

SINGING THE
LORD'S SONG
IN A

New Land.



**SOUTHWESTERN
PENNSYLVANIA
SYNOD**
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH IN AMERICA

CONGREGATION COUNCIL DEVOTIONAL 2023-2024

SEPTEMBER

Pastor Ralph Kusserow

Acts 1:8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

One of the joys of serving as a missionary was seeing new Christians witnessing for their faith. In Malaysia and Singapore, our churches were growing primarily among young adults. When one of them accepted Jesus, he or she would usually come to church accompanied by a non-Christian friend. And, usually, that friend would soon be in my class preparing new believers for baptism.

When I was in Tanzania, I was serving a large number of congregations because of our shortage of pastors. Each of those congregations had a lay evangelist who did the day to day work of ministering to the congregation: preaching, teaching Sunday School, visitation, etc. Every now and then, one would ask if I could come for some baptisms. Of course, I could come! Often, that evangelist would take me to a village where we did not have a church but where he had been faithfully witnessing and teaching and would have a group of new believers ready for baptism. There usually were about 25 ready to be baptized. The largest group that I had was 79. And, of course, we immediately had a new congregation. How eager those young Christians were to share their faith with their friends.

Obviously, we live in a very different culture. If we try to tell others about Jesus we might be told: "Keep your faith to yourself!" So we become uneasy about sharing our faith with anyone else. I believe that the most effective witness in our culture is made by our lives. Others may not want to listen to what we say but they may be inspired by the way we live.

We can begin by asking that God will send his Holy Spirit upon us and that we will then be given power to live lives that will witness to our Lord Jesus by letting God's love flow through us into the lives of those about us. May that love touch their hearts and open them to new life in Jesus!

PRAYER

Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for blessing us with your gracious gift of forgiveness and life in Jesus. We ask that your Holy Spirit might fill us and enable each of us to be channels of your love so that your love might flow through us into the lives of others. Give us wisdom so that we might lead our congregation to be able to witness through our lives of love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

OCTOBER

Pastor Mary Anne Kingsborough,
Concordia Lutheran Church, Columbia PA

Isaiah 43:18-19 - Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. See, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (NRSV)

It is hard not to remember former things when you are grieving. In fact, that is in a way, grief - remembering and re-remembering, putting the memories and the loss of the person back together into something new. In the process of grief something new is born, something you may never have wanted or even imagined.

It was a week before Christmas and my family was in the full frenzy of preparations at church and home. My two teenagers were packing in everything before the school break and basketball season was in full gear. My husband, the Pastor, was preparing his Christmas Eve sermon and also gearing up for the annual congregational meeting. That Sunday morning was the Christmas play and the meeting and we all breathed a sign of relief that afternoon. I was taking the next day off to wrap and do some last minute shopping.

That next day changed the course of many lives as my husband suffered a fatal heart attack. They called it the widow maker for very good reasons. The loss was devastating for my children, the congregation, our family and for me. In the weeks and months that followed major decisions were made - college for my son and a new home for us. The congregation and my family shared this grief and the loss of other members together, and I marveled at how well the church worked together as the body of Christ.

Sometime after the shock wore off I began feeling stirrings to do something else with my life. I was an AIM (a lay rostered associate in ministry) and had attended seminary for Christian Education. I was then serving as a Case Manager for a Lutheran Social Service Agency. I felt like I was being led in a different direction - the ministry! The two functions that I had always said I would never be able to do as a Pastor, preaching and leading a funeral, no longer seemed to be barriers! After much discernment and support I went back to Seminary, became a Pastor and have been serving the Church for the past 11 years as a minister of word and sacrament. I NEVER would have imagined myself in this place. God did a new thing! In the midst of my despair and grief in the wilderness something started to blossom and grow in a place I never expected!

I have seen this happen over and over again in other people's lives as well through bereavement care and pastoral counseling. God works in the darkest places of our souls to birth something new. It may take a while and it may not be easy, and it may not be what we think we want, but God is there. God is always there, and God is working in the Church, the body of Christ.

PRAYER

Heavenly God, you are our stay and guide. Help us to see and hear the new things that you are doing in the Church and in our lives. When we are in the wilderness places in our lives lead us to places of growth and trust. Help us to be the body of Christ for all those facing unexpected loss of any kind in their lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

NOVEMBER

Pastor Brenda N. Henry,
Pittsburgh Lutheran United Ministries

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path. Do not be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil. (Proverbs 3:5-7 NLT)

When I think of sharing my faith with others, I am always reminded of my mother's example. She was a witness to living her faith in daily life. To her, faith was not something that should be pulled out only in challenging times or with those with whom she felt comfortable. She also believed it should not be used as a conversational tool when encountering new people to prove how faithful she was. She reminded me and my siblings that our faith is the life we live each and every moment, and it is as much what we do as what we say. It is what others see when we are in public and in the privacy of our homes because God sees us always.

