



June 2016, Number 1



Church Together

Welcome to Church Together, a regular gift to you from your Synod storytellers/mission interpreters. Our aim is to build helpful connections in our Sierra Pacific Synod, to develop among us a deeper, clearer sense of being Church Together.

The children's song celebrates, "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All God's people all around the world, yes we're the church together." But sometimes church people and church leaders lose that sense of church together with other congregations and believers in our synod and "all around the world." It's natural. We focus on our own congregations and communities, our own "backyard." Sometimes we aren't very diligent about sharing with others the stories of how God the Holy Spirit is calling, gathering and building her church where we are. And sometimes, to tell the truth, others' stories are there but we, wrapped up in our own joys and challenges, just don't pay attention.

Our aim is to gather stories of mission and ministry in the Sierra Pacific Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and pass them along in a clear, concise, usable way. By "usable" we mean stories that might be included in a newsletter or sermon or class or...whatever. We want to help you/your congregation tell your stories that others could benefit from hearing.

Did you see that word "benefit?" There is great power in stories. Just look at

the Bible. Through stories God can work to create faith and inspire action. Through stories the Holy Spirit can work to "provoke one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24), and to "build up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). We believe in the power of stories, the power of God working through stories. Our job with Church Together is to find the stories, get them told, and help them be heard. We look forward to a partnership with you; to being with you "church together".

Suzanne O'Dea, Calvary, Eureka, CA
Carl Wilfrid, retired parish pastor, Reno, NV

**"God's Work. Our Hands."
September 11, 2016
Plan now to enter the contest!**

"God's Work. Our Hands." Day is our opportunity to celebrate a day of service across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Congregations throughout the Sierra Pacific Synod and the nation will be preparing food for hungry people, painting houses, planting gardens, visiting isolated people and performing thousands of other acts of joy and mercy.



It is time to start planning your congregation's projects for that day. For a bulletin insert and more information on planning your day [CLICK HERE](#).

Sharing your projects and ideas with other congregations will give them ideas for next year. To encourage you to do just that, we're having a contest! There are two categories: video and narrative. The winning congregation in each category will have the honor of having a \$100.00 gift made to ELCA Good Gifts in their name. How cool is that?

Here is how it works, along with the pertinent deadlines:

1. Your congregation submits either a written narrative or a video of its "God's Work. Our Hands." Project, along with an entry form, which will be available in late August, as well as instructions for submitting your video. Each congregation is limited to one submission, either a video or a narrative. Deadline: October 15, 2016.

2. The narratives and videos are posted on the [Sierra Pacific Synod website](#), where you will vote for your favorite. Everyone can vote-your grumpy uncle, your best friend, the sweet auntie who bakes the best ginger cookies. Deadline: December 15, 2016.

3. We tally the votes and announce a winner, sometime in early 2017.

4. The checks go to ELCA Good Gifts.

Those of us at Church Together can hardly wait to see what wonderful projects you are doing.

If you have questions, please send them to: mic@spselca.org.

The Rwamagana Lutheran School

The cultural, economic, geographic, historical, and social differences between Rwamagana in Rwanda, just south of the equator in east central Africa, and a congregation in Santa Rosa, California, are too many and too great to describe in a few words. For many people, Santa Rosa is a classic northern California city, a gateway to wine country; Rwanda is the site of a horrific 1994 genocide.

Yet, there is a personal and intimate tie between them: the Rwamagana Lutheran School, a secondary school. The connection began when Karl Smith visited Rwanda in 2006 as a member of a delegation led by then-Bishop David Mullen for our synod. Karl was presented with a vision to build a secondary school in Rwanda. As he explained: "Helping the people of Rwanda became my dream. I felt a personal passion to educate others to the needs of the Rwandan people and particularly to the building of a school which also could be used for church services." In 2007, through Karl's leadership, his congregation, Bethlehem Lutheran in Santa Rosa sent \$75,000.00 to purchase land for the school and church. His commitment has continued for a decade. He has led delegations of family members and members of his congregation, returning to the country in 2009, 2011, and 2015. He currently serves as president of the school's board.

Karl's vision for a secondary school was shared by Robin Strickler, an American educator who had married a Rwandan Lutheran pastor and community organizer. She came to believe in the importance of a school a couple of years before Karl, through conversations with Rwandan Lutherans and leaders. As the idea matured, Strickler taught at the school, beginning with free English language classes. Other teachers in the United States and Rwandan leaders joined forces to create the school and move it forward.

The school is open to boys and girls, but it fills a particular need for girls. Secondary educational opportunities for girls have historically been dismally few. In 2007, for example, 97 percent of girls attended primary school, but less than 13 percent attended secondary school. In addition, according to the Rwandan Ministry of Education, many of the secondary educational opportunities for girls were poor quality. Some of the benefits of educating girls include lower infant mortality rates, lower birth rates, opportunities for reducing HIV rates, and higher income. Along with more education, girls and

women have opportunities to develop their skills, self-esteem, and participation in the larger community's life. Rwamagana Lutheran School is making a significant contribution to the lives of girls and women.

There are other connections between the school and our synod. The board's treasurer, Joy Petty, is a member of Bethlehem Lutheran and the secretary, Libby Bullock, is a member of St. John's Lutheran in Sacramento. Debbi Holmerud, an educator and our bishop's wife, is a board member. Today Rwamagana Lutheran School has ten classrooms, ten latrines, a kitchen, a chicken project, a girls' dormitory, and a science lab. The school has 129 students. In November 2015, the first class, sixteen students, graduated.

Describing what he learned during his years working with the school, Karl Smith said: "The most important lesson is that partnership means not just money donated-it's also the willpower and energy to fight corruption, improve sanitation, distribute resources, raise expectations, and change habits. And all those things are happening in Rwanda today.

In a part of the world where women are thought to be worth less and prevented (sometimes with violence) from receiving an education, Bethlehem Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in Rwanda have created Rwamagana Lutheran School, bearing witness to Jesus, who valued women and taught them.

For more more information about Rwamagana Lutheran school, visit their [website](#).

Committed to being re-formed...
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