

# Teaching pastors touched by Ethiopians' faith

Text by Gayda Hollnagel



**The Revs. Dennis and Chris Hallemeier (right) receive gifts during a farewell party with staff from the Nekemte Christian Education College, East Wollega, Ethiopia.**

When the Rev. Dennis Hallemeier went to Ethiopia to teach in a regional seminary last fall, he took along the collected wisdom of his teaching predecessors, including his wife, the Rev. Chris Hallemeier.

The shared information was invaluable, said Dennis Hallemeier, the eighth La Crosse Area Synod pastor to teach for three months at the Nekemte Christian Education College, East Wollega, Ethiopia.

Without that input, he wouldn't have been prepared to work with students whose English skills varied.

Although all classes are taught in English and students are required to pass a proficiency exam before enter-

ing the school, English is not their first language, Hallemeier said. Most students learn a tribal dialect and then a national language before learning English.

"Some students were very, very good; some were not so good at taking notes," he said.

Knowing what to expect, he prepared lesson plans and materials before he left for Ethiopia. To assist the students, he created handouts of his lectures so even those with limited note-taking skills could easily review the material he presented.

Hallemeier said he logged 22 class sessions a week with two groups. He taught Old Testament and New Testament theology to nine students in an upper level degree program and the Gospel of Mark to 30 students in a lower level diploma program. Part of the challenge was that they were considered full-semester courses, but he had to teach them in a half-semester.

"It was really a privilege to teach these students because they are absolutely committed to furthering their education," Hallemeier said. The students, many already pastors, preachers or evangelists, were mostly in their 20s and 30s.

Unlike U.S. seminaries, students at Nekemte don't need a four-year col-



Bishop Jim Arends (left) and synod delegates will travel to Ethiopia March 14-30 to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Central Synod of the Ethiopian Evangelical [Lutheran] Church Mekane Yesus.

They will also visit congregations and ministries of the Central Synod, seeing how we can best connect in mission with one another. Other delegates are: Kristin Wendland, who will remain at the Nekemte Christian Education College through May as our next teaching pastor; our first teaching pastor, Mark Solyst of English Lutheran, La Crosse; former delegation leader Lindsay Jordan, pastor of Good Shepherd, Viroqua; and former (and now acting) La Crosse Area Synod Secretary Connie Scharlau of Christ, Arcadia.

lege degree to enter. The school offers a one-year certificate in Bible that isn't considered college level; a three-year diploma program that counts as two years of undergraduate study; and a two-year degree program that provides graduates with a bachelor of theology degree.

The goal is to eventually offer a four-year degree program. To do that, all teachers would need a master's degree. Now they only need a bachelor's degree to teach diploma students.

"Since they've started the degree program, our teaching pastors are really important because they have a master's degree in theology," Hallemeier said.

Not all students become pastors, a designation reserved for those who serve as administrators or leaders of parishes, which are similar to our synod conferences. Other leadership roles include preaching or evangelizing. People are recognized for their gifts and receive training to develop

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their skills. They can be preachers or evangelists without a diploma. Once students complete their training, they go back to their faith communities to serve, Hallemeier said.

The college is operated by the Central Synod of the Ethiopian Evangelical [Lutheran] Church Mekane Yesus, since 1991 a companion of the La Crosse Area Synod.

Our synod began sending teaching pastors to Ethiopia in 2002. Mark Solyst, pastor of English Lutheran Church, La Crosse, was the first. Solyst said he was surprised by the Ethiopians' depth of spirituality and how committed they are as Christians.

"I went with the expectation that we in the West were going to help the church in Ethiopia. I came back realizing that we are truly partners, walking together in Jesus Christ," he said. "In America, sometimes we lack passion because the church gets swallowed up in our everyday lives. In Ethiopia, the church is thriving. There's confidence in prayer, there's confidence in God's grace, and we truly need that."

Other teaching pastors were: John Stennes-Spidahl (2003); Lanny Westphal (2004); Jim Arends, (2005); Elwood Rieke (2006); Chris Hallemeier (2007); and Pete Beckstrand (2008). The Rev. Kristin Wendland is teaching in Ethiopia this spring.

The Central Synod, which has about 800,000 members, has a critical need for pastors as there are only about 300, including parish administrators, Hallemeier said. Of the 300, 16 are women. The synod is part of a fast growing denomination with about 2.5 million communicant members.

Hallemeier said his experience wouldn't have been possible without the support of his congregations, Westby Coon Prairie and Vang Lutheran in Westby, Wis. Julie Wollman, the congregations' associate pas-

tor, assumed responsibilities as senior pastor. Beth Stempinski, a retired pastor, volunteered to help with visitation and preaching.

The members raised \$3,000, including \$500 from Sunday schools, to help fund Central Synod programs. About one-fourth of the money aided students at the college.

After he returned, Hallemeier began raising money to buy theological dictionaries for each of his students because they have so few books

and little resources to purchase them. He's hoping to raise enough to purchase 57 volumes, at \$30 each.

Both Hallemeiers were inspired by the deep faith of the Ethiopian students and by their eagerness to learn and make the most of what they have.

Chris Hallemeier said there is much poverty in Ethiopia. "Just to get the basics of life is very, very difficult," she said. "Your heart would say, just fix it, but it's a very complicated issue." □

## From the bishop

This supplement brings lots of news about our companionship with the Central Synod of the Ethiopian Evangelical [Lutheran] Church Mekane Yesus (translated Household of Jesus). Our other companion is the Peruvian Evangelical Lutheran Church. These relationships are near the center of our understanding of faith and the church. "What does this mean?" you may ask.



Some church council members once proposed increasing support for missions and for fighting world hunger. Others opposed, turning to their pastor and asking, "In hard times, don't we need to take care of our own first?" The pastor replied, "By 'our own' are you meaning the members of our congregation? The people of our community? Americans? Isn't the baby baptized in Africa last Sunday just as much our sister as the baby baptized at our congregation's font is our brother?"

We have sisters and brothers in Christ across the communion rail and across the seas. We learn from one another how to live out our call to be Christ's presence in our world. We help our companions raise up leaders with teachers, textbooks and support for children's ministries (donations are always needed and welcome).

Our companions teach us how to share Jesus with our neighbors, to feed our poor neighbors' children in spite of limited resources, and to speak out for justice in our communities and beyond. We are blessed in different ways in the ELCA, the EECMY and the Lutheran church in Peru. But we are all blessed to be a blessing—blessing one another, connected in Christ, from continent to continent to continent.

"Join hands, disciples of the faith, whate'er your race may be. All children of the living God are surely kin to me. In Christ now meet both east and west, in him meet south and north; All Christly souls are one in him throughout the whole wide earth" (John Oxenham; ELW, 650). Connected in Christ,  
*Jim Arends, bishop*

# Blair churches unite to become one

By Gayda Hollnagel

**A**fter decades of shared missions and ministries, Zion and First Lutheran churches in Blair have become one.

The unification into Blair Lutheran Church became effective Jan. 1 after months of planning. The two congregations voted for unification in September 2010 by a more than two-thirds margin. Organizational meetings were held in October, with the election of a new church council and adoption of a joint budget and revised constitution.

The Blair congregation will be formally received into the La Crosse Area Synod during the 2011 assembly in June.

Roger Gilbert, a longtime member of Zion, said the two congregations (part of a three-point parish with Fagernes Lutheran, rural Blair) had talked about uniting for decades. But nothing ever happened until the matter came to a head last year. Leaders became aware that scheduling separate services and events was becoming more complicated, especially with just one pastor to serve all three congregations. Scheduling worship services was especially confusing, with the two town churches taking turns shutting down for three or four months at a time.

“It got to be that people didn’t know what time services were or where they were,” Gilbert said. “We felt we had to do something different.”

Adding to the confusion: while the two congregations shared a pastor and many ministries, each had its own church council, budget and constitution. There also was a parish

council that included representatives from First, Zion and Fagernes churches.

The Fagernes church, which was not part of the unification, is considering several options, including continuing as a separate congregation, said Chris Hallemeier, who continues to serve Blair Lutheran and Fagernes as interim pastor. Both congregations began the call process in January, with a goal of finding a permanent pastor to succeed Hallemeier.

Although the Zion and First churches are now one, members use both buildings, which are about four blocks apart. Zion’s building has the larger worship space and education wing and continues to house the church offices, just as it did when the congregations were part of the three-point parish. First’s building is more suited to smaller events such as Lenten services and informal meetings.

Mick Miller, a longtime member of First, is president of the new Blair congregation. He said the two congregations already shared many ministries, including a joint Sunday school, choir and confirmation classes. “The kids have grown up together in Sunday school for well over 30 years,” he said, adding that most of that group already has felt part of one congregation. “They have been part of the same family, Sunday school together, confirmation together, which I think will help this single congregation function as one.”

First’s longtime annual lutefisk dinner will continue to be a tradition with the Blair congregation, church leaders said. Zion members had

always helped out with the dinner, as did many non-members from the community.

The new church council, composed of five members from Zion and four from First, is very optimistic that the unified congregation will be good for members from both former congregations and for the community, Miller said.

“It is just a wonderful thing to happen,” he said. “It is not only to unify, it makes it easier for people to come. They won’t have to decide which church to attend.”

Miller said he doesn’t think there will be significant changes in operating expenses because the congregation will continue to have two buildings to maintain. However, some savings will come with reduced insurance costs.

Dohn Galstad, the former president of First and now secretary of the new Blair congregation, said he believes that even people opposed to the unification will come to see it as a positive move.

“A lot of people wanted this to happen. A lot of people worked hard to get it to happen, the next step is to cause our congregation to grow,” Galstad said.

The three church leaders credit Hallemeier with providing the pastoral leadership needed to make the unification a reality.

“Pastor Chris came to us at a time when we had been thinking about this for some time,” Miller said. “She’s probably right that we were at the point [where we needed] to make some decisions for the future. She was very helpful.” □

## La Crosse Area



**LYO students and adult advisers sort bags of shoes they collected in November for Shoeman Water Projects, a nonprofit organization that works to provide clean water in developing countries.**

# Synod LYO members help turn shoes into clean water

By Gayda Hollnagel

**M**ore than 5,000 pairs of shoes donated by La Crosse Area Synod members are on track to provide clean drinking water to people in developing countries.

The shoes, collected last November as a service project by the synod's Lutheran Youth Organization, will be resold to fund water projects in places such as Haiti, Africa and South America.

According to its website ([www.shoeman.org](http://www.shoeman.org)), Shoeman Water Projects is a ministry of Eagle Wings Ministries, a registered, nonprofit charity. Shoeman Water Projects picks up donated used and new shoes year round from businesses, churches, schools and shoe drives.

The shoes are exported to retailers in the developing world.

The resale of shoes provides jobs and affordable footwear for residents in developing countries. Affordable shoes are a life-saving tool as they protect the new owner's feet and overall health from foot abrasions, parasites and mites, the website said.

The money raised pays for well drilling rigs, water purification systems and hand pump repair microbusinesses.

In Kenya, through a partnership with Water for Kenya, the Shoeman has drilled 140 wells serving about 130,000 people. Edge Outreach of Louisville, Ky., is also a partner with

Shoeman Water Projects.

Rocky Danielson, director of Raising Up Leaders, said the truck driver who picked up the shoes in La Crosse in December told her that he was from Haiti and had seen first-hand the work of the Shoeman Water Project. "He said some of the only clean wells there have been drilled by Shoeman," Danielson said.

The shoes were picked up the week of Dec. 5 after 25 youth and 15 adults gathered at the synod office in La Crosse to prepare them for shipping. After 45 minutes of hard work, they had more than 5,000 pairs of shoes in 173 bags, Danielson said.

The project was suggested by Karyn Bodenschatz, pastor of Trinity and Zion Lutheran churches, Adams, Wis., and an LYO adviser.

Cheryl Schmidt, an LYO member from Trinity, said the students were eager to try the project after hearing about it. But they wondered whether it would be successful, she added.

"It was amazing the outcome we had," Schmidt said. "I didn't think it would be that big. There were a lot of shoes."

The group spread the word to congregations through posters and fliers provided by the Shoeman Project.

The December gathering included a worship service and a meal at Trinity Lutheran Church in La Crosse. The LYO youth also got a visit from St. Nicholas, ably portrayed by Bishop Jim Arends. □

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