Her go-to song was "Your Grace and Mercy" sung by the Mississippi Mass Choir. In particular the chorus:

*Your grace and mercy has brought me through
I'm living this moment because of You
I want to thank You and praise You, too
Your grace and mercy brought me through*

We would often hear her sing the chorus, as she was cooking, sewing, knitting or as part of her morning devotions, as a reminder of how God was sustaining her through a demanding situation or because it was a beautiful day. Singing the song was her constant expression of her gratitude of God as her constant companion. That song, coupled with her favorite passage of Proverbs 3:5-7 on trusting God, was her living testimony of a faithful God.

It has been six years since my mother transitioned to the church triumphant, yet it feels like it was yesterday. There may be some who read this and will acknowledge how challenging it is to lose a matriarch within a family. Her message of sharing God's story and God's love remains with me to this day. I still hear her gentle reminder that every day and every moment is an opportunity to share God's story. And her reminder to trust God's guidance and not my own understanding has become my life's mantra. It has sustained me and encouraged me throughout my years of social work to my ordination as a pastor to my ministry within PLUM. To this day, I am grateful for her witness to me of God's love and steadfastness.

Take a moment to reflect on your own faithful witness of God's love. Who is that person that has shaped your understanding of God and helped you live your faith? How has that person modeled the way you tell your story?

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, your grace and mercy is the constant reminder of your love for us. May our lives be a living testimony of your story in us with all those we encounter. In Jesus name, Amen.

DECEMBER

Ray Dittenhafer,
St. Paul's Lutheran, Carmichael

I knew it could mean some big changes in our lives when my wife discerned to pursue a call to ministry. My call was and continues to be to encourage and support my wife in hers. Was I prepared to accept that call, becoming a husband of a pastor? What would that mean?

I have always been active in church; regular attendance, Sunday School, choir, council and all of that stuff. My wife's decision did not come as a big surprise, in fact, I encouraged it. But, was I really prepared to take on the role as a husband of a pastor?

Having served on a call committee, I was aware of the process my wife would be going through to become a minister of word and sacrament. She had already received a degree in Christian Education so now it meant going through another candidacy process, additional courses, internship and the call process. Not to mention a possible relocation.

Well, if that was the call, she (we) better answer it! With a little fear and trepidation, we decided to take the journey we felt God calling us to take. After all, it was not anything close to being like what Abraham and Sarah were called to.

We did have a distant relationship for a while when she went out to Washington County to do what turned into an extended internship and I stayed in York County to take care of things on the home front. And it did mean a move to what I call the other end of the state when she was called to a two point parish here in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

As it has turned out, it has been a very fulfilling, educational, meaningful, and at times frustrating experience. In other words, it has been part of life's journey with God as the guide. Sure we missed family and friends, and routines we left, and there has been times we may have complained about how we may have been better off staying where we were (Gen.16) but we haven't considered it a 40 year journey through the wilderness.

Life is a call! We are all called to use our God given gifts and talents. To participate in this life as God's chosen; as a teacher, a miner, a doctor, a truck driver, a preachers husband. As Martin Luther said in his Freedom of the Christian, speaking about good works vs faith for his righteousness and salvation, "... he [(woman too)] should be guided in all his [her] works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone,

that he [she] may serve and benefit others in all that he [she] does, considering nothing except the need and advantage of his [her] neighbor." This, I have learned, has been my call and, I believe all of our calling. No matter where life takes us.

PRAYER

God, you have called me to live life in Your service. By the presence of the Holy Spirit, the example of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and Your Grace, help me answer that call. Amen.

JANUARY

Debi Beit-Adams,
Trinity, Ellwood City

(Ps. 137:4) is not only possible; it is necessary.

We've all heard of the saying "family is everything" or "family matters." Now there are all types of families: immediate or extended, friends, work, social organizations...with whom we may each identify. But for me, the one family that helped me through some challenging times and dark days was my church family.

Having to close a church, (St. Paul's Lutheran, on 37th street in Beaver Falls) where I was baptized, confirmed, educated in Sunday School classes, sang in the choir, taught Sunday School classes, served on council, and held my mother's funeral, was an emotional matter, to say the least. And let's be clear, I realize the church building is just that, a building. The Church is and always will be the people who make up the congregation. But the building holds a lot of memories: potluck dinners, council meetings, church services – Sunday ones and special ones, like Christmas and Easter. As they say, if only the walls could talk...

But there was still another Lutheran Church in Beaver Falls, located a short distance from St. Paul's and that was Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church on 11th Street and 4th Avenue. So, my father, husband, and I joined CELC. It took a while to feel comfortable again. And a very wise lady, Betty Wickline, told me one day to just keep coming, show up, participate, give it time. She was so correct! After having time to grieve St. Paul's closing, CELC did feel like my church family, and I was thankful to once again have a place in which "to sing the Lord's song."

Then the unthinkable happened. CELC was going to close its doors. So, for a second time, the grieving process of losing a beautiful church building became a reality. And just like any other family unit, some members went their own way and others decided to stick together and find yet another Lutheran congregation to join and make family. Our Pastor Kim Rapzcak did the kindest and wisest thing possible. She made a list of all the Lutheran churches in the area and encouraged each of us to visit each until we found just the right one to join.

Leah Noss, who had gone through the closing of these two churches with me, and I decided to take on that challenge. The very first Sunday after CELC closed, she and I attended the first church on the list, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ellwood City. We had every intention of continuing through the list; but that Sunday we were so warmly greeted by Pastor Peggy Suhr-Barkley and individual members of the congregation that on the way home I looked at Leah and said, "I don't think I'll be

going to any of those other churches." She agreed. Trinity had the feeling of our St. Paul's, only on a larger scale, and it had the beauty of stained-glass windows like CELC. We were happy to share our feelings and invite others from CELC to "come see." And while some chose to go to other local Lutheran churches, the majority came to Trinity. What a blessing!

We quickly felt like joining our Christian brothers and sisters in "singing the Lord's song in a new land." And what beautiful music and singing we have there with David Spielvogel II as our organist, pianist and choir director. He plays on a baby grand that he arranged for Trinity to purchase. This piano even came from a descendant of Martin Luther. So, sing we shall and it looks like Trinity won't be closing its doors any time soon. Praise the Lord!

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank you for all types of families. Especially, we are grateful for our Christian brothers and sisters. We ask for your continued blessings on church families everywhere. We ask for Your continued guidance and wisdom in helping us to each sing our praises to You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FEBRUARY

Sthela Gun Holly Hanitirinina,
Zion Lutheran Church, Portersville, PA

The first 24 hours after receiving the devastating news of my partner's passing were etched into my memory with heart-wrenching clarity. I can still feel the weight of that phone call or text message from his sister delivering those crushing words: "Ben has passed away." In that single moment, my world crumbled beneath me, leaving me gasping for breath as my heart pounded with grief. Fortunately, a compassionate friend was by my side, offering solace and providing a place for me to spend the night.

But sleep eluded me entirely. Thoughts swirled incessantly in my mind, desperate to make sense of the incomprehensible. Why was this happening? It couldn't be real. Questions and confusion consumed me, as I clung to my phone, hoping against hope that it was all a cruel joke or some malicious falsehood. The inner turmoil sent me spiraling, my emotions swinging wildly between highs and lows, occasionally breaking down during changing my own clothes.

Finally, in a moment of desperate longing for solace, I reached out to Ben's mother, who had been the one to discover him (Ben passed unexpectedly). Overwhelmed with anguish and disbelief, I poured out my pain and denial to her. And in that fragile moment, she simply listened, providing a gentle presence of empathy. Then, unexpectedly, she uttered words that pierced through my despair: "Come here, let's celebrate his life." Ben was visiting in his parents in St Croix Falls, WI, and he passed in the guest bedroom in where his mother found him., and I live in Pittsburgh, PA. A friend named Ruth, seemingly guided by a higher power, reached out to me during this darkest hour.

Overwhelmed by emotions, I could do nothing but cry as she sought to understand the depths of my sorrow. Sensing my need for support, she extended an invitation: "Come stay with me while we navigate the arrangements and plan your journey to Wisconsin." It was during my time in Ruth's comforting embrace that I resolved to seek solace in faith, to surround myself with those who had a deep connection to God and sought to understand Him. Though my pain remained indistinct, the unbearable knowledge that Ben had passed away alone became the source of my most profound anguish. I fervently believed that no one should depart from this world without companionship. In pursuit of spiritual guidance, I turned to my college pastor, seeking answers to the unanswerable questions that plagued my mind. I questioned why God would allow such a tragedy to befall someone who was alone, grasping for understanding. In response, my pastor offered a balm for my wounded soul: "God was with him as he took his last breath." Those words struck me deeply,

igniting a tiny flicker of peace within. It became increasingