



REMEMBERING THE PAST, MINISTERING IN THE PRESENT, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE.

 Outreach
for
Hope, Inc.

25th Anniversary Lenten Devotions



Celebrating 25 years of raising awareness and financial support for urban ministries in the Greater Milwaukee Synod.

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WELCOME TO OUR 2020 LENTEN DEVOTIONS!

An outstanding year lies ahead!

Our partners continue to do transformative work in the neighborhoods they serve. As I meet with their leaders, I am humbled and energized by their creativity and diligence. I am confident that every congregation in the Greater Milwaukee Synod can learn from these communities of faith. Let 2020 be the year that you and your family worship at one of our ministries to see first-hand the remarkable work they do. Afterward, share what you experienced and encourage others to follow your example.

2020 is the 25th Anniversary of Outreach for Hope. Praise God! The Board of Directors of Outreach for Hope is using this milestone as a time to reflect on the successes of our unique ministry as we plan for the future. Later this year, we'll gather to celebrate the vision that was put into action in 1995. We will keep you informed as plans are finalized!

With this in mind, we are taking a different approach to our Lenten Devotions in celebration of our 25th anniversary. The Rev. Gerry Goodrich has agreed to serve as our Editor and will share more about this year's theme on the following page. Thank you, Gerry, for your hard work and thoughtfulness on behalf of Outreach for Hope!

2020 is also the first year that Robyn Di Giacinto, in her role as Communications Specialist, will take on the responsibility of publishing the devotions. Watch for changes in our communication style as Robyn brings new ideas to Outreach for Hope and GMS.

Please remember that our Lenten Devotions are also a request for support of Outreach for Hope and our mission. I respectfully ask for your continued support and that in this 25th Anniversary year, that you consider an additional \$25 in support of our mission.

Lastly, as I become better acquainted with our ministries, I welcome the opportunity to connect with our supporters. Please share with me your thoughts, your vision, your concerns for Outreach for Hope. Please pick up the phone and call me on my cell (414-807-0750) or email me at mike@outreachforhope.org.

In God's Work,

*Michael Groh
Interim Executive Director, Outreach for Hope*

REMEMBERING THE PAST, MINISTERING IN THE PRESENT, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

25 YEARS! What a great testimony to what God has accomplished through us in those years. Most of this year's devotions were written in past years; the original year of publication is listed in parentheses next to each devotion's title. They are grouped into three themes.

"Remembering the Past" is the overall theme of the devotions from February 26 through March 14. They are led off by a devotion written by the former Executive Director of Outreach For Hope, Pastor Jim Bickel, and followed by devotions by three former Bishops of the Greater Milwaukee Synod: Peter Rogness, Paul Stumme-Diers, and Jeff Barrow.

"Ministering in the Present" is the general theme of devotions from March 16-28. They are led off by a devotion written by our present Bishop Paul Erickson.

The final theme, **"Looking to the Future,"** covers the last two weeks of Lent, from March 30 through April 11. This series will close with words from the current Interim Executive Director, Michael Groh.

The devotions are for the forty days of the Lenten season. This excludes Sundays, which are "in Lent" but not "of Lent."

The writings were selected to give a broad base of the different types of ministries which have been supported by Outreach For Hope. Most of the devotions were drawn from all of our available Lenten devotion booklets, ranging from 2006 and from 2011 onward. I have also tried to select a variety of authors – though you will see some authors more than once, since from 2011 to 2015, each year's booklet was written by a single author.

In my early years of pastoral ministry – a long time ago! – dime folders were a popular way for people to give a dime a day during Lent. In a few years, quarter folders replaced the dime folders. And in recent years, we have encouraged people to consider giving a dollar a day to Outreach For Hope. Whatever the amount, hopefully these devotions will inspire you to share in the ministries supported by Outreach For Hope. At the end of Lent, you can send your donations to Outreach for Hope via the Synod Office (1212 S. Layton Blvd, Milwaukee, WI 53215) or via your local ELCA church.

*Pastor Gerald V. Goodrich
Editor*

REMEMBERING **THE PAST**,

MINISTERING IN **THE PRESENT**,

LOOKING TO **THE FUTURE**.

wednesday, february 26 - ash wednesday
MARKED FOR LIFE (2020)

After the baptismal water was splashed on your head, the sign of a cross was traced on you with the words, "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that the cross is still there. And for a brief time – maybe for just an hour, or maybe for an entire day – the cross of ashes is visible for the whole world to see. Its message is a reminder of what extremes God will go to give us life and hope.

It was that visibility of life and hope which the members of the Greater Milwaukee Synod had in mind when they began Outreach for Hope 25 years ago. It was created to help assure that churches of the Greater Milwaukee Synod, serving in low-income and challenged neighborhoods, would not fade away like ashes, but they would make their mark visible in their communities.

In those 25 years, ministries funded by Outreach for Hope have welcomed and nurtured countless numbers of children with love. Church members have stood with neighbors to advocate for schools, housing, and safety. Neighbors have been prayed for and visited. The cross has been visible to the community in acts of love and hope preached.

Together, we are all blessed as Outreach for Hope helps assure diversity of cultures, race and worship in the larger faith community. We see the wideness of Christ's love in each other and from church to church throughout the Greater Milwaukee Synod.

This Lent consider how the victorious cross of Christ will be made visible to you and through you.

PRAYER: Even when the ashes fade, remind me that the cross is still present in me and in your Church. Amen.

Rev. Jim Bickel
Executive Director, Outreach for Hope (2009 - 2017)

thursday, february 27
REMEMBERING THE BEGINNING (2020)

"What does the Lord require of us, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God." Micah 6:8

And what does it mean to "walk humbly with God?" If we turn to Matthew 25 – "as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me" we learn that walking with the poor is to walk with God – it's the same walk.

"I was there to hear your borning cry..." begins John Ylvisaker's well-known hymn. I was there for the "borning cry" of what is now Outreach for Hope.

Except 25 years ago wasn't really the birth. Only the name (at first, simply "Outreach Fund") came into being then. What was already in existence was the wide-spread commitment that – if our church was to be a church of all people, including the poor – it was a commitment to be carried by the whole church. Walking with the poor was a shared commitment among many. If a middle-class or upper-class neighborhood church is "successful," it grows in numbers and dollars; if a low-income neighborhood church connects with its neighborhood, the dollar needs grow. The Greater Milwaukee Synod was blessed with incredibly gifted pastors and lay leaders in a number of low-income neighborhood churches. And there was a wider circle of "partners": individuals and congregations that saw what was going on and stepped up to walk alongside with their time and finances. Those obvious first places like Cross, Incarnation, Hephatha, and All People's became models for outreach in Racine, Kenosha, and other places in Milwaukee. People noticed and joined. Ministries multiplied. People living in poverty found hope! Commitment to those ministries was a widely shared commitment. There were many on this walk.

Finances had been coming from partners in the ELCA churchwide level, from the Siebert Foundation, from other grants and individuals, and the question was often asked "what's the synod's stake in it?" The fact was the synod was already deeply involved. But the establishment of Outreach for Hope meant that there was a regular, on-going, committed arm of the synod's life that would ensure that our walk with those living in poverty would always be a fundamental part of the synod's work.

The subsequent 25 years have demonstrated this ongoing commitment. Hope abounds! And each of us who have had some part in that walk recognize that the God of the Universe is to be found in those neighborhoods and people; our walk together is a blessed walk with God.

PRAYER: God of the Universe, help us to walk together in unfamiliar neighborhoods and among your people.

*Bishop Peter Rogness
Greater Milwaukee Synod (1988 – 2002)*

friday, february 28
WALKING WITH ANOTHER (2006)

A commitment to "walking with" the other requires that we are attentive to those who "walk with" each of us in our journey of faith and community. It is a shared endeavor, one that involves mutuality and reciprocity, and one that over the past three years has at times been so constant that it has made me a bit paranoid. I find there is always someone accompanying me! You see, everywhere I go there are companions in attendance, "walking with" me, befriending me, living out partnership with the presence of their beautiful feet.

At the retirement party of Pastor Dale Erickson, there represented, "walking with" Pastor Erickson at the occasion, were persons from Florist Avenue Lutheran Church. At the installation of Pastor Elias Kitoi Nasari at Galilee in Pewaukee, no fewer than twenty churches walked with that suburban congregation in that celebration. At the installation of Pastor Ken Wheeler at Cross in Milwaukee, again no fewer than twenty representatives of synod congregations were present lending their encouragement.

Whenever I am invited to a congregation for an occasion, there in faithful attendance are members of Hephatha Lutheran Church. At ordinations, with gifts of flowers in hand, are members of Hephatha. At installations throughout the synod, walking with me, singing with me, praying with me, are representatives from Hephatha. At anniversaries and retirements, with cards and smiles, are Hephatha friends, young and old. In December, walking with me in late Advent, were friends from Hephatha bearing gifts: a candle to light my way, to warm my heart, to bear witness to the Light of the World.

"Walking with" is not something we do, but the gift we share, a gift to be given, but moreover the gift to recognize and receive. We do so with the faithful yearning that "I want Jesus to walk with me," and we discover anew that Jesus does.

*Bishop Paul Stumme-Diers
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2002 – 2009)*

saturday, february 29
AT THE BACK OF THE CHURCH (2015)

At the Back of the church, almost every Sunday, the very same group of people gathered early at the back of the church. Art, Roland, and Elmer had been ushering together for more than thirty years. Roland's wife always accompanied him, and another woman always took the same early bus across town to make it to services on time. A man named Tom walked every Sunday, rain or shine, from his apartment four blocks down. They had a lot to offer a new pastor fresh out of seminary.

They were the bearers of our history, a rather illustrious history for what had to be one of the great churches in Milwaukee. Over time, you could learn not only the significant events in the life of the church, you began to learn also about the curious idiosyncrasies of some of the former pastors, about some of the trials of the congregation as well. Like putting a giant jigsaw puzzle together, they helped explain why things in the congregation were what they were, why some things made perfect sense and why other things made no sense at all.

Those people at the back of the church were the weekly litmus test for what was going on in the church and the world. Long before the first bulletin was handed out, there was a rehashing of current events, there was laughter, there were sometimes spirited discussion about what was really happening in the world and then there were sometimes brutally honest evaluations of programs in the church.

At the same time there was a deeper purpose to their gathering. They gathered faithfully to set the table for the celebration of word and sacrament. They were the people who welcomed both the regulars and the stray cats to the worship service. I sometimes compared them to the women who gathered first at the empty tomb, those who simply initiated the story that was so much bigger than anyone first imagined. In their own down-home fashion, they did it well for many years.

I suspect they also came for each other. They were the small group ministry that churches today work so hard to recreate. Over the years I saw them look after each other on a weekly basis, speak words of grace to each other, pray for each other at times of extended absence or illness, grieve together at the time of death.

It took me the longest time to realize that Tom from down the street was not a member. He was a curious, solitary figure who never took communion nor was he there by the end of the service. In some ways he was a sad witness to the fact that many people in this world believe, yet don't belong to a community of faith. In retrospect, I think that group of folks at the back of the church was the only church, perhaps the only family he had.

PRAYER: Dear Father of us all, help us to remember that "church," as we sometimes think of it, extends beyond the doors of the sanctuary to the people outside. Let us welcome them in. Amen.

Bishop Jeff Barrow
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2009 – 2016)

monday, march 2
NEW JERUSALEM (2012)

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Revelation 21:1-2

Life is full of what I call "Ah – Ha!" moments. We suddenly and inexplicably realize a truth that had escaped us; we get a joke that we had totally missed; we hear a gospel story for the hundredth time and suddenly "get it." There is great power in the words, "Then I saw..." Our eyes are opened. Our hearts are opened. Our lives are made new again.

A Vietnam War Veteran tells a story of his first encounter with a US bombing raid on a village suspected of being a haven for Viet Cong sympathizers. His duty was to go with a team to assess the results of the raid. When they entered the village, they realized that the only people killed were women and children and elders. This young man looked and said, "My God! These are my brothers and sisters." His commanding officer yanked him out and sent him back to the States where he was quickly discharged. "Then I saw..." Many times, our "Ah – Ha!" moments are not this dramatic, but they are critical to our growth as Christians and as humans.

We have been equipped with the stories of the gospel in order to have our eyes opened and our lives enriched by the endurance of the saints and the witness of the faithful. All around us, in our cities, in streets we rarely frequent, in places we are afraid to go, there are our brothers and sisters who share in the New Jerusalem. Our calling is to share it with them today.

PRAYER: You are the God of all our impossibilities. Give us the eyes of hope and heart of courage. Amen.

Rev. Sandy Jacobs

tuesday, march 3
NEW NEIGHBORS (2011)

"We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." Hebrew 6:12

Their music is too loud. They have too many people coming by all times of the day and night. Their language is offensive to my ears. There are too many girls dropping by with too little clothing on. They choose not to use garbage cans...

They hang out in the street. In the middle of the street. For the past three weeks or so, I have honked my horn to make them move, even though they clearly see my minivan coming towards them. I have already walked down and introduced myself to those whom I believe live there (but it is hard to really know) and asked them to move out of the way when a car is coming. My other neighbors are fed up with them, but afraid to approach them.

This hour, they are in the street again, are close enough to look me directly in the eye as my van is upon them, and they choose not to move an inch. This hour, I choose to keep driving. The one I bump has a confused look on his face. They all do. As they move out of my way, I wave to them from my open window, as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened, and ask them if they are enjoying this beautiful day. No one answers but they all keep staring at me.

After I park the van, I walk back to where they are, now all on the sidewalk. I hear one of them instruct another: *Don't say anything to her. That's Miss Venice.* Without another greeting, I start talking. I remind them they are all Children of God and, for whatever reason, God has sent them to me this summer. As I keep talking, I touch their hands, their cheeks, their chests. *You are meant to be more than you are claiming right now. You are intelligent. You are gifted. I need you all to bring forth your best. If you need help finding it, I would love to help you. You know where I live, and my door is always open to you.* No one says a word. My voice is cracking now. *I do not know you, but I love you.* I pause, before I walk back home. *And I will bump you again if you choose to stand in the street when you see me coming.* Some let out a chuckle. I tell them to be safe and head back home.

PRAYER: Creator God, your children need us and many of us just do not know what to do. Jesus had so much courage and compassion! Help us to find ours when we need them most.

Venice Williams

wednesday, march 4
CROSSING THE BRIDGE (2015)

Holy Communion Lutheran Church is a majestic Gothic edifice perched on a hill that overlooks the Root River in Racine. In spite of its imposing structure, it has been a welcome place in the neighborhood. Below, on Kinzie Avenue, there is a bridge which spans the river. Sometimes the river below is wider and deeper than one might expect. Often it divides people racially and economically. The challenge has been of how to cross the bridge.

Never was that division more apparent than the day I went to make visits in the hospital. In a day before HIPPA laws, almost anyone was likely to show up on Holy Communion's hospital list. Sure enough, the woman I visited had been a member of the congregation more than 10 years ago. She was very pleasant and thankful for my visit. Then, as I was about to leave, she said with more surprise than anything, "Wow! It's been a long time since I've lived in a white world." An Anglo herself, she had remarried a black man and from that point her community was radically different. It was a sad admission about the world in which we live.

I don't think one unravels the deep racial divide in this country easily until we confront racism head on. There are at first interim steps to be taken. Thus, over the years, I began to treasure the chance to take those steps, which I called simply, "crossing the bridge."

The best place, it seemed to me, was at the local YMCA. In truth, it became the *only* legitimately integrated place for me in a world divided. For over 20 years I played basketball with the same group of people. Some days I would be the only white person in the gym. Not only did it provide good exercise, it also began to expose some of my deep-seated prejudice. Frankly, it forced me to surrender some preconceived images I had about other people. I think when we stop being afraid of others, we begin to find common ground.

Over time some of those relationships became very important to my life. I was offered a glimpse – though only a glimpse – of what it meant to be a young black male living in a society . . . to be filled with hopes and dreams, on the one hand, and having the cards stacked against, you on the other. Equally important was that some of those people, now with names, began to offer the words of acceptance, the joy of play, the words of forgiveness that any soul longs to hear.

Sadly, I do not think that we have ever really crossed the bridge when it comes to racism in the world. All too often we find ourselves scampering back to our own sides. Every once in a while, we seem to meet in the middle of the bridge, if only for a moment, and when we do, we are all blessed.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, help us to build bridges which will bring your people together. Amen.

*Bishop Jeff Barrow
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2009 – 2016)*

thursday, march 5
LAMENTATIONS OF WALKING WITH PARTNERS (2016)

"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people. How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! ...She weeps bitterly in the night." Lamentations 1:1-2

Walt and I watch with horror as the news reporter tells of nine people dead at a church bible study. A place of peace has been violated. The sins of racism have been visited upon the people of Mother Emmanuel AME Church of Charleston, South Carolina, while they sought God.

How can this be? A pastoral letter from Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reveals that among those shot is the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, a graduate of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and the Rev. Daniel Simmons, associate pastor at Mother Emanuel. The suspected shooter is a member of an ELCA congregation. All of a sudden this is an intensely personal tragedy. One of our own is alleged to have shot and killed two who adopted us as their own. An angry President Obama asks the question, "How long must this go on before action is taken?" An anguished black man says to a reporter, "If we are not safe in our churches, where are we safe?"

As a suburban white grandmother, I ask where can we go for strength and comfort when murder invades the church? To our white congregation? Or to All Peoples, an urban church in the Riverwest neighborhood – a neighborhood that many of my Lutheran brothers and sisters will not even drive through for fear of their own safety – where the depth of the tragedy will be respected? Recently they have accompanied the family of Dontre Hamilton to seek justice in his death at the hands of the Milwaukee Police.

On a beautiful summer's evening, two days after the South Carolina event, my husband and I drive across the Milwaukee River. On this night of lamentation, we have gone to be with our partners who are able to provide a place for our sorrow, for our sin-sick souls. The wooden doors to All Peoples Church in the Harambee neighborhood are wide open as young and old, black and white walk in. The gathering space that we church people call the sanctuary is full.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE...

As the prayer service begins, the names of the murdered scroll across the screen, and people take turns reading brief biographies. Our hearts break as we hear of a student, a grandmother, the head librarian, a legislator and pastor. Pastor Steve Jerbi of All Peoples invites the lamentations. White people ask for forgiveness, some speak of the sin of racism. Black people cry out for the murdered. Others demand change. Dontre Hamilton's brother speaks of grief seeking justice. Some of us just listen and search our hearts.

We have come together to be led in this tragic walk by the people of our urban partners. The prayers begin. A voice cries out, "how long, oh Lord?" And the gathered echo the plea, "how long, oh Lord?" A child cries, an old man rises to offer his prayer for hope. As one, we turn to the God who was wounded for our transgressions. United in sorrow, we sing, and the hymn rises.

"There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul."

PRAYER: Dear Lord, help us to be welcoming to all your children. We need each other to be part of the family of God. Amen.

Aleta Chossek



friday, march 6
FAITH AND MT. MERU FARM FAMILIES (2006)

During my visit with the farm families of the Meru Diocese, their lack of physical possessions was quite apparent. These families have few of the creature comforts we take for granted in the United States. They do not have electricity or running water. They do not have motor vehicles or any other machinery. Their days are filled with physical farm labor and by walking to get water.

They are very proud of their small family farms that are approximately 1-3 acres. These farms produce coffee as well as the sustenance crops needed for their survival. In most cases their only cash income is generated by their coffee crop. The Mt. Meru Coffee Project is helping to increase their income by paying a fair price for their select coffee. One would think that this additional income would be used to make their physical lives easier or more comfortable.

When asked how this additional income is used, the answer is quite consistent. It is used to educate their children. The cost of high school education has been out of reach for many of these families and continues to be a struggle for many. These people of faith choose to spend their meager income to give their children more opportunity rather than spend it on material possessions. Most young adults move to the cities to begin their own lives. Without an education most of them are not able to find worthwhile employment. The city slums are full of people who are barely surviving. An education will offer better jobs and a better future to those that are blessed in this way. The parents of these children are people of faith and will forgo material possessions to offer a better life to their children.

Our brothers and sisters of the Meru Diocese have a great deal to teach us. As we live our lives of comfort and relative wealth, it is important that we focus on our faith and our families rather than the materialistic lifestyle many of us enjoy.

Ron Bohrer

saturday, march 7
BARBER SHOP (2011)

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Philippians 2:1-2

What's going on in the community? Make your way to the barber shop on a Saturday morning to find out. Today, as always, it is full of conversation, opinions, ideas. It is that time of year when the men can talk about tomorrow's NFL games and last night's NBA outcomes. In our community, we discuss the details of the lives of Black entertainers as if they are our personal family members. This morning, there is a high-profile divorce, an actress's pregnancy, a forthcoming CD release, and a new movie role to dissect. The two young men sitting next are seeking *female advice* from anyone who is willing to offer some, because *these females out here are crazy!* A man enters selling socks and fresh fruit. His efforts are successful, and he leaves quite happy.

I am here with my seven-year-old son who is totally engaged in and excited about the animated conversations going on all around him. He whispers questions in my ear when there is something he does not understand and then he goes back to taking it all in. Although we have an appointment, we will wait for about an hour until it is his turn...and neither one of us mind at all. This hour, the barber shop is like a field trip for both of us!

As I sit, I am reminded of how much this place is like a church. It is a place of confession. It is a place where the wisdom of Elders is sought, and sometimes, absolution is given. It is a place where I hear *Amen to that* and *Thank God* and *That wasn't nothing, but Jesus* more than I will hear such exclamations tomorrow morning from the pews. It is a place where people come for support, guidance and the strength to go on their way. It is a place where people come to share a passing and to grieve. It is often a place of pure gladness, too! It is a place I want my son to be. God is here amongst God's people.

PRAYER: God of Life, you nourish us in so many places and through so many people! Help me to not keep you or seek you just on Sunday mornings but to recognize your presence in so many places in my life!

Venice Williams

monday, march 9
TEPEAGUA (2014)

Had it not been the dry season, I'm not sure the road to Tepeagua would have been passable. The last twenty miles took over an hour as our driver maneuvered through the cavernous potholes. When we finally arrived at the little church, we were greeted by a number of children, the pastor, other leaders from the congregation -- and two policemen with machine guns sitting on a bench in front of the church. Apparently, there had been a disturbance among the *bandias* (gangs) the night before and the local officials were concerned about our safety.

Throughout the day we lived with the great contradiction that is El Salvador today . . . the presence of so many gentle people trying their best to scratch out a living amid the reality of poverty and amid the threat of violence.

I felt relatively secure as we heard the story of life in the church, saw the brick oven bakery founded by an enterprising pastor, watched people draw water from the only well in town (a well-built thanks to the partnership with Atonement Lutheran Church in Muskego, Wisconsin.)

When I heard about the snake who'd made an appearance in the rafters above the place where I would be sleeping, I was a little more concerned about that than I was about the presence of the policemen. However, when we drove to La Libertad in the late afternoon I was surprised when the officers jumped in the van with us, a little unsettled when one of the machine guns rested only a couple of inches from my leg.

When we returned to Tepeagua, there was to be a large fiesta. People emerged from every direction and the party thrown in our honor began to happen. And then, just as the sun disappeared and the woods became dark, the two policemen and their machine guns left. I can only guess that the word had filtered back to the local officials that there would be no trouble tonight.

For the rest of the evening I felt incredibly safe. The small children played games, people danced, food was shared. As the party began to disperse, an old man suffering some great trauma lay down to sleep beside the small bonfire . . . right in the middle of kids and dogs and the American guests who gathered there.

I realized that places are not holy in and of themselves. Places are holy when they are declared to be holy. Peace happens when people realize that peace is simply better than warfare.

PRAYER: Bless our partnership with El Salvador. Help keep the people safe; help them to know peace and comfort, help them find freedom from hunger and fear.

Bishop Jeff Barrow
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2009 – 2016)

tuesday, march 10
O DEATH (2016)

"O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

A generation ago, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Epiphany was facing ecclesiastical hospice. Like many urban churches, when the demographics of the neighborhood changed, the membership of the church didn't. Fueled by racism manifest in white flight, Epiphany lacked the resources to sustain a congregation. The members decided that the most faithful thing to do was to die.

Death, however, could not win the day. Resurrection burst forth. With a vision from the members of Epiphany, residents of the neighborhood and Rev. Greg Van Dunk, new life came. Through support from synodical leaders and mission partners, Epiphany was born again as All Peoples Church. 2016 marks our 25th year of ministry.

Last year the rebirth All Peoples knew in 1991 repeated as Florist Avenue chose the difficult and faithful path of dying for the sake of resurrection. The corner of 40th and Florist is now the Havenwoods campus of All Peoples Church.

A congregation rising like the Phoenix is a compelling story for the Lutheran fellowship. It shows us that our God is always capable of doing a new thing. But keeping a building open is far from reveling in the hope we know in Jesus Christ.

Congregational rebirth must reflect the resurrection of our neighborhoods and our city. When hunger affects our neighbors, we must bring daily bread and the bread of life. When poverty cripples the opportunities for our friends, we must claim Jesus as the healer that tells our city to take up our mat and walk. When the demons of addiction and despair steal lives, we cast out those demons with the name of Jesus. When violence plagues our community, we must be blessed as peacemakers.

When we reflect the light of Christ in our members and in our work, then the resurrection story is more than just a hope of what is to come; it shows that resurrection is now!

PRAYER: Lord, let our lives reflect your Spirit, revitalizing and resurrecting the community around us. No matter where we live let us be neighbors who care about each other. Amen.

Rev. Steve Jerbi

wednesday, march 11
REFUGEES (2011)

"For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Matthew 25:35

I am still trying to figure out how I got in this position. Literally, standing in this position, on a driveway between two lawns, standing between two families, attempting to reach an understanding. One family is African American and has lived on the block for several years. The other family is Somali Bantu recently arriving in the country and new neighbors on this block after many years in a refugee camp. Almost a dozen Somali Bantu families have moved into this circle of government-subsidized homes over the past four months and it has become too much for the *Americans who were here first*, as one man labeled himself. Interesting words from a Black man...but he is too busy shouting to really hear himself. This hour, I am negotiating the peace.

Who keeps a couch on the porch? They ride their bikes across everybody's yard! They don't put their garbage in the garbage cans! They let their kids run all over the place! The list of complaints seems unending...and I don't know what the #@* they be saying!*

The Somali Bantu males who have gathered are confused and hurt. A teenage boy amongst them translates the Elder's words. *Venice, why do they treat us like this? I thought these were our brothers? We are the same.*

The awareness, the mending, the learning that needs to take place requires more time than this hour, this day holds. We reach some basic agreements that may or may not work. I don't know. I walk to the porch and take a seat on the couch that should not be there. With my eyes wide open, I begin to pray. It may or may not work.

PRAYER: Jesus, you were always trying to help people understand one another, the world they lived in, and the Kingdom that was to come. That is still the work we are all called to be about today. Give us the wisdom, humility and strength to do your work in the world.

Venice Williams

thursday, march 12
THE LEAST OF THESE (2016)

Of the many people that have crossed my path at the ELCA Outreach Center, the ones that stand out the most are the ones that have taught me the most about myself. One such person had been coming to the clothing closet since before I started working there.

One day, during my second year at the Center, she was particularly angry. We did not have any clothing that fit her or anything that would be helpful to her. She yelled at my coworker and me, and she let us know that we were useless to her. We tried to explain that we could not control what others donated and that she could check again another day.

It is my belief that Matthew 25:40 is literal. "Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me." I had been trying hard to see the face of Jesus in every person that came into the Center. I knew, if I thought of a person as Jesus, I would treat them better. This is easier in theory than in practice. Especially when that particular person is not acting in a way you would ever expect Jesus to act. I looked at my coworker and told her that I just could not see the face of Jesus in this woman.

Later in that week, I remembered seeing an unrelated bumper sticker that reminded me that I had no idea why she was mad, but that there were probably very valid reasons for her anger and that maybe she just needed some kindness. Remembering this, it was much easier for me to smile and to be kind to her.

About five years later, this woman came back to the Center. It had been a long while since I had seen her. I mentally braced myself for her complaints, however, she shocked me. She had an envelope and she handed it to me saying, "It's not much, but you were here for me when no one else was. I am doing good now. I have a job and I want you to use this to help someone else who needs it."

We walk by faith, most of the time in the dark, trusting that God is guiding our steps. I have seen her many times since that day and have had the opportunity to share what her blessing meant to me. It is a wondrous thing when we are reminded that God is, indeed, guiding us and showing us the way, even through an unrelated bumper sticker and an angry woman.

PRAYER: Thank you, Lord, for your life-changing grace. Help us to keep praying. Amen.

Mary Zorn

friday, march 13
FROGGY HUGS (2016)

"Let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and loves God." 1 John 4:7

Oh, the love of a stuffed amphibian! Meet Froggy. Yes, he is green. He has wonderful big eyes. His unique quality is that his arms and legs are long and have Velcro on them. He is the perfect size to be wrapped around our kids who attend Neighborhood Camp, a 5-week summer program, at Emmaus Lutheran Church in Racine. While Froggy is unable to give a hug, campers young and old are ready to hug their special friend.

Froggy hugs began several years ago to affirm campers. On Thursdays, each staff selects a camper in their group to receive a hug. As the campers are entwined in their special hug, the kids encourage the response by shouting out, "squeeze." There is no timidity in the response. Faces turn red, arms are quaking as the hugs tighten.

Once Froggy has given his quiet unconditional love, a name is picked from a hat and the selected camper gets to take Froggy home for the weekend. The campers are quick to remind that special person on how they are to care for Froggy. Froggy has been on many adventures including the Dells. On Monday the camper shares Froggy's adventures.

How does one show kids that Froggy hugs represent the amazing love of a God who showers unconditional love on them? The kids are reminded again and again that each one of them is a unique and special gift from God. The smiles on their faces, the light in their eyes, and the enthusiasm of their hugs speak of a God who is there for them all the time.

They are loved! And they love! God is a delight!

PRAYER: Dear God, help us always to remember your arms are locked around us even when we don't feel it. Help us relax knowing we are yours. And knowing that, give us courage to be your arms as we embrace others and support each other. Amen.

Nancy Smith

saturday, march 14
ACCOMPANIMENT (2017)

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1

The first time I remember learning about accompaniment was when I was studying in Mexico. After I graduated from college and before I entered seminary, I decided to spend four months learning Spanish and living with a family in the city of Cuernavaca.

Conchita and Cristobal were the parents of my temporary family, and as leaders of the Base Christian Community movement, they led Bible studies in various neighborhoods almost every night of the week. I went with them as often as I could, participating in the conversations as much as my slowly growing language capacity would allow.

I was humbled by their patience with me. They would smile and nod with encouragement as I struggled to express my thoughts. It was same the patience with which they treated everyone, gently encouraging those who were new to reading and studying the Bible and helping them to see how it connected with their daily lives.

Not far from their house there was a street sign that read, "Este camino no es de alta velocidad" (this road is not for high speeds). I chuckled whenever I saw it. The road it described was filled with rocks and potholes making it difficult to walk quickly, much less to drive. It became for me, however, a metaphor for my time in Cuernavaca. I learned there that the road of faith is long, and the pace is slow and steady, as together we walk with humility, kindness, and patience.

PRAYER: Slow us down, Lord, whenever become impatient with ourselves or with others, and help us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Amen.

*Bishop Paul Erickson
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2016 – present)*

REMEMBERING **THE PAST,**

MINISTERING IN **THE PRESENT,**

LOOKING TO **THE FUTURE.**

monday, march 16
MINISTERING IN THE PRESENT (2020)

*"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.
Today's trouble is enough for today." Matthew 6:34*

One of the challenges of having served as a pastor in this church for over 30 years is that I have a lot of memories, a lot of stories, a lot of experiences. While these stories and experiences have shaped who I am and how I lead and serve, so much is changing so rapidly in our church and in the world that many of my yesterdays have little or no bearing on the challenges of today. On the other hand, there is so much uncertainty about the future, so many questions and so much we don't know that it can be quite paralyzing to ponder tomorrow.

And yet, God's wisdom reminds us that we know enough for today, and that God's ancient rhythms and patterns still hold true. It is enough for us to do justice, today. It is enough for us to love mercy, today. It is enough for us to walk humbly with our God, today. We can trust that God will hold on to all our stories from yesterday and all our questions about tomorrow, freeing us to love and serve the person in front of us today.

We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future, and this knowledge can give us what we need to take that next step, today, tomorrow, and every day. I'm grateful for all who are willing to walk the slow and steady path of faith as together, we travel each day in God's grace.

