and globally that are proclaiming the gospel in word and deed.

Triumph has been relying on Lutheran Brethren International Mission (LBIM) for decades. LBIM extends our gospel impact beyond North America, carrying the gospel message across the globe. As a congregation, when we ask ourselves how we can steward our money and energy well, LBIM has been a crucial part of the answer.

As a local congregation, we can wrap our mind around bringing the gospel to our community. However, we do not have the resources to bring the gospel to

the ends of the earth. We might be able to figure out what it looks like to cross cultural barriers, but we certainly cannot pull it off. We cannot recruit. We cannot train. We cannot send. And we surely cannot sustain a mission movement. Our partnership with LBIM is priceless to us because they can recruit, they can train, and they can send. And they are built to sustain this global mission movement.

And how is this mission movement sustained? Through you and me. You see, this is a two-way partnership. We rely on LBIM to spread the gospel where we cannot, and LBIM relies on local congregations and individuals like you, me, and all of us here at Triumph. A true two-way partnership in the gospel!

Our focus as a congregation is on a specific people group in Chad called the Bilala. Our goal is to reach this people group with the gospel of Jesus Christ and to see a Church planted among them that will effectively share the gospel with their own people. We do this by sending

missionaries, funding holistic ministries like water wells, and sending short-term missionaries to bring encouragement to our long-term missionaries on the ground. This past December, a team from Triumph spent a week in Thailand encouraging our missionaries and leading children's ministry programming during LBIM's first-ever Global Summit. After the team returned, they shared all about what God is doing in and through our missionaries in Chad, Taiwan, and Japan. What a blessing!

Our partnership with LBIM provides Triumph with an opportunity that we would never have on our own. We thank God for the work of LBIM and all that they do to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to those who need it most.

*Rev. Doug Rogness is the Lead Pastor at Triumph Lutheran Brethren Church, Moorhead, Minnesota and West Fargo, North Dakota.*

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# Theology is for Everyone

HEATHER KNUTSON



**T**heology defines what we believe and explains how that belief is supported by the Bible. I would say I was a believer, but I was also one of the biggest offenders of not knowing what I believed. Why didn't I try to learn? My first excuse was that I was too busy; my kids needed too much of me, and I felt like I didn't have any time to spare. The second excuse was that my husband was working as a pastor; he had all these years of biblical study and knowledge, making it easy for me to fall into the trap of thinking it was his job to know the deeper things, not mine. I had convinced myself that the study of theology was only for specific people, for theologians, for pastors and professors.

As my kids got older, they became more inquisitive and asked a lot of questions. Many of the questions they asked were really difficult, and I started to realize that I should have answers for them. I couldn't just pass off the responsibility and tell them to go ask their dad!

Although my husband worked in the church, I perhaps had more opportunities to share my faith than he did. At that time, I was the only young mom with kids in our congregation, so to make close friends, I had to go outside the church. I made friends with other moms who would bring their kids over and we would talk and drink coffee together. Most of these friends weren't Christians, and so as we talked, they started asking me questions. One even asked me to explain the Trinity! I fumbled my way through an answer, unsure if it was even correct. That was another big wake up call for me. If I claimed to believe that Christ really mattered, then I needed to know everything I could about him and about God's Word. I definitely couldn't tell my friends to go ask my husband. That would've been super awkward!

I think, as women, so much of our focus is needed in the here and now, on our daily lives and routines, that we



Screenshots from [www.WMCLB.org/training.html](http://www.WMCLB.org/training.html)

lose sight of God in us and our eternal glory. Sometimes I have found that women's Bible studies will settle for the shallower lessons. They don't dig deep into those Scripture passages that make us uncomfortable, or that we don't understand. Instead they stick with the more common messages and stories, because they're familiar and easier.

Gender segregated Bible studies don't help this. While I have personally benefited a great deal from women's studies and have been taught by many wise women, I do think we are missing out on a treasure of knowledge. Along with that, pastors often don't get involved with women's ministries, tending to have a hands-off approach by leaving the women to teach the women. I have no doubt that it would be daunting for a man to teach an all women's class, but I would encourage men in the church by saying that we do want to learn from you! Even if a pastor chooses not to lead the women's studies himself, he can strive to equip female leaders with solid resources and to encourage a strong grasp of theology.

