

# Kids are never too young to learn about Jesus

By Gayda Hollnagel



ANDREW STUTESMAN

**Andrea Curtis and her daughter Ava (right) pose for a photo with Little Leaps leader Carla Stanton and her daughter Caroline.**

**W**hen Carla Stanton's 4-year-old son Andrew was a toddler, he couldn't read, but he sure knew a McDonald's or a Target when he saw one.

"So [if he can learn that] he can learn the story of Jesus too," said Stanton, the leader of a faith-based program for parents and children birth to age 3. The program operates on the premise that children are never too young to begin learning about their Christian faith.

Stanton's "Little Leaps" program is in its fourth year at First Lutheran Church in Onalaska, Wis., with some families bringing their infants while they are still tiny newborns.

"The idea is to remind families

that they are their child's primary faith formers," Stanton said.

Holmen [Wis.] Lutheran Church started a similar program this fall called "Tadpoles." Leader Lori Toso said the first session drew 17 families and 19 children.

"I was hoping for five or seven [families], but thought maybe three would stay with me," Toso said.

## More involvement

The idea behind both programs is to involve young children and their parents in the life of the church and to become more comfortable practicing their faith in their homes and in their lives.

Faith Factors, a study produced

by Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., and Southwestern Southern Baptist Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, notes that only one in 10 young people who are baptized will stay engaged in the life of the church as adults, Toso and Stanton said.

They are hoping their birth to 3 programs can help reverse that trend.

"If you ask a child, 'When did you first know your mother was your mother,' they would respond, 'I don't know. I always knew,'" Toso said. "So when our children are asked, 'When did you first hear about Jesus,' the young person's response is, 'I don't know. I always knew.'"

To help spread the word to other La Crosse Area Synod congregations, First hosted a one-day workshop in November led by two birth to 3 experts from the Twin Cities in Minnesota.

*Continued on page B*

**Mark Wrolstad and his wife, Terry, play with some of the children in the Little Leaps class at First Lutheran Church in Onalaska, Wis. Seated on Mark's lap is Leah Thies. Terry is holding Alea Runde. Standing is Andrew Stanton.**



ANDREW STUTESMAN

*Hollnagel is the supplement editor for the La Crosse Area Synod.*

# La Crosse Area

Continued from page A

The monthly Tadpoles program in Holmen is set up with learning spaces where children and their parents can engage in several activities. There also is time for singing, praying and hearing Bible stories.

First's program meets the last Sunday of each month during the Sunday school hour. Stanton said the time works well for families with older children because they can be in Sunday school while the parents spend time in the class with their

younger siblings.

The sessions at First average 10 to 12 families during the school year, but attendance drops off over the summer.

## The four keys

The sessions at First focus on four keys of faith formation as defined in the book *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* by David Anderson and Paul Hill (Augsburg

Fortress, 2003):

- Caring conversation.
- Rituals and traditions.
- Devotions.
- Service to others.

"The goal is not that we would come and do these things one time of the month, but that we would gather and learn to do them at home," Stanton said.

Activities incorporate music, Bible stories, prayer and physical movement such as dancing. The parents and children do some things together, but time is allowed for conversation with the parents while volunteers play with the children.

Rituals may be as simple as lighting a candle or praying before meals and at bedtime, Stanton said.

Katie Everson, a parent whose children have been part of the program at First since it started, said one of the rituals she and her husband like best is giving a blessing to family members when they leave the house or come home.

"It's a great reinforcement and more of a blessing than a hello and goodbye," Everson said.

Being part of Little Leaps has resulted in her family becoming more involved in the life of the church, she said.

Little Leaps has gotten Everson's children to feel more comfortable being in the church, she said. "It's like a second home, and I like that," she added. □

## From the bishop

# What generous love

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all ... [in] the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is*



*who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds* (Christmas text: Titus 2:11, 3b, 14).

Christmas is more than a holy night. Christmas is more than goodwill to all. Christmas is more than a baby in a manger. Christmas is seeing the fullness of God's generous love in the future of the swaddled baby Jesus.

All who feel distant from God know that God is manifest—made visible and close—to us in Jesus.

All who feel like outsiders know

that God brings welcome salvation to all.

All who feel unworthy know that we are worth the life of Christ, the Son of God.

All who feel broken, dirty, trapped in sin know that Christ redeems us from all iniquity.

What wonderful gifts we see in the Christmas baby Jesus. Gifts so great. Gifts so personal. Gifts so eternal. Gifts so freeing. How can we ever say thank you?

We can be the people Christ made us, who are zealous for good deeds. We can give gifts. We can share the good news. We can be present. We can give ourselves. We can bless the world for Jesus. We can bless the world with Jesus. We can live out *generous lives*.

Our La Crosse Area Synod theme for 2012-13 is: "*Generous Love, Generous Lives*."