PRAYER: Gracious God, help us to live and love and trust in you today, embracing whatever the day brings as a chance to grow in love, and help us to discover once again how precious each day is when we live in your grace, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Bishop Paul Erickson
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2016 – present)*

tuesday, march 17
ASK AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN (2016)

Someone came into the Center and needed a cane. The center did not have one. By the end of the day however, someone had donated one. We got a refrigerator donated and a week later the one we had went out. A man came in and needed shoes for a job interview. We did not have any in his size. I gave him the shoes I was wearing, knowing that I had another pair at home. So often at the Outreach Center needs are filled before we even know there is a need. Sometimes the need is just for an ear to listen, a laugh to share, or a shoulder to cry on.

I also know that I will be blessed.

My family needed a couch and someone donated a couch that not only was the right size, it was the perfect color.

For our wedding, my wife and I did not know how we would afford anything. Through the center, we got my wife's dress. The volunteers and staff provided food and the cake and the director, Karl, took pictures. We are truly a community, sharing God's love with each other and with our larger community.

I give whatever I can to the Outreach Center, knowing that not only is God using me and my life to bless others, God is blessing me with abundance.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, we thank you for the unexpected gifts. Help us to receive them graciously and to be generous when we can. All good things come from you. Amen.

Willie Colister

wednesday, march 18
OPENING THE SIXTH SEAL (2012)

"Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks...calling...'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb...'" Revelation 6:12-17

There are lots of reasons to run away. We may run because we are afraid, or because we are bored, or do not want to commit to someone or something. We might think "the grass is always greener" somewhere else; or if only I could be left alone everything would work out. We may just want to hide out and let the world go away.

When I was five years old, I got angry at my mother for some now unknown five-year-old reason, and I threatened to run away. I stomped upstairs and packed a bag, but got no farther than the big walk-in closet of our bedroom. I waited for someone to find me. I waited a long time. Finally, I got so hungry that I came out and went downstairs. My mother said, "I thought you were going to run away." I replied, "I did." We both laughed.

Today child and youth runaways are no laughing matter. There are lots of reasons that young people run away from home, from school, from life: abuse, fear, drugs, and more. It is estimated that 1 of every 3 runaways engages in what is called "survival sex" in order to stay alive. There are over 1,000 reported missing youth and children in Wisconsin, but no one really knows how many runaways there are. In the midst of this madness, there is God's "still, small voice" crying out, "Find me."

PRAYER: Mothering God, hold us close to you and keep us safe in this dangerous world. Protect us from fear and despair. Amen.

Rev. Sandy Jacobs

thursday, march 19
GLEANINGS (2016)

I caught a glimpse of Jesus. During morning prayers, a Peer Minister told his story. Someone beat him and he required emergency medical care. Days later, still nursing physical and emotional wounds, he was offered a weapon to use in retribution against his assailant. He struggled with his decision whether to seek revenge, and then shook his head no; he would not take the gun.

In that moment, I caught a glimpse of Jesus' transformational power. There was a time in this man's life that anger consumed him. Now a gun was easily accessible, and his emotions were running high. In the moment, he was able to see himself differently, as Jesus' beloved, and walked away. He is a changed man.

Jesus changes us, too. When we go towards people who are different than us, even those who scare or repulse us, and look for Jesus behind the mask of "addiction or mental illness or just plain nastiness", we encounter God. In that encounter, we are changed, too.

Reformation Lutheran Church walks with the community that no one wants to deal with. Partners step outside of their comfort zone to stand in solidarity with our faith community. In the ministry of partnership, we look for the face of Jesus in people who are different than ourselves that may be filled with despair or hate. It takes a step of faith to talk to, listen to, and walk with such an individual. But in that extraordinary search for Jesus in others we find different or despicable, something happens to partners. They discover Jesus in the other and have the possibility of seeing Jesus in themselves as well.

Partnership is powerful. Together we experience a "vision of faith and work that will never be boring."

PRAYER: O Lord, bless our relationships. Give us the courage to serve and be transformed by our acts of service. Amen.

Marge Johnson

friday, march 20
BLESSINGS ABOUND (2016)

Every day we spend on this earth, we have the opportunity to send and receive a blessing. They come in so many shapes and forms. Sometimes we just don't see them. We really have to be rooted in the Word, with our eyes wide open, so that we can notice them when the opportunity occurs.

If you want to learn more about blessings, it's plain and simple. Just pick up your bible - it is your complete guide. Start by looking in Matthew 5:3-12.

"Blessed are those who know they are spiritually poor. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires. God will be merciful to them. Be blessed and glad for a great reward is kept for you in heaven."

The blessing of our church keeps us surrounded in God's love. We are very important to the people in our community. I remember a family of six - they didn't have the money for rent or Christmas presents because the wife lost her husband to a murder. She moved to Milwaukee to keep her family safe. A lady on the bus said this church on 35th Street could help her family. Reformation helped the family get gifts for the children and helped with a portion of their rent.

If we do not have the gift of sharing in our heart, we cannot be a blessing to our brothers and our sisters. Remember how you came to Christ and share a story of your life. Help someone else if you can. Remember, you have a blessing inside of you!

PRAYER: Dear Lord, open our hearts to the possibility of sharing your love with others. Amen.

Thaurra Stallings

saturday, march 21
THE FIELD AT ANATHOTH (2014)

The prophet Jeremiah is called to speak to the people of Judah before the unthinkable happens. The southern kingdom has been left unconquered (although forced to pay heavy tribute) when the northern kingdom of Israel was overwhelmed by Assyria in the 8th century B.C. In a new day, when Babylon is the new power, the people of Judah think they cannot be touched.

Jeremiah must speak not only to the people's need to reform. He must also speak in the face of arrogance. It's a thankless job in which Jeremiah often finds himself in the crossfire of the strained relationship between God and God's people. Then in 587 B.C., Babylon does descend from the north, the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and the people are carried off into captivity for more than a generation. In many ways it is Judah's darkest hour.

As all of that is beginning, Jeremiah does a radical thing. He buys land in the middle of a country being overrun! The Field of Anathoth is a sign of God's continued covenant even when others have abandoned hope.

In the heart of Milwaukee lies a place called Alice's Garden. It is so much more than just another urban garden. Venice Williams is the holy woman who stands at the center. For her Alice's Garden is not a job but a calling.

Alice's Garden stands on land connected to the Underground Railroad. It is land which in its history has been tied to the birth of a burgeoning black middle class, subject to willful segregation. It has seen buildings razed to make way for a freeway that never happened; it is surrounded by people living in poverty.

The Field at Anathoth, places like Alice's Garden, are holy when they are declared holy, when they are reclaimed and renewed.

PRAYER: Dear God, bless visionaries like Venice Williams who claim your Covenant and tend your holy ground.

*Bishop Jeff Barrow
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2009 – 2016)*

monday, march 23
AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? (2017)

"But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

Why are we often quick to judge and dismiss others? As a member of Incarnation Lutheran Church, I have seen firsthand an entire beaten-down population treated as if they are invisible. In so many ways, compassion for these "least of the brethren" appears lacking, at best.

The neighborhood has evolved over decades, from being home to upwardly mobile German families to the influx of Great Migration African Americans in search of a better life. The church stood during the tumult of the Civil Rights movement, the Open Housing Law, and subsequent white flight. Incarnation church members reached out to families like mine as well as the neighborhood, offering the understanding, love and knowledge of God and His Son, Jesus. Through an amazing network of supporters — city and statewide, a multitude of opportunities and activities were available through the church. Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, summer youth programs, Beckham/Stapleton Little League baseball, 4-H programs, camping at Pine Lake, and confirmation retreats at Carthage College all helped families experience the love of God. Adults discussed the political and domestic challenges of the day. They worked hard to develop teen employment programs, all under the watchful eye of caring, committed adults. Many of the bonds formed during that time were lifelong. The entire neighborhood was given the resources and support that struggling families needed to stabilize their lives, while building for future success. Thus, many of my peers and I live spirit-filled, productive lives in ways that "give back" to others.

Over the last three decades the neighborhood has become almost exclusively African American, home to some of the poorest families in the city. Some families must move frequently due to limited finances, destabilizing the area. Violence and hopelessness are high in the one-mile area around the church. Help is needed more than ever for the families there facing daily health, safety, and financial challenges. Didn't Jesus die for people here too?

The Good Samaritan saw the beaten traveler in distress. He did not walk by. He made a choice to love this person before him and help. No doubt that help saved the life of the beaten traveler. While the parable doesn't say what happened to the traveler after he was cared for, I believe that he never again saw Samaritans in a negative light. Isn't that what our Lord calls us to do? He reminds us, that what we do to the least of the brethren, we do to Him.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, we thank you for your love for all people. Help us to see and love our neighbors as you love them. Equip us with your Holy Spirit to be in humble service to them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

J. Mays

tuesday, march 24
NOTHING CAN SILENCE THE SONG (2018)

"I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord." Psalm 118:17

"After they had given Paul and Silas a severe flogging, they threw them into prison. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." Acts 16:23, 25

There is something deep and powerful about music. It can motivate. It can praise. It can spark gratitude, peace and joy in a way that few things can. It is no wonder that music is so intricately woven through the history of our faith. And what a powerful thing it is to be surrounded by others singing of hope and peace.

As we read the passage above from Acts, we see how Paul and Silas were so convinced that they would not die, but live, that – even in prison, even in the middle of the night – they sang. Nothing can silence the song of love.

I am reminded of the story of Ben Larson, a Lutheran seminary student who was killed in the Haiti earthquake in 2010. The other students who were with him in the building that collapsed crawled out to safety. They called for Ben, whose voice they could hear deep in the rubble. He was singing – and he kept singing until he no longer could. As his wife said, "He spent his last breath singing."

Think of the power of that song. A song of faith and love and hope in the midst of terrible heartbreak. Eventually, Ben's song stopped...but the song of love continued in the lives of those he touched. Truly, nothing can silence the song of love.

My simple prayer is that God make our actions today the next verse of the song. God will write eternity in time through your life, and through mine. May we have the courage to enter the song and may our verse today be one of peace.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of music, for the gift of song. We echo the prayer that our actions become one with the Song of Love, the Song of Peace.

Rev. Matthew Short
Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission, Greater Milwaukee Synod

wednesday, march 25
HEPHATHA FRONT STEPS (2014)

Much of the ministry of Hephatha Lutheran Church has come because the neighborhood around 17th and Locust has been declared Holy Ground.

Located in one of the economically poorest neighborhoods in one of the country's economically poorest cities, its ministry simply cannot be confined within the walls of the sanctuary, even though worship stands at the center of everything that happens. Standing on the front steps of Hephatha, one can see a lot of important things about the ministry there.

From those front steps one can see the evidence of drug houses being torn down, Habitat houses being built, houses where the names and faces of the people who live there are not unfamiliar. An important part of renewal comes when the residents of the neighborhood are no longer anonymous.

Pastor Mary Martha Kannass seems to prepare for worship on Sunday morning by spending little time in the sacristy and plenty of time on the front steps, greeting almost everyone by name. The 9 a.m. service rarely starts at 9 but rather when a church van full of people pulls up in front. About the same time, many of the front doors on the block open, and children come, with or without their parents.

The front steps are both the place of welcome and the place of sending . . . an entry point as people are commissioned to go out into the world bearing the healing power of Jesus' name.

One of Hephatha's key ministries comes in offering support to Hopkins School, the neighborhood public school which has learned to value the caring presence of a concerned congregation.

Some of Hephatha's children have lived in the drug houses which have not been boarded up or torn down. It is not easy ministry (if there ever was such a thing). It's hard to beat swords into plowshares. Thankfully, a few of the drug houses are now community gardens.

The front steps will be Holy Ground as long as people are welcomed and sent.

PRAYER: God, bless people like Pastor Mary Martha who create a welcoming presence within the community they serve. Teach us anew the true meaning of "Holy Ground."

*Bishop Jeff Barrow
Greater Milwaukee Synod (2009 – 2016)*

thursday, march 26
HOPE IS...SUSTAINABILITY (2017)

What is my source of hope? Where did it come from and how did it start? For me, it began long ago at Incarnation Lutheran Church.

My earliest memory of Incarnation was my baptism at the age of about seven. I distinctly remember an unusual sensation as the cool water settled on my head. I became part of something greater than who I was. I made a small altar with flowers in our backyard and prayed there, imitating what I saw during Sunday service. I believed that God was smiling on me, and I felt a connection with him. Attending Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, my thirst for greater understanding grew. "Why?" was my favorite question, and my quest for greater knowledge grew with each explanation.

Church members were my coaches, cheerleaders, and loving spiritual guides during this tumultuous time of the 1960's. During the Civil Rights movement, I knew God was there in our poor neighborhood with us. My foundation of faith, hope, and trust in the Lord was created through their efforts.

That foundation has sustained me through numerous challenges, achievements, pain and joy throughout my life. I know that "all things work together for the good to those who love the Lord." As I observed God working in my life, my desire for sharing knowledge of his love, grace, and power with others grew. He created many opportunities for me to do this at my work and in the community. I cannot thank the Lord enough for all he continues to do in my life.

Decades later Incarnation Church is still a beacon of hope and love at the corner of 15th & Keefe. My greatest hope is that we at Incarnation can continue to be a blessing to others in the neighborhood we serve. The challenges now include gun violence, multiple murders within a one-mile radius, illegal drugs and more. There are long-term residents and families with children who suffer from the trauma experienced here on a regular basis. We believe that through the power of God, we will create the same foundation of faith, hope and love in the lives of the children and families we serve.

PRAYER: O God, we thank you for the support, guidance, and hope that our faith communities impart to us. Help us to sustain the outreach ministries of our congregations through the power of your Spirit, for the good of all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

J. Mays

friday, march 27
HOPE IS...SUSTAINABILITY (2017)

"So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." 1 Corinthians 3:7

Effective accompaniment requires an understanding of the difference between charity and sustainability.

I think of charity as a basket. Those who have "more than enough" fill the basket. Those who have "not enough" empty the basket. The basket must constantly be filled and emptied for the poor to survive. If the wealthy stop filling the basket the poor suffer. That is dependency.

Sustainability is working in the field together. The basket image can still be helpful. Together the gathered community fills the basket with seed, plants the crops, fertilizes the field, and harvests the grain. From that first crop the community prepares more seeds for the next season. Like charity, sustainability is cyclical. But sustainable projects do not put one group of people in a position of dependency. All depend on the same causes and conditions to thrive.

About three years ago, North Cape Lutheran Church started a Dairy Project in partnership with the community of Jesus de Vida Lutheran Church in El Chipilte, El Salvador. Through this partnership we learned that sustainability takes sustained effort and mutual learning. Armed with the knowledge of decades of Wisconsin dairy farming, we provided funds for a herd of heifers. We thought this would be simple. Our North Cape farmers asked about feed, learning that cows in El Salvador just wander the village and eat what they find. They learned that dairy farming in El Chipilte would be much different than commercial farming in Wisconsin. After a rent-a-bull program did not work, a local service club provided a healthy bull named Kiwanis. Without a fence Kiwanis became an unwanted trespasser in the fields around the community. He destroyed a lot of beans and corn. Nevertheless, he and the heifers created a productive partnership. We have more than a half-dozen calves on the way!

Sustainability projects provide opportunity for mutual learning and a healthy dose of humility. Together we build relationships and develop a deeper understanding of our individual gifts and talents.

PRAYER: God of all creation, remind us that we all rely on you to provide our daily bread and teach us to work together to share the harvest. Amen.

Rev. Brad Brown

saturday, march 28
AGENT OF HOPE (2018)

More than once in the past year or two, I have had to remind myself to look for hope. More than once I have wondered whether hope was in hiding: times when people seemed to stop caring about our community, about facts, about creation – and worst, about one another. In those times of wondering, I do have to look for hope, but I don't have to look hard.

I see hope in the ways people all around me use their God-given gifts. Some serve in ways that are loud and obvious; others share their gifts in quieter ways, ways that might seem like hiding compared with the shouting of leaders portrayed in the media. But they are by no means hiding.

If you pay attention, you'll notice that our community is filled with prophets and preachers. They accompany people with disabilities, immigrants, people of color, and those without homes or adequate health care. They do not shy away from the hard work of reconciliation. I think about them as I drive past churches, past social service agencies, past mailboxes used by those prophets who still write letters.

Our community is filled with the teachers, apostles, healers, and pastors (not all of whom wear robes and collars). They share God's love, sometimes with words and prayers, sometimes with boots or mittens or a backpack. They take the word of God – along with socks, sandwiches, and underwear – to streets and neighborhoods that many people are afraid to even speed past. They walk willingly into places of tension and pain. They have that incredible and seemingly rare gift of showing up and listening.

All these people show me hope. They give me hope. They remind me that I, too, am called and equipped by God to share hope in this world.

PRAYER: Thank you, Lord, for all the people in our community who are agents of hope. Bless their work and bless me too, that I may do my part.

Jaime Larson-McLoone

REMEMBERING **THE PAST**,

MINISTERING IN **THE PRESENT**,

LOOKING TO **THE FUTURE.**

monday, march 30
ALL THINGS NEW (2012)

"And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true...It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'" Revelation 21:5-7

Walter Breuggemann often describes the faithful life as "living on the edge of impossibility." He is right, of course. The promises of God sound impossible: everything new? Impossible! No more death? Impossible! No more tears or mourning? Impossible! On a more personal note: It is impossible that my wounds will ever heal; it is impossible that my family will ever be whole again; it is impossible that I will ever trust again. And yet, we hear the words from the throne: "See! I make all things new."

I can remember hearing Bishop Desmond Tutu say he thought that he would never see the day of a free South Africa. I remember in the 1960's meeting John Lewis, the civil rights leader, and hearing him wonder if the Civil Rights Act would ever pass Congress. Not so long ago I, too, wondered if the ELCA would ever confer ordination on gay people. And now we see that these things have happened. Certainly, things are not all 'new,' but there is an edge of hope to this life that was not there before. There is a realization that in the morning when we rise, there is a new day ahead of us that God has given us. Every time we enter the sanctuary and sing and pray and rejoice and mourn, we have faith that there is a new world that is being blessed and prepared for us. It is impossible – but it is "trustworthy and true."

PRAYER: We live on the edge of impossibility because that is where you live and work and play. Help us to grow not in despair but in hope and joy. Amen.

Rev. Sandy Jacobs

tuesday, march 31
A WORD TO THE WISE (2018)

*"The Lord says, "I will make peace your governor and well-being your ruler."
Isaiah 60: 17*

*"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of
mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of
righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."
James 3:17-18*

It is interesting to me how my internal definition of "wise" has changed over the years.

As a kid, I used to think of becoming wise as becoming "wise in the ways of the world." I saw the adults in my life who had learned how to play the game: they knew how to manipulate others for their gain, and they knew how to invest to maximize their profit. They were, to use biblical language, "wise as serpents."

Using that model as the basis for my expectations, maybe that little kid version of myself would be pleased with the civic and political leaders we have. Indeed, many of them are "wise as serpents" in the ways I described above.

But then, this counter-cultural Way that Christ lays before us interrupts those expectations. "Wisdom" in Christ's kingdom looks like peace, gentility, and mercy. "Wisdom" in Christ's kingdom is actually characterized by a willingness to yield, something that our human systems of power certainly don't hold as a laudable characteristic.

And yet, if I think about the deepest, most grounded, wisest people I know . . . I would use many of the words from the passage above to describe them. If we search our lived experience, we know James' words above to be true – even if it is opposite of what we typically expect of our leaders.

Today may peace and well-being themselves be our rulers – as in, may they rule over us. May they rule our thoughts, shaping our decisions; may they rule our hearts, shaping our experience of ourselves and others; may they rule our actions, shaping the million tiny decisions we will make. May they give us hope in the One who makes us one.

PRAYER: Lord, grow in us the wisdom that James describes. Fill us with mercy we can pour out on others. Make us people of peace.

*Rev. Matthew Short
Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission, Greater Milwaukee Synod*

wednesday, april 1
RECIPE AFTER 10 YEARS (2016)

I was once asked, how are you able to always be so calm and patient with the clients? I had to think about it, and I came up with a combination: a cup of patience, a double dose of God, and a half a teaspoon of professionalism.

"Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face continually."
1 Chronicles 16:11

Ok, so please let me explain. I went to school for human service so that gave me the skills to work with different clients. I have had a strong walk with God for many years now and I've always been told to see the face of God in everyone.

"Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face continually." Psalm 105:4

I'm professional at all times so I feel as though I get respect because I give respect.

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16

So, I came up with this theory. Every day is a new day. Once I turn off the lights and I turn that alarm on the day is behind me. Just like I ask for forgiveness daily, I have decided to do the same for my clients. For example, I'm going to use the saying "woke up on the wrong side of the bed". I had a client who came in who must have woke up on the wrong side of the bed and she was mad at the world. Everything I said and did was wrong. She cursed at me, called me out by name and told me she would never talk to me again. The next day she came in and was in a much better mood. She asked if she could speak to me alone. I said, "Sure, let's go to my office." She began by saying "I'm so sorry, I was having a bad day" and she asked me to forgive her. I said, "Sweetie, I have already forgiven you for yesterday."

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE...

"You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." Micah 7:19

So, from that moment on I didn't take anything clients said personally and began seeing the face of God in each person.

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, watching the evil and the good."
Proverbs 15:3

I asked for daily forgiveness. I have chosen to give that same forgiveness daily.

"Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'"
Matthew 18:21-22

PRAYER: Lord, help us to see you in the face of the people around us. Give us patience. Help us to forgive ourselves and others when our days are not ideal. Amen.

Danielle Nixon



thursday, april 2
THYATIRA (2012)

"I know your works – your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols."

Revelation 2:18-29

Our text raises the uncomfortable issue of "tolerance." In most "enlightened" Western, democratic societies, "tolerance" is a virtue, something to be embraced and a value to be taught to our children. We are deeply and loudly critical of Islamists or fundamentalists or old-fashioned folks who espouse "intolerance" for a variety of behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and acts. We grit our teeth at the politicians who refuse to "compromise." But the nagging questions remain: "How far can we go?" "How flexible can we be?" "Where is the line that is too far?" "How inclusive can we be?"

Lent in an election year is a good time to reflect on our own values and our limits to tolerance. It is also a good time to reflect on our actions of "love, faith, service, and patient endurance." We are challenged to reflect God's love for all people in a crazy, diverse, fast-paced world. We need each other. One of Luther's marks of the church is "Public Worship" which includes open conversation about thorny issues. The sanctuary is not the place to close out the problems of the world, but the place to open them up to the light of Christ.

PRAYER: Close our mouths and open our minds. Slow our judgements and increase our patience. Give us the courage to always draw the circle of love larger and larger until all your children are within. Amen.

Rev. Sandy Jacobs

friday, april 3
MY SOUL IS ANCHORED (2018)

"We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the shrine behind the curtain. . ." Hebrews 6:19

Almost every day it seems we are being tossed from here to there. It's like being on a giant pendulum as we swing from one piece of challenging news to the next. The nation is rocking and reeling from the constant motion of systemic, community, and personal dysfunction. If we feed off this negativity on a regular basis, we can become ill and no longer live with joy.

What does one hold onto in times like these? The role of the anchor is an important one for the ship or boat which can be tossed about or even float away if it is not secured. When we feel at loose ends, it's important to hold onto hope in God: *"a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul."*

An anchor can also bind one thing to another. We have to carefully examine the people and things to which we bind ourselves. Binding oneself to any substitute for the love and care of God is dangerous. We need an anchor that goes so deep, it is immovable –like the hope that we find in God *"behind the curtain."*

There is a song that says, *"My soul is anchored in the Lord."* As we move through this Lenten season, we are reminded that Jesus is our Eternal Anchor. Because of Jesus, we can have hope for today, tomorrow, and all eternity.

PRAYER: Dear Jesus, what reassurance it is to be "anchored" in you.
Thank you.

Rev. Marilyn Miller

saturday, april 4
INFINITE HOPE (2018)

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."
Martin Luther King, Jr.

What is it that disappoints you in your life? Is it the ever-frustrating 24/7 news that continues to obsess over presidential tweets or White House leaks? Is it the flood of stories from #metoo, or your addition of your own story, and the anger that this has gone on for way too long? Is it the racism that pervades our society, that divides our community, and affects our schools, neighborhoods, prisons and church? Is it the broken relationship with your spouse, or parent, friend, or co-worker?

It can be all too easy to get sucked into the toxic reality of disappointment. Martin Luther King says, *"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."* Our lives will always be filled with disappointment, but we must not live in those moments. These disappointments, while they are frustrating and overwhelming, do not define us. What defines us is infinite and holy.

Child of God, do not lose infinite hope. As you encounter daily disappointments, may you be held by the love of God to move you to infinite hope. Hope will get us through tweets and leaks. Hope will get us through the hearing and sharing of our own #metoo stories. Hope will see us through from the present reality to the end of racism. We hang on to hope in our desire to reconcile in relationships to others. No matter what you encounter today, may hope dwell in, with, under, and through you.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, help us to weather our disappointments, to never lose the spark of infinite hope.

Rev. Jessica Short

monday, april 6
THE SIXTH BOWL (2012)

"The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east...These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty."
Revelation 16:12-16

Every year, without fail, there are at least three to four movies and TV shows about the final battle of "Good" versus "Evil," that feature the usual dragons and monsters and villains along with the heroes and warriors and victors. I have no doubt that there are plenty of video games about the same thing. Our culture is caught in a mythology of dualism: good-evil, right-wrong, light-darkness. By mythology I do not mean "make believe" or something that is not true or real. By mythology, I mean that story in which we find the truth about how the universe is structured: how it begins, how it plays out, how it ends, and, most importantly, how we fit in. Common to many myths is the "Great Battle." In Scripture it is often called Armageddon with the kings of the earth on one side and God's forces (not us) on the other. We assume that God will win the Battle by destroying the kings of the earth. Interestingly, we are not the ones called on to fight, to do violence, to defend God. We are called only to be faithful witnesses and to live in hope. What God does with the kings of the earth is up to God, not us.

What will God do? Will God play into the hands of the violence of this world? Will God conquer Evil by destroying it, or by transforming it? We must remember that in contrast to the mythology of "Good vs. Evil," we have the mythology of Scripture in which the world, the universe, the Creation is "Good." Evil is an intrusion, a very real and very nasty intrusion, but an intrusion none the less. We are called to resist evil with love and compassion and, if needed, suffering. Speaking the truth, standing up to injustice, and solidarity with the poor are all part of our witness.

PRAYER: Take away our tanks. Take away our mine fields. Take away our billion-dollar fighter jets. Give us peace. Amen.

Rev. Sandy Jacobs

tuesday, april 7
HOPE IS...COMMUNITY (2016)

Here's what hope looks like in our neighborhood.

Picture a park....with litter everywhere, and always present; the bathrooms closed, and eventually razed, because of mold; the wading pool, broken and drained, only to become a garbage receptacle; the playground equipment, run down and rusting; no kids in sight, because gangs have claimed the park as their own turf. That was Lindberg Park, a source of despair in the neighborhood.

"Something needs to be done," said the Justice Team at Incarnation Lutheran Church, located just around the corner from the park. So began a year's long process of rescue. Together with partners from the community they reclaimed and revitalized the park. There were disappointments and delays along the way, but today the gangs are gone. New bathrooms have been built. A splash pad has replaced the wading pool. Kids can be heard laughing on the bright, colorful new playground equipment. Litter is still an issue, but Ms. Doris Owens, the Neighborhood Minister at Incarnation and a member of the Justice Team, recruits folks from the neighborhood to keep the park clean.

These days you can bring a lawn chair and listen to a jazz trio on a summer evening, or your bible and study Scripture around the picnic tables on a Tuesday morning, or your kids and play in the park anytime.

"Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are and Courage to do something about it." St. Augustine.

Some have suggested that Hope has a third daughter: Community. Some things can only get done when they're done together.

PRAYER: Dear Counselor, give us your righteous anger to change our neighborhoods. Help us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with you always. Amen.

Rev. Steve Wohlfeil

wednesday, april 8
MUTUALITY (2017)

The list that Paul gives us in verses 6-8 of Romans 12 is a clear and tidy enumeration of gifts: prophecy, ministry, teaching, encouragement, giving and generosity, leadership, compassion and cheerfulness. Our checklist-oriented minds can easily grasp these concepts and identify these attributes in others.

This is as good a time as any to reflect on whether Paul was asking us to assess others in relation to these gifts, or if Paul was encouraging us to cultivate these gifts in ourselves.

However, verses 12-18 are also full of gifts! When was the last time you gave someone the gift of a blessing instead of responding to them defensively? When did someone give you the gift of empathy, choosing to weep with you?

Have you given yourself the gift of praying even when things seemed stacked against you? Have you talked about how uncomfortable it feels to persevere in prayer (verse 12)? In doing so you may spark a connection that builds mutual faith.

What happens when you give yourself and others the gift of community with people you may not normally associate with, or agree with (verse 16)?

Our gifts have been given us to help others – our family, our neighbors, the people we don't know yet, the body of Christ, and the rest of the world.

The more we consider these gifts the brighter they shine – brighter than our conventional understanding of gifts (things in a store window or things that we suddenly 'need' from a TV commercial). These true gifts are given to us through Christ so that they may be given to others. These are the gifts that strengthen relationships and signal the coming kingdom of Christ.

PRAYER: Thank you for the gifts that you have given to us, O God. Help us to discover their power as we share them with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Denise Rector

thursday, april 9 – maundy thursday
LOOKING FOR HOPE (2018)

The gift of living in these times is learning that faith and hope are not tied to government decisions. Hope does not reside in our financial institutions or in the internet or in job security or even in the very existence of our own congregations. Hope takes her place in God's love and promise.

To visit Pan de Cielo, the food pantry at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Racine, reveals hope even as most who come there carry the worry of security for family and friends who are “undocumented.” It is born in the small change collected monthly from members of the congregation, which adds up to full grocery carts and laughter as the hungry are fed.

Hope vibrates in after-school programs where children sing, eat, study, and play in love and safety. Programs of hope living in our cities.

Hope lives as Pastor Marilyn of Reformation stands to preach or Pastor Mary Martha at Hephatha sits to teach.

Hope is born in those who know where to look – not in fancy hotels but in the stables behind, not in soft beds but in animal feeding troughs.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank you for the ministries like those in our Greater Milwaukee Synod that reach out in hope. Bless those who serve and those who are served.

Rev. Sue Ruehle

friday, april 10 – good friday
THE JOURNEY THAT TAKES US DEEPER (2018)

It was Good Friday and we were walking through the neighborhood surrounding Reformation Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. It's an annual journey, taken every Good Friday by Reformation members and anyone else who wishes to join them. I spent a few minutes talking to a man from Oconomowoc who was feeling the joy of the connection he had with the people of Reformation.

I asked him how the connection had started. He told me it began by a Mission Partner trip to the Mt. Meru Lutheran Diocese of Tanzania. There he discovered the remarkable faith and witness of brothers and sisters in Christ, in a country on the other side of the world. And it made his own faith grow deeper.

It got him thinking, "Can I have that same joy and deep blessing through connecting with my brothers and sisters in the central city of Milwaukee, where I know no one?" And so, he made a commitment to get involved in the Partnership his congregation has with Reformation. To his delight, he made the same faith-expanding discovery.

The journey that takes us deeper into our Christian discipleship comes about by journeys that take us deeper into the body of Christ. Not going deeper is to rob ourselves of the joy our faith is meant to help us experience. It is why the Greater Milwaukee Synod has an Outreach for Hope – so that we can continue to nourish the gift of diverse connections in our Synod and deepen the joy of our faith.

We are most connected to God when we allow ourselves to be connected to our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world, in the next county, and in our own cities.

PRAYER: Dear Lord Jesus, give us the courage to step out of our comfort zone and reach out to others we do not yet know, in order to form strong bonds, such as the Partnership between congregations in our Greater Milwaukee Synod.

Rev. Jim Bickel
Former Executive Director, Outreach for Hope (2009 – 2017)

saturday, april 11 – easter vigil
HOPE (2020)

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." 1 Peter 1:3

Hope, a word that we all frequently use.

As you are reading this devotion, the 13th Annual Outreach for Hope Family Bike Ride will take place in 5 months.

Leading up to the day of the ride members of the planning teams will be saying "I hope it does not rain the day of the ride" or "I hope we exceed our goal of 600 + participants."

The hope Peter speaks of is not this type of wishful thinking. In this passage, Peter links our new birth—our salvation—with the idea of "a living hope." The hope that Peter speaks of is a confident expectation of what is going to happen, a hope that lives on. Living hope, energizing us day in and day out.

PRAYER: As we prepare to celebrate the Resurrection of our Savior, we are reminded that the crucifixion of our Lord was an attempt to bury Truth, but Truth is not dead. It was an attempt to bury Love, but love cannot be contained. We give thanks for the energizing power of living hope as we strive to do God's work. Amen.

Michael Groh
Interim Executive Director, Outreach for Hope