Walking Together

Unto Jesus

Acts of Love and Mercy

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Your Kingdom Come

South-Central Synod of Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God’s work. Our hands.

WINTER 2015
editor’s letter

In the last issue of Walking Together, Bishop Mary Froiland wrote that we are called to recognize the face of Jesus in those we encounter around us every day. This issue is about places where we have seen the face of Jesus.

We have seen the face of Jesus at the Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage, Wisconsin where Rev. Mark Teslik serves as Prison Chaplain for 830 inmates. We have seen Jesus in the homeless for whom we advocate by processing around the capital in solidarity on the Longest Night of the year. We have seen Jesus for those whom we serve meals through community suppers and provide shelter through The Road Home. And we’ve seen Jesus in the face of an 89-year old Badger fan, Ken Becker, a member of Dekorra Lutheran Church who has a seriously generous heart for this church.

Come with me. Let’s walk together through these stories of God working through members of our worshipping communities and congregations of the ELCA South-Central Synod of Wisconsin. You will see us living out our faith through acts of service in creative, resourceful ways with compassion, love, kindness, and mercy.

In the words of Mother Teresa, “Look for Jesus in everyone you meet.” I hope you will see the face of Jesus in everyone you meet in this winter issue of Walking Together.

Vicki Hanrahan
Editor and Synod Communicator
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On the cover: On December 21, the longest night of the year, Community members walked together around the Madison capitol behind a hearse in memory of people who have died while homeless. See more on the story in this issue of Walking Together.

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Chaplain Mark Teslik has been a chaplain at Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage since December 2010. Columbia Correctional Institution (CCI) is a maximum security correctional institution for 830 male offenders within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

Prior to his call at CCI, Mark served as pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in East Moline, Illinois, and as chairman of the World Hunger Appeal Committee of the Northern Illinois Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He served as chaplain from 2002-2004 at Sand Ridge Secure Treatment Center (SRSTC) in Mauston and at New Lisbon Correctional Institution from 2004-2010 where he worked to implement many new programs to meet the spiritual needs of 1000 inmates at NLCI prior to accepting the call from our synod.

The CCI chapel has a full range of programs addressing the spiritual needs of inmates. CCI has one full-time chaplain, Rev. Mark Teslik, and one part-time chaplain.

Services that are new to CCI are Mindfulness Group and Spiritual Discipline. Rev. Chris Lee Thompson (Hope Lutheran, McFarland) is one of the core volunteers leading the Mindfulness groups. Inmates report on lowered levels of stress as they focus on meditation in their living areas. “The inmates have said that Rev. Lee-Thompson’s meditation classes have really helped them and have been life-changing for the inmates,” said Lucas Wogernese, Captain of the facility.

The chapel utilizes over 100 volunteers in providing programs including worship services, study groups and prayer for the seven religious groups: Buddhist, Catholic, Islamic, Jewish, Native American, Pagan, and Protestant. These volunteers are required to take an orientation once every two years to stay current with changing policies. Volunteers are key in all the groups, services, and programs that are offered at CCI and inmates are appreciative of the volunteers’ time spent at the institution.

Mark explained that during in processing, inmates complete a form that includes questions about their religious preferences and any food restrictions relating to their religion. Mark indicated, some arrive without a religious preference, so will choose one to follow. But the question about diet restrictions gets shared with the kitchen and they observe religious requests, which is not an easy thing to do among 830 inmates.

Mark also showed me the greeting card ministry that we have been invited to participate in as a synod. Greeting cards are purchased and inmates can fill out a form that they give to Mark for fulfillment. An inmate actually processes the orders from a small office where the supplies are stored. He also showed me prayer booklets, bibles and books that are made available. This is also an opportunity for congregations to make monetary donations to the prison.

The next part of the day, I experienced three different worship services: A Catholic service, a Native American Indian service, and an Islamic service. These are always held on
Fridays. The protestant services are held on Sunday nights and volunteers typically lead those.

The chaplain is responsible for arranging leaders for all services and these leaders change throughout the year. Mark is grateful to have effective leaders. The leader of the Islamic service has been very well received by the inmates. He also mentioned the dedication and preparedness of the Catholic priest that often leads mass. I was surprised with the Native American Indian leader and this service. He shared a beautiful and comforting message reminding the inmates that just getting up to a new day, being made new, was a gift from God for which to be grateful.

I was impressed by Chaplain Teslik’s ecumenical appreciation. It became clear that he would need to have this in order to be effective in his call.

Mark assures the chapel has the appropriate tools needed for each leader. For the Catholic mass, an altar was rolled out into the middle of the floor and the priest arranged the paraments and the communion elements that he brought with him. A smoking pipe and willow branches for a cleansing ritual and drum were necessary for the Native American service and prayer rugs for prostrating in prayer were brought out for each inmate for the Islamic service.

The importance of close communication between Mark and the leaders became evident and was eye-opening. I realized how much the chaplain needs to know about the rituals and meaning of the rituals of all different religions. Mark was able to explain them to me with great authority.

After the worship services, I was taken on a complete tour of the facility by the Captain, Lucas Wogernese. He had just been promoted and several people congratulated him while we were on the tour. Inmates would stop him to ask questions and he would gently answer them or let them know he’d have to get back to them. They appeared to treat him with the same respect with which he treated them. While he is clearly an authoritative figure who fully understands the nature of the crimes they have committed, he somehow balances that knowledge with treating them with kindness.

While walking through hallways, we had time to talk about the daily life of inmates. He explained that our prison system has been changing from a system focused on punishment of the incarcerated to one that has a goal of correction and successful re-entry into the community. That gave me a sense of hope and I realized that prison ministry is one part of that hope. The captain stopped and pointed to caulking in the joint where a window met the wall and explained that inmates will pull out the caulking, let it dry until it has sharp edges and use it for harm. They can’t let them have whole oranges as some might save the orange peel and let it dry until its sharp edges could be used as tools to cut themselves. These stories of desperation made it even clearer to me why chaplains are needed.

I felt gratitude and pride to learn that our church, our synod, has called chaplains like Mark Teslik who love justice and walk humbly with Jesus. He embodies the call to serve with love and mercy. What’s more, he seems to approach the calling to share the goodness of salvation and righteousness with a sense of urgency. I am inspired by his efficiency and his tenacity and follow through on his daily tasks. When I asked Mark where he saw God at work, he reflected on his experience as pastor in a small rural community. “I remember becoming known to many persons through crossing paths in the post office and grocery store of the small town where I served as pastor. I find a similar community experience when I stop to greet staff and inmates wherever I am known and wherever I walk throughout the institution. I offer baptism classes throughout the year to interested inmates. The many stories of the newly baptized men stepping forth in faith are among the most memorable moments of seeing God at work.” Chaplain Teslik also sees God in the Sunday evening Protestant communion services where Christ is present in His life giving body and blood.

CONNECT AND SUPPORT PRISON & JAIL MINISTRY

Here’s how you can participate in the the Greeting Card Ministry for the Incarcerated

Helping inmates keep in contact with their family and friends through donated greeting cards is the focus of one of the most popular ways Chaplain Teslik assists inmates at CCI. Synod congregations, groups, and individual members who wish to support the greeting card project can help purchase the greeting cards. Consider bringing light to an inmate and their family through donating to the CCI greeting card project throughout special times of the year. A form to assist you can be found on the synod website:

http://www.scsw-elca.org/ ministry_opportunities.aspx

Coat Ministry for Those Re-entering Society

People who enter jail in the spring, summer or fall may be released in the winter and need a coat to keep them warm. Please ask your neighbors and friends to check their closets for extra-large or larger coats to donate, or perhaps make an announcement to your congregation or civic group. See instructions below for getting the coats to people who need them.

Coats for Men: Contact Chaplain John Mix at (608) 266-4525 or jmix4peace@hotmail.com

Coats for Women: Contact Chaplain Julia Weaver at (608) 261-9755 or thejweaver@yahoo.com

CONNECT:

For more information on jail ministry: http://www.malc-online.org/home

Madison Area Lutheran Council “MALC” provides the Jail Chaplains for the Dane County Jail in Madison, WI.

Rev. John Mix is under call from the synod council to serve as a jail chaplain. He is pictured here with Rev. Julia Weaver.
Mark explains, “Correctional chaplains play a vital role in supporting inmates whose lives are at best difficult because they live separated for a large part from the community and family. The chaplain can become part of the community that is formed within the institution’s walls. Inmates can address their spiritual needs by attending the many services and study groups offered through the chapel as well as speaking privately with the chaplain. Spiritual needs are part of the human condition no matter who we are or where we live.”

The large number of inmates’ written requests to see the chaplain, as well as a significant number of staff referrals speaks of the vital role of the chaplain. In addition to the number of religious services and study groups, Chaplain Teslik offers inter-faith activities that are available to inmates regardless of their chosen religious preference.

After a day of learning, I was reminded that prisons are surely places of potential violence. Staff are vigilant and concerned about safety as they daily share spaces without barriers with people who have committed horrific crimes of violence. It was easy to see God at work in this place. The staff that I encountered all seemed to have special hearts for justice: Linda Fait, the intake person was proud of the programming that is offered for inmates at CCI and what is done to match programming to the needs of the inmates; the security guards and in particular the security guard of almost 30 years whose job it was to always know when Mark was coming and going and to know who was in the area of Mark’s office and chapel; Captain Wogernese, the Administrative and Accounting staff, the cooks, the teachers, the laundry room supervisor, and the visiting volunteer leaders, all had the face of Jesus.

Inmates who are maximum security prisoners wear green and those with medium status wear red. When I looked at the men in green who were participating in these services and talked about working toward being on the “red road,” I could see the face of Jesus. In truth, I could see the face of Jesus in all the inmates for I kept thinking about what Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

For weeks after the visit, I shared my experience with almost everyone I came in contact with. They listened with great interest and I was excited to be the carrier of the good news that God is doing some very good things with chaplain ministry in our jails and prisons through chaplains like Mark Teslik.

Bishop Mary and I have been invited to lead a Lutheran service in July. We have humbly accepted.

On my dresser there sits an orange peel that has aged and dried. Its edges are sharp. I keep it there as a daily reminder to pray for the inmates and staff and volunteers of the Columbia Correctional Institution.

I first met Rev. Mark Teslik at the Lake Geneva School of Cooking free time activity at Bishop’s Convocation. We shared the same cooking island and I teased him about eating some of the ingredients meant for our dish. He was a good sport and a friendship was born. What a contrast to our play time was my experience shadowing him for a day at CCI. He clearly takes his calling and responsibilities seriously, fulfilling his duties as chaplain with authority, dignity and compassion.
In 1529, Martin Luther published a series of articles explaining the statements that define the Christian faith. In his conversation with people in the towns around his home, he learned that the storms of life had left them “in the dark.” They needed some guidance to navigate daily living. This series of articles was soon gathered into a booklet and given the name “Luther’s Small Catechism.” It was designed to help families learn and understand the life-giving truths found in the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Sacraments. It provided direction as they made their journey of faith with God.

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther wrote when we ask for Daily Bread, we ask for “everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful magistrates, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.”

Our synod has a ministry partner in Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin that focuses its work on providing Daily Bread for all children in Wisconsin. Our kids need food to grow up healthy and strong, an education to strengthen their minds and prepare them for the future, access to health care providers and resources, and finally a safe home.

Today in Wisconsin:

- Over 350,000 children live in homes receiving food assistance through the FoodShare Program.
- More than 335,000 students, or 40% of all Wisconsin’s K-12 students receive a free or reduced price lunch at school.
- More than 12,000 children are known to be homeless.
- Homeless youth are more vulnerable to being trafficked.

What Martin Luther Had to Say About Our Daily Bread

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Entertaining Angels Through “The Road Home”

The Road Home Dane County provides opportunities for homeless children and their families to achieve self-determined goals and affordable, stable housing. Through the work of a core group of religious leaders and shelter providers, The Road Home currently serves about 150 homeless families with children each year in Dane County. Several of our congregations participate in this program (see the Connect Information in this article).

Midvale Lutheran Church in Madison, has been involved with the program since it was founded over 15 years ago as the Interfaith Hospitality Network. One of the six coordinators from Midvale, Gayle Perlberg, explained that until they were approached to become a host church, they were unaware about the number of homeless families in Madison. They signed up immediately and Gayle and Greg Lampe went to training. Now 15 years later, Midvale serves as host to families four times a year for one week at a time.

Here’s How It Works:

Gayle explained that their belongings and rollaway cots provided by Road Home arrive on a U-Haul Sunday morning. Midvale happens to have rooms that have accordion dividers so they can serve five families at a time, although they never serve more than the 14 people that the Road Home Van can accommodate. “We have the rooms for the families and then across the room we have a youth room with a TV and couches for lounging. Churches are very creative with making it work, some just use room dividers to create the room space,” she explained.

Families arrive Sunday night and for one week, Midvale members provide evening meals for them, breakfast and foods for them to pack lunches. They leave our church at 7:00 in the morning and they go to a day center on Olan Avenue where they are helped to find permanent work and housing, and are provided access to laundry facilities and showers. At the end of the week, we repack the U-Haul with their belongings and cots and take it to the next church. Most of the children get to school on the IHN van or some families have vehicles. They do try to keep the children in the same school as they were when they became homeless.

Toni Swandby of Midvale makes sure volunteer slots are filled: cooking food, serving, interacting with the families, staying with the kids, and serving as overnight hosts, and other tasks as needed. To simplify this, volunteers sign up using Midvale’s website.

Midvale also has four buddy churches that don’t actually house families but their folks volunteer to help. St. James-Verona, Glenwood Moravian, Prairie Unitarian, and Beth Israel Center all help with all the other activities. For those churches that might not have physical space, this is an opportunity to still lend helping hands in creative ways. For example, Burke Lutheran has teamed up with Lakeview Lutheran for the past few years to provide food and volunteers in support of this program. Lakeview provides the housing location. Burke provides volunteers and food from Sunday through Tuesday and Lakeview takes Wednesday through Saturday.

Coordinators at Midvale write articles, recruit volunteers, make welcome door signs and help set up before families arrive, and write thank you letters to volunteers in the newsletter. Other coordinators are: Greg Lampe, Lorraine Snyder, Randi Leeder, Ruth Manning, Alison Schultz and Volunteer Coordinator, Toni Swandby.

The families can stay in shelter for 90 days, but if they haven’t found housing and jobs in that 90 day period, IHN works very hard to find jobs and homes for them.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:2
I was homeless and you changed my heart . . .

The Road Home is the umbrella for Interfaith Hospitality Network and Second Chance Apartments. Midvale uses a home they own for use as a second chance apartment that is managed by IHN. Road Home also owns apartments and are expanding their operation to help homeless people find permanent housing.

Gayle shared, “When I realized there where children that didn’t have homes, that’s what spoke to me. Way back over 20 years ago, in a bible study, I learned that we are blessed to be a blessing. Through that study and other experiences, I learned that we are called to be a blessing to each other. I need to give to people. That is what I am called to do. I was a pediatric nurse, so I’ve always loved kids. When I heard there were kids that didn’t have a place to sleep, that really touched my heart and I thought, “I can do this.” And when they came to talk to us at the time I had been on council, but I didn’t have a big job anymore…I thought I do little things at church, but I haven’t had a big job in a while, so I thought I can do this.”

Through The Road Home, Midvale members give so much more than temporary housing and food and Gayle shared an example of seeing God at work changing hearts through this ministry. A mom was going to meet with teachers the next day to discuss an Individualized Education Program for her child and she was sure the teachers were going to say, “This is what’s wrong with your kid and this is your fault.” There was a group with special needs kids that was meeting that night in our church and somehow just because God was working for this woman, she ended up sitting down with these parents and they explained to her what an IEP was, assured her that the teachers and social workers really wanted to work with her and help her child. Through this loving conversation, they equipped her to go into that meeting with a whole different attitude and heart.”

For Gayle, it is these moments that make the work so rewarding. “There was a Mom who hung out with us in the kitchen. We had eaten our meal. Pastor Katie came down and sat at the table with us. After Pastor Katie left, the Mom said to me, ‘You have a woman pastor? She’s a minister?’ She had come from a southern Baptist-patriarchal church background and she was shocked that we were so open and so welcoming and Pastor Katie was so filled with grace and she was so blown away with that. Then she said, ‘those twins seem to get along so well.’ I said, “they’re really great people.” She said, “I have a twin sister and we don’t get along so well. She hates white people and I kept telling her that I have met so many nice white people that are so good to me and I tried to tell her that.”

“One little kid asked me, ‘Do you go to church here?’ I said, ‘Yeah, it’s a nice church and I really like it.’ She asked, ‘What’s your church like?’ I told her, ‘We are a Christian church. We believe that Christ is God’s son and we are supposed to live our lives in response to what he did for us.’ That conversation went on and the little girl said, ‘We’re all children of God.’ And I said, ‘Yeah we’re all brothers and sisters in Christ.’ And she replied, ‘You could be my Auntie!’ That just filled my heart.”

CONNECT:

The Road Home  -  http://www.trhome.org/


Gayle Perzberg, Coordinator, Midvale - (608) 274-2622
Homeless individuals, members of local faith communities and representatives from social service agencies as well as the general public gathered at the State Capitol Sunday December 21st, the longest night of the year, to remember and honor people who died without shelter in Dane County and elsewhere this year.

The event, the Longest Night Homeless Persons’ Memorial Service brings attention to the growing tragedy of homelessness across the country. The service reminds us that every year members of our community, brothers and sisters, sons, fathers, husbands, wives and children die while they are homeless. Too often their deaths are invisible, there is no obituary, no funeral. The Longest Night Service is an opportunity to remember, honor, celebrate and mourn the passing of those in our community who have died.

The service started at the marble bench on the Capitol Square where homeless person, Dwayne Warren’s body was found on June 16, 2009. Music from bagpipers, prayer, reflections and remembrances of our neighbors who have died this year and who were homeless were shared. Rev. Dean Kirst of Lakeview Lutheran Church and Rev. Eldonna Hazen, First Congregational United Church of Christ led the prayers. Also participating were Rev Lex Libertore of Lake Edge United Church of Christ, Rev. Jonathon Grieser, Grace Episcopal Church, as well as representatives from Madison-area Urban Ministry and Community Action Coalition, and local faith communities. After the service, attendees processed around the capital following a Clydesdale drawn hearse. The somber procession ended where it started and those in attendance left donations of warm gloves, socks, hats and thermal underwear for the men’s and women’s shelters.

Pastor Kirst has been involved with the Madison event since its inception seven years ago. “We learn through our senses and walking around this time of year in the cold reminds us to respond to homelessness. The difference is we will go home to a warm bed.” Linda Ketcham, director of the Madison-area Urban Ministry shared, “We want to make sure that people realize that these are the realities. Life on the street is hard. If you’re homeless, every night is a long one. We need more affordable housing and we need a permanent day shelter. Those are things we’re going to work on next year.”

Advocating for the Homeless

CONNECT:

Madison Area Urban Ministry - www.emum.org
phone: (608) 256-0906

Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin - Rev. Cindy Crane - (608)270-0201/cindyc@loppw.org

Prayer for the Homeless

On this long cold night we pause, O God of love, to give thanks for food, drink, warmth and shelter—and to remember those who do not enjoy these simple things we take for granted.

Open cold hearts, we pray, to give warm reception to the hungry, hampered and homeless among us. And open the hearts of those with plenty that they may share—so there will be food, milk, water and a place to lay their heads “be it ever so humble” so long as it can be called a home.

In a world of war, jealousy, hostility and destruction, let us, O God of all peoples, in all lands, build peace, love and hope.

Lead us to care for one another as You love us, even as you forgive us our sins, our failures, our mistakes, our shortcomings, and judge us all not by results, but by motives and intent. Grant peace on earth in this and all seasons of life and grant all the bread of life, earthly warmth and lodging and a spiritual place for us all. Amen
A GENEROUS HEART
An interview with Ken Becker

Son, father, brother, fisherman, former savings and loan executive, World War II B-17 navigator, member of Dekorra Lutheran Church, UW Alumnist, devout Badger and Packer fan, philanthropist, all describe this humble servant of Christ, Ken Becker. They also take you to the heart of his generosity.

As a person of faith, Ken Becker’s love for his neighbor takes on a concrete form. Generosity is simple to him. He is just giving back to God all that God has given to him. He quotes Mark 10:21 during the interview as this verse often comes to his mind:

“Jesus looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

In Jesus’ name, and out of love for God’s church, Ken has made numerous financial contributions to the ELCA. In fact, Ken was this year’s recipient of the Wisconsin Chapter of ALDE Spirit of Giving Award. ALDE is an international community of fundraising and communications professionals that is rooted in the Lutheran tradition of the Christian faith and dedicated to serving God’s people in the church and the world as it inspires, connects and equips Christians for excellence in philanthropy. The award is what prompted this interview, but when we arrived, we learned that Ken would have already made it yesterday’s news.

One of Ken’s passions is continuing education and also raising up future leaders in the church. His latest contribution was made in the form of a gift annuity to support the ELCA Fund for Leaders. It was presented to Larry Westfield, the ELCA regional gift planner on the day that we met Ken for this interview. We weren’t expecting it, but that’s the way the Holy Spirit works!

Here are a few of the glimpses that we got into Ken’s generous heart during our interview:

WT: Giving is a choice. Tell me what the church means to you.

KB: Every day I thank God that I was born in the U.S., born to a Christian family, that I could go to St. John’s Lutheran Church in Johnson Creek where I was baptized, went to Sunday School and was confirmed.

WT: Was generosity imbued in your family? Did you come from a family that was always generous?

KB: My Dad was janitor at the church for a while and every month, they gave a dollar to the church. Growing up during the depression, needy people would come around and my mother always had a sandwich for them. A lot of my suppers at night was one piece of bread with a little bit of sugar and milk on it. That was my supper because that’s all there was to eat. Most of my clothes, my mother made from hand me downs from other people. What the Lord has given me now…well, I can have more than a piece of bread for supper!

When I got out of high school, I would have liked to have attended the University of Wisconsin, but my parents didn’t have the money for that. Instead, I went to Vocational school in Milwaukee as a sheet metal apprentice and it was in connection with a work program. After one year, my sister, who is 16 years older than I, said, “You’re going to go to school.” She lined me up with a job at the A&P, and I enrolled in Northwestern. When my grandpa died, he left each of the grandkids $50 and it mounted up to $60.00, and if I went to college, I could have the $60.00. I had saved, and somehow it added up to the $100.00 I needed to attend school.

WHEN YOU PUT YOUR HANDS TO WORK,
GOD HEARS YOUR HEART
What is a Charitable Gift Annuity?

A charitable gift annuity is a gift made to our organization that can provide you with a secure source of fixed payments for life.

Benefits of a charitable gift annuity
* Receive fixed payments to you or another annuitant you designate for life
* Receive a charitable income tax deduction for the charitable gift portion of the annuity
* Benefit from payments that may be partially tax-free
* Further the charitable work of congregations, institutions, and agencies of the ELCA with your gift.

How a charitable gift annuity works
A charitable gift annuity is a contract between you and Lutheran Planned Giving of Wisconsin.

1. You transfer cash, stock or mutual funds to the ELCA.
2. In exchange, we sign an annuity contract and promise to pay fixed payments to you for life. The payment can be quite high depending on your age, and a portion of each payment may even be tax-free.
3. You will receive a charitable income tax deduction for the gift portion of the annuity.
4. You also receive satisfaction, knowing that you will be helping further our mission.

If you decide to fund your gift annuity with cash, a significant portion of the annuity payment will be tax-free. You may also make a gift of appreciated securities to fund a gift annuity and avoid a portion of the capital gains tax.

Connect:
To inquire about other assets that you might be able to use to fund a charitable gift annuity, contact our regional gift planner, Rev. Larry Westfield. He is also available to give a presentation and to preach in your congregation.

larry.westfield@elca.org
262-224-9575
www.lpgwgift.org

An interview with Ken Becker continued...

My Dad bought me a pair of shoes for $6.00 and I had my suit that I graduated high school in and at a garage sale, I got a sport coat for 75 cents. I had two ties. At Northwestern in those days, I’d wear my suit one day with one tie and my sport coat the next day with another tie. I worked all day Saturday and two nights a week at the A&P, so I helped a little bit what I could in the apartment with my sister. My nephew and I slept in the Murphy bed. At the same time I applied to get into the aviation cadets and then when I was at Northwestern, they offered to make me an officer right away if I signed up. I enlisted but then they called me to duty, but at the same time, I was also accepted into the cadet program. While I was in service, most of my money went home so I could finish school. When I was in Italy for three years and receiving officer’s pay and combat pay, 100% of my check went to my savings account so I could finish school at the University of Wisconsin upon my return.

WT: Tell me a little about your time serving in the military.

KB: The worst mission the 15th Army Air Force flew was over Linz, Austria. There was never a mission that we didn’t get shot at. One of the engineers counted over 100 holes in the B17 that we were flying. I lived in the town of Johnson Creek, a town of about 500 at the time and lived in the middle house of three houses with boys living on each side of me, so you get pretty close. We all served in the military and both of the other boys were killed in the Pacific. One was four years older than me and graduated from Marquette in Civil Engineering, and went into the navy and asked to be sent overseas where he could do some good as a civil engineer. On the plane ride over, the plane crashed and he was killed...I’m sorry. I still cry when I think about it. The other was killed in the battle of Iwo Jima.

WT: Did living through things like that make you appreciate what you have more?

KB: I don’t know when God enters your heart but God has for me and I wish this for everybody. For the first 10 to 12 minutes every morning, I thank God for my blessings. I ask God, “What is the best thing I can do today with all that you have given me?”

WT: It seems to me that all of that makes you part of the person you are and the generous man that you are and that you continue to be. When there is a person that needs help to get an education, you have been very generous. The Fund for Leaders is one of the charities that you’ve had on your heart and you have chosen Gift Annuities to do that.

KB: Gift annuities just make sense! I receive a regular income, get a tax deduction and have the joy of giving. It’s actually kind of selfish! I get so much more back than I give.

LW: The Fund for Leaders has grown over a period of 14 years to $47 million. 214 students this year are impacted. We’re very close to being able to make an impact in every one of the seminary students in all eight seminaries. Every student will soon be getting some help. We’re very close, Ken!

At this news from Larry, Ken about jumped up out of his chair with excitement! “I’m glad you said that! I told a friend of mine about that, and he didn’t think much could happen to that. Now I can tell my friend that it has grown to $47 million and he will be confident that his gift can make a difference. That’s good news!”

It was at that moment that I realized that what Ken Becker wants most is for his generosity to be contagious! He understands what God wants for us and Ken wants the same thing...for everyone to feel the joy of giving back to God all that God has given us.
At the January Synod Council meeting, our vice-president, Robin Cherwinka, led us in an exercise to help us define and articulate our vision and mission as a Synod. We imagined that our work as the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, ELCA was done and we were being laid to rest. We imagined what would be on our tombstone; what would be the epitaph of the SCSW-ELCA. We talked about what our congregations and communities would look like if we had successfully accomplished all that we had been called to do, there was no further action we needed to take, and we were being laid to rest.

We had to think awhile. Finally, one person in my small group said, “Well, if we have successfully completed all we are called to be and do, then I know I wouldn’t be working at the homeless shelter anymore.” That comment helped us begin to visualize how we would know when our work was done, when our purpose was accomplished, when our call had been fulfilled.

Now, I’m not so naive that I think we will ever run out of God’s work to do in this Synod or on this Earth. We are struggling people living in a broken world, clumsily trying to be good and do good and invariably falling far short. But we are also a resurrection people, living in the hope and promise of God which speaks hope to despair, reconciliation to brokenness, love to alienation, and new life to death. As the Church together, we hold and safeguard God’s alternative vision of the world, for the sake of the world.

I think the Matthew 25 passage that is the theme of this edition of Walking Together, articulates God’s vision of the world, and gives us a blueprint for where to act and serve now. Where people are hungry, we are called to feed them today and ensure they have the opportunity to feed themselves in the future. Where people are thirsty, we are called to offer a cup of water today and work to establish and maintain the existence of clean water going forward. When strangers come into our communities, we are called to welcome them right now and establish a sense of home and belonging for generations to come. When people are sick, in body, mind, or spirit, we are called to provide comfort and companionship today and make sure there are opportunities for ongoing healing and health in the days and years to come. When people are in prison, both literally and figuratively in bondage, we are called to accompany them today, and fight for the elimination of all that oppresses tomorrow and the next day and the next.

We will know God’s kingdom has come, God’s vision has become a present reality, when no one is hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or imprisoned. When that day comes we will be ready to lay our Synod, our Church, to rest. Our mission as followers of Jesus will be accomplished. Until that day, we have work to do, as we live into our calling to be the hands and heart of Jesus in this time and place; as we live into the already present, yet still future, kingdom of God.

God’s Peace,

Bishop Mary Froiland

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