We should all desire for our faith to grow richer and deeper, remembering that we don't need spiritual milk, we need solid food! We need the meat and potatoes that Scripture can offer. The deeper we dig into the Bible, the more we learn we don't know it all. So, dig deep for great riches and even greater understanding.

Grab your Bible and read a portion of it that you haven't read in a while, or maybe

have never read! If you come across something you don't understand, ask someone who might know. If there's no one around, buy a commentary and see what it says. Another great resource is the CLB app ([clba.org/app](http://clba.org/app)). If you click on *Resources and Documents*, there is a list of our denomination's position papers. These explain what the CLB believes biblically about tough issues, such as the role of women in the Church, sexuality, euthanasia, and lots of others. Also see Dr. Tim Ysteboe's book, *We Believe*.

Don't fall for the lie that theology isn't for you. Don't tell yourself that you need a degree in biblical studies or to learn Greek and Hebrew to begin to understand the Bible's deeper meanings. Theology is for everyone, whether you are in the throes of raising little babies or you're the nurse at the hospital; whether you're trying to decide if you actually believe for yourself what your parents taught you or are wondering how to explain the Trinity to your atheist friend.

Teaching women theology is teaching women to know what we believe, and what we believe about the Bible matters. A lot. This teaching is for you.

*Heather Knutson is a writer and contributor to Women's Ministries, living in Fergus Falls with her husband Clint and their children.*



**Learn more:** [www.WMCLB.org](http://www.WMCLB.org)  
**Contact:** [WMCLBContact@gmail.com](mailto:WMCLBContact@gmail.com)



Lutheran Brethren Seminary staff at the 2023 TRACS conference:  
(L-R) Kathy Doering, Dr. Troy Tysdal, and Dr. Brad Pribbenow.

### *Accredit*<sup>1</sup> verb

ac·cred·it ə-ˈkre-dət

accredited; accrediting; accredits (transitive verb)

1: to give official authorization to or approval of:

a: to provide with credentials especially: to send (an envoy) with letters of authorization

(E.g., accredit an ambassador to France)

b: to recognize or vouch for as conforming with a standard

(E.g., The program was accredited by the American Dental Association.)

c: to recognize (an educational institution) as maintaining standards that qualify the graduates for admission to higher or more specialized institutions or for professional practice

2: to consider or recognize as outstanding

(E.g., an accredited scientist)

# The Benefits of Accreditation

**BRAD PRIBBENOW**

**T**here are numerous areas of service in our public life for which we demand a person who has official “accreditation.” Consider, for example, the choice of a surgeon. On the whole, I believe all of us would be much more comfortable utilizing the services of a surgeon who has been educated in a reputable (accredited) institution and who has proven his/her knowledge and skill to a group of qualified evaluators (accreditors). A surgeon’s certification by this accrediting body would give you confidence that he/she is qualified and, thus, can be trusted. The same might apply to an accountant, or a mechanic, or a financial planner. When we’re placing our well-being (whether physical, financial, or mechanical) in the hands of another person, we want to know that this person knows what they’re doing and that they can successfully deliver what they are promising. This kind of assurance is provided, in great part, by the work of accreditation.

### **Definitions**

Lutheran Brethren Seminary (LBS) operates under this type of professional and educational accreditation.

LBS is accredited by the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, or TRACS for short. TRACS is an international accrediting agency, working with post-

secondary schools from all over the world. They were founded in 1979, and they currently accredit just over 100 schools in twenty-six states and eight overseas locations. Their mission is “to promote the welfare, interests, and development of postsecondary institutions whose mission is characterized by a distinctly Christian purpose” (see [www.TRACS.org](http://www.TRACS.org)).

TRACS is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

### **The Process of Accreditation**

LBS began the process of accreditation in earnest in 2008. We received candidate status with TRACS in 2009 and had the “candidate” label removed in 2012. This process began with a thorough analysis (called a self-study) of all aspects of our organization, including our governance policies and procedures, financial qualifications, faculty credentials, student learning outcomes, student services, and publications. This self-study led to a site visit by TRACS representatives, which ultimately culminated in an appearance before the TRACS commission, at which time LBS was officially granted its accredited status. Since that time, LBS also received accreditation for a distance education option (2013). Maintaining this status involves regular and ongoing assessments, including an Annual Operations Report (which could be considered a mini self-study) as well





## GIVING HEARTS DAY

Giving Hearts Day is coming **February 8!**

Financial contributions by generous donors cover nearly 75% of the cost to prepare future pastors, missionaries, and church leaders. Since 2019, an average of 45% of LBS's annual contributions have been received in support of Giving Hearts Day.

To contribute to Giving Hearts Day on or before February 8, 2024:

**www.LBS.edu/give**

(Select "Giving Hearts Day")

25%  
Tuition

75%  
Annual  
contributions

as more in-depth reports carried out at five- and ten-year intervals. The ten-year assessment involves a new self-study.

### What Accreditation is Not

Engaging with an outside accrediting body in the way LBS engages with TRACS may raise some concerns about influence: Does TRACS influence LBS's statement of faith, mission statement, or course content? The answer to all of these questions is, "No." TRACS does not require any specific statement of faith (our statement of faith remains the exact same statement of faith held by the Church of the Lutheran Brethren), mission statement, or course content. They do not tell us what we should believe or what we should teach. They only prompt us to clarify these details and to assess if/how we are functioning in a way that is consistent with them. In other words, TRACS does not tell us what to believe or teach, rather they prompt us for evidence that shows whether (and to what degree) we are functioning in line with what we say we believe or teach.

### Benefits of Accreditation

So, what benefit is there to accreditation? And, why do we believe it is important for LBS to be accredited?

- Accreditation serves our students and our churches by helping LBS be as effective as possible. Accreditation prompts LBS to review and clarify

our policies, procedures, educational outcomes, and support resources so that we can best serve our students and accomplish our mission statement. This process invites LBS into regular and consistent self-evaluation. I can honestly say that we carry out some form of self-evaluation at LBS every month. This self-evaluation helps us to sharpen our aims and procedures by bringing about greater clarity and alignment with our policies and outcomes.

- Accreditation helps our students who desire to go on with more schooling. Because LBS is accredited, our graduates are able to gain access to doctoral programs as they pursue advanced degrees. CLB congregations often benefit from this, too, since a number of these doctoral programs are completed by those who are currently serving as CLB pastors.
- Accreditation has served a number of our graduates who have gone on to ministry as military chaplains. The U.S. military requires their chaplains to have gained a Master of Divinity degree from an accredited institution.
- Lastly, accreditation connects us with other like-minded Christian educational institutions and provides the opportunity to learn from them and, in some cases, serve them in their accreditation journey. These professional relationships have

proven very beneficial for LBS faculty and staff in our teaching and administrative roles.

### Conclusion

The accredited status that LBS has achieved and maintains is not the result of any one person's work. It is a team achievement. At the risk of missing someone by name, I want to acknowledge the following individuals who have invested much time and energy into this achievement: Mr. Mike Berry, Dr. Eugene Boe, Dr. David Veum, Dr. Allan Bjerkaas, Dr. Margareth Alexandersen, and Kathy Garvin. Because of the work of these individuals—and now the ongoing work of those who continue in their roles—LBS is able to offer high-quality education and ministry preparation in service of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. To God be the glory.

*Dr. Brad Pribbenow is the Dean of Lutheran Brethren Seminary.*

<sup>1</sup>Accredit Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster



*Pastor Orvin Solberg working with Confirmation students.*

# A Child-at-Heart Reaching a Child's Heart

**ORVIN SOLBERG**

You do not realize the length of time I have waited to use this next portion of scripture:

After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. —Acts 28:1-2 (ESV)

I am from Malta, but not the island. Rather, good old Malta, Montana. I am Orvin Solberg, the pastor here at Elim Lutheran Brethren in Malta. What a joy it is for me to have been asked and allowed to serve in the church that I've attended since a child in the early 1960s. In this position, I have had the honor of

doing many things: visitations, funerals, sermons, and fellowship. But, one of the unique things I get to do is disciple the youth of the next generation. My wife Thea and I have the great privilege of teaching middle school students in our Confirmation class, and let me tell you, it brings both of us great joy.

God is faithful and he hears and answers our prayers. We have prayed for a strong youth ministry here at Elim and God has greatly blessed us. God uses his people in so many ways to bring about his purposes. Shari Solberg is a dedicated force in this ministry at Elim. Shari calls parents of students, and spreads the word about our Wednesday evening program. In another way, there initially was only one girl in our sizable Confirmation

class. She might have felt awkward as the only female in the group, but she joined anyway and invited her friends. And they came! Wow! God used this one girl wonderfully.

To be a leader in youth ministry, it is helpful if you have a child's heart, and that has not departed from me, even at 66 years old. My childhood memories are of how stiff and rigid some teachers seemed. Keeping Confirmation light-hearted and fun benefits the students' engagement, yet even in fun we can still learn about God's great mercy, grace, and steadfast love. As we study the Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism in class, we start with questions #228 and #229. The first speaks of the "New Birth" and what it is. The second asks, "In what way does





Pastor Orvin Solberg's Confirmation students.

the New Birth affect you?” We start there, because many people, including adults, may think that being a Christian simply means going to church.

Nearly every week I write up my own quiz and give it to the students after we have a time of prayer. Since I develop my own questions, it's much easier to retain that child's heart. I typically start with a spiritual prompt, such as, “In your own words describe the New Birth.” And I follow up with a fun question like, “Do you like bananas better than pickled pigs feet?” I know it sounds silly, but you should see how the students relish taking these tests. When we make it enjoyable to learn, it creates a desire for the students to come back again and again.

Here is another question: “We know the

last book of the Bible is Revelation, but what is the book just before Revelation?” That's followed by, “How do you spell the word ‘impossible’?” You should have seen the reactions on that occasion. One student leaned over and asked another, “What does he mean by this?” It's very easy to spell a word you can see on the paper in front of you!

Over the years, I have purchased many candy bars for Confirmation. One evening, one of the young boys looked over at me as he was enjoying his pop and candy and said, “You know Orvin, you could save a lot of money if you stopped buying so many treats.” I laughed and said, “I know I could, but I won't.” This simple interaction gave me a perfect opportunity to share Jesus' parable of

“The Shrewd Manager.” The moral of the story? If we were as dedicated to accomplishing our objectives as the world is to accomplishing theirs, we would be reaching out to many more people.

I ask that you readers keep these youth in your prayers. It is a great joy to disciple the youth of the next generation, and it brings joy to the entire church body when we see them return eagerly each Wednesday.

Train up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

—Proverbs 22:6 (ESV)

*Orvin Solberg is the pastor of Elim Lutheran Brethren Church in Malta, Montana.*





# A Global Retreat for Intentional Care, Rest, and Renewal

DAN VENBERG

Our Lutheran Brethren International Mission (LBIM) missionary families live and serve in cultural contexts that are very different from their home cultures. They navigate life in different languages and minister in areas where Christian community is minimal. For these reasons and more, the life of our cross-cultural missionary families can feel lonely and isolated, leading to discouragement, burn-out, and a myriad of issues that negatively affect ministry. Intentional rest, renewal, and spiritual care are vital for long term health and productivity.

In late 2023, LBIM was blessed to facilitate, for the first time ever, a global LBIM missionary retreat. It was a significant undertaking. Our missionary families from far corners of the globe (Chad, Japan, and Taiwan) took a pause from their ministry contexts and navigated the complexities of international travel, making their way to the Suan Bua resort outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand. A staggering amount of car, train, and plane connections was orchestrated, and by God's grace, all arrived safely and on time.

On November 26, a week of retreat and renewal commenced... a week of

fellowship, sharing, laughing, crying, learning, praying, and playing together. Our theme for the week was "Joy in the Journey." Our speakers each took one of the four chapters of the book of Philippians, focusing on taking joy in all circumstances, finding joy in unity, knowing joy in God's grace, and being joyful in God's provision.

Joel and Liz Christenson and Chris and Suzanne Preistaff, our missionary care couples for Asia and Africa respectively, led the retreat. A team from Triumph LB Church (Moorhead, MN and West Fargo, ND) provided children's ministry programming. Rachel Roy and Rachel Christenson of Mount Bethel LB Church (Mount Bethel, PA) provided ministry in music and worship. Lisette Gabre, a TCK (Third Culture Kid) Consultant and People Care Specialist from OM (Operation Mobilization), spent a day with us, sharing her expertise with both kids and adults. President Paul Larson and wife Bee were also part of the retreat, as was the family of Pastor Sky Chen, the pastor of Victory Chupei Church, a congregation of the Chinese Lutheran Brethren Church of Taiwan, and the sending church of LBIM-Chad missionaries, the Daniel and Nancy Wen-

Wu family. I was blessed to have my wife Rachel and daughter Claire along, as well.

The days were interspersed with times for worship, hearing from the Word, corporate prayer, small group time, sharing time, children's programming, games, communion, and even a night of "LBIM's Got Talent!" It was such a joy to see our missionaries from different fields connect with each other, share stories, pray together, play together, laugh together, cry together, and rest together.

Spiritual retreats are not a new experience for our missionary families. We have been intentional about facilitating those in each of our fields for decades. But it has often been expressed what a blessing it would be to have a global retreat, where all our missionaries could gather in one place for connection and renewal. The task was daunting and expensive. But by God's grace, and the generosity of his people, this dream became a reality. Thank you, Church, for blessing our missionaries with this gift.

*Dan Venberg is the Director of International Mission for the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.*





## Retreat Reflections

We walked into the global conference barely four months into this new vocation. On the one hand, our minds are full of questions about what remains for future ministry. Yet there we were, fellowshiping with those the Church sent long before us, listening to story after story of how our Father has already been touching lives through them. The encouragement could not have been more timely.

*Matthias Szobody  
(France—preparing for ministry in Chad)*



Thank you for investing in our families. Thank you for this incredible opportunity to be served and loved on, and for sending teams to love our kids, as well. We are arriving back in Taiwan beaming with joy and hearts full from this time of encouragement!

*Sara Hosch (Taiwan)*



It was a wonderful time of replenishment after a difficult year. I feel much more rejuvenated and ready to get back to the people who need to hear the Word of God.

*David Narvesen (Chad)*



The first global LBIM retreat was more than I expected it to be. I can't find an expression to communicate how valuable it has been to form a connection with our Asian missionaries in conversation, prayer, and worship together, and in hearing their stories firsthand. Priceless!

*Teresa Szobody (Chad)*



A big shout out to all who invested so much to make this week possible and so amazing. We feel refreshed, encouraged, and better equipped to march forward. We come away reminded that we are not alone but rather a part of a big family that really cherishes each other. Wow!

*Ethan Christofferson (Taiwan)*



In the CLB stirs the heart of a missionary people. In the heart of a missionary God stirs the desire to gather people from all corners of the world. How fitting that those most scattered in the service of God's mission be brought together for a brief rendezvous of frontier disciple makers. At so many points and pictures held in my mind from this retreat, I sensed the smile of God. Thank you, Church, for your support and mission partnership!

*Paul Larson (President, Church of the Lutheran Brethren)*



# 2024 Biennial Convention

June 8-11, 2024

Disciple-Making Church

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[www.CLBA.org/bc24](http://www.CLBA.org/bc24)



## Don Raun Passes Away

LBIM missionary, Donald Raun, passed into the presence of his Lord and Savior on Monday, November 20, 2023. Don and his wife Orpha faithfully served as LBIM missionaries in Chad between the years of 1959-1999. Thirty of those years were spent in Leré, in a Bible translation and teaching ministry among the Moundang people. The last ten years were spent in Meskin, in a pioneering ministry among the unreached Bagirmi people. Don and Orpha are survived by three adult children, Carolee, Jonathon, and David. We are so grateful for the life and heritage of Don.



## Jeanive Solheim Turns 100!

Jeanive Solheim celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on December 9, 2023, at the Platte Care Center in Platte, South Dakota. Jeanive served in CLB ministry alongside her husband Rev. Gordon Solheim in Illinois, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota.



Jeanive Solheim with her birthday cake.

## Elder Ordination

On November 12, 2023, Aaron Hestekin was ordained as an elder of Living Hope Church, Menomonie, WI. Rev. John Wile officiated.



Foreground (L-R): Pastor John Wile, elder Aaron Hestekin. Background: Elder David Holstrom, Pastor Brent Juliot, elders John Neiderhauser and Steve Redmann.

## Kuans Commissioned

On Sunday, December 17, 2023, David and Janice Kuan-Chang were commissioned by the Lutheran Brethren Church of Taiwan as missionaries to Chad. They are the second Taiwanese couple to come alongside U.S. missionaries to reach the unreached peoples of Chad with the gospel. David and Janice will join Dan and Nancy Wen as missionary partners among the Bilala people. The service included special music, a testimony shared by David and Janice, and a video message from Dan Venberg (Director of LBIM), which ended with a short greeting from the missionaries in Chad. David and Janice sang special music accompanied by a choir. The song is a Chinese song called "Here I Am, I Will." View the commissioning service and the song with English subtitles here:

[www.CLBA.org/kuans](http://www.CLBA.org/kuans)



David, Janice, and Lucia following the commissioning ceremony.



David and Janice share their testimony.



Scan to visit  
[CLBA.org/kuans](http://CLBA.org/kuans)

## ROOTED



Registration is open for Rooted, a young adult gap-year program that starts in September. Rev. Roger Viksnes, Director of Rooted, says when a young adult joins Rooted, they are saying, "I want to intentionally grow in the most important identity that I will ever have: Being a disciple of Jesus Christ." This ministry is an exciting partnership between Tuscarora Inn & Conference Center (Mount Bethel, PA) and the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.

**LEARN MORE & REGISTER:**  
[www.tuscarora.org/rooted](http://www.tuscarora.org/rooted)

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## Feet in Two Realms

**T**he Christian's eternal realm is pictured in chapter 21 of John's Revelation. Most precious to me is the assurance that "...those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children" (v.7). I *should* be longing for that every day I live in this earthly realm. So, *why don't I?*

It would be easy if Christ returned for us tomorrow. Barring that, I dread the process. I fear the hard transition from this life, through death, to life in heaven. We've all journeyed with friends and loved ones through that hard transition. We have days marked on our mental calendars of our losses one year ago, or ten years ago, or twenty. We remember these losses all too well. We don't want any more of that—not for our loved ones, not for ourselves.

My mother, who went home to the Lord a year ago after a brief illness, lived in the present. She had a very strong faith, yet she expressed then that she was "not ready to go." Oh, she was ready to meet the Lord, but at 93, she was still loving this life. She still hosted every special family occasion and worked diligently on projects that spelled love for others. She was constantly and skillfully knitting. In fact, her four most recent great-grandchildren, born after her passing, were all blessed with blankets she had knitted with love.

It was hard to see mom go. We grieve still, yet not "as those who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). We know the day is coming when our faith shall be sight—when Revelation 21 is true for us. That day has come for my mom.

I have been wrestling with this much more since my brain tumor diagnosis last August. Depending on how difficult or how easy my medical treatments and my physical health are, my longing for the eternal realm of Revelation 21 feels stronger or weaker. I think it works like this: The greater our pain and struggle, the more we long to take that step to be with Jesus. When our health issues or other life struggles become lighter, we'd rather stay here.

This is not a cause for guilt; it's just the reality that *all* God's children *always* stand in two realms, one foot on earth and one foot in heaven.

Paul wrote of this to the Philippians: "...to live is Christ and to die is gain." Confessing that he was torn between the two realms, Paul concluded, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (1:21,23). Few of us can say that as wholeheartedly as Paul. As we stand with our feet in the two realms today, we understand that it's only one step forward into our Father's eternal realm. And when he calls us to take that step, we'll do so with great joy!

*Rev. Brent Juliot is Contributing Editor of F&F magazine and Pastor of Living Hope Church in Menomonie, Wisconsin.*

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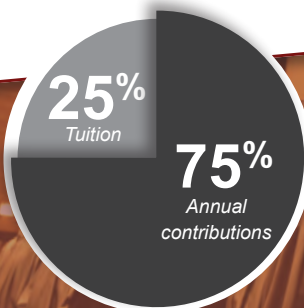
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### Your gift matters!

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Give on or before  
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(Select "Giving Hearts Day")



Lutheran Brethren  
**Seminary**