Thankful for God's gifts, serving with you,  
*Jim Arends, bishop*

This supplement is sponsored by the La Crosse Area Synod and Bethany Lutheran Homes. To share your stories, contact: Gayda Hollnagel, N5061 Sunset Vista Rd., Onalaska, WI 54650; 608-783-5131; [ghollnagel@yahoo.com](mailto:ghollnagel@yahoo.com).

## Holmen churches begin new journey; Peace buys building

**C**hrist the King and Bridge of Life Lutheran churches in the Holmen-Onalaska area have come together to form a new congregation.

Journey Lutheran Church held its constituting meeting Nov. 13, during which it formally closed both previous congregations and then adopted a constitution, called a pastor and elected officers.

“What we have become is a new congregation under development,” said Steve Meyer, pastor of Journey who previously served Bridge of Life and Christ the King part time.

The formation of a new congregation gives members a fresh start in their journey of faith, Meyer said, adding, “It’s really an exciting time.”

Journey Lutheran meets in the former Christ the King building at 2703 Sand Lake Rd., Onalaska. The Bridge of Life worship center and offices, which were leased in the Holmen Square Mall, were closed.

Much of the extra furniture and equipment from the Bridge of Life site has been donated to Peace Lutheran Church of Tomah, Wis., which purchased its own building in

September.

Peace, which formed in 2010, previously shared worship space with First Congregational United Church of Christ in Tomah. Peace is now located at 307 W. Warren St., Tomah. The first services in its new location were held Sept. 11.

Susan Meyer Sheffer, interim pastor of Peace, said the congregation was able to buy their building with a 20 percent down payment.

“God has blessed us richly in finances and new members,” she said. □

### Anniversaries

#### 150 years

**St. Peter Lutheran Church, Prairie du Chien, Wis.**, was founded in 1861 by German immigrants. It started as a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregation but eventually joined the American Lutheran Church, a forerunner to the ELCA.

The congregation celebrated its anniversary all year, winding up observances on Sunday, Sept. 25, with a worship service that included preaching by Bishop Jim Arends and a banquet after the service.

Other major events were a concert by Ritterchor, the all-male choir from Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, and a pig roast on the grounds of the Villa Louis Mansion in Prairie du Chien.

Nine former pastors and pastoral interns preached on separate Sundays throughout the year. The congregation had one pastor, Walter Bodamer, who served 45 years and was still pastor when he died in 1968.

**Our Savior’s Lutheran, La Crosse, Wis.**, was founded in 1861 as a mis-

sion outreach of Halfway Creek and Lewis Valley Lutheran churches, both in rural Holmen, Wis. The congregation’s first pastor, Laur Larson, was a co-founder of Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and served as its first president.

In 1871, Our Savior’s became a two-point congregation with Bostwick Valley, rural West Salem, Wis. Our Savior’s offered confirmation classes and worship in Norwegian until the 1920s. The congregation was served by only four pastors during its first 100 years, ending with George Ulvildsen, who presided over the 100th anniversary celebration.

Our Savior’s began its 150th celebration in October 2010, holding many special events throughout 2011, including: a service with Luther College President Rick Torgerson preaching and music by the Nordic Choir, a lutefisk supper, visits from former pastors, and a recognition Sunday for widowed spouses of former pastors.

The final celebration was Sept. 18,

with Arends preaching, and a dinner afterward.

#### 125 years

**Bethel Lutheran Church, La Crosse**, was organized Oct. 23, 1886, in the home of John Alstad. The congregation met in homes until building its first church at George and Sill streets. A new church was completed at Loomis and Livingston streets in 1958.

Bethel celebrated throughout October, with two pastors who are sons of the congregation coming back to preach. Arends preached at the Oct. 23 anniversary service, which was followed by a dinner and tours of the former church building at George and Sill streets. The congregation also recognized fourth- and fifth-generation families still at Bethel.

Members were invited to submit their favorite hymns to be sung during October and also share memories about Bethel. The memories, including some from former pastors, were compiled into a book. □

# La Crosse Area

## Bethany Lutheran Homes



From the Rev. Kimberly Jordan:

As a family of communities committed to providing the best in long-term care that will meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of our residents, Bethany Lutheran Homes' staff members understand that their work is a ministry. No matter our particular work or department, each staff member who serves here uses his/her gifts and abilities to be the hands and feet of Christ.

*One day, Jesus will say to us, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, so you did it to me" (Matthew 25:34-40).*

We are privileged that God has seen us fit to entrust to us the very people Jesus was talking about: the least of these—the sick and the frail, the lonely and the vulnerable. Our goal is to serve our residents in a manner that will cause Jesus to say to us, *"Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you."*



**Residents of Eagle Crest Senior Community participate in Hawaiian Day, one of many activities offered to keep residents active.**

Bethany Lutheran Homes  
2575 South 7th St.  
La Crosse, WI 54650  
608-775-8200  
Fax: 608-775-8270  
[www.bethanylutheranhomes.org](http://www.bethanylutheranhomes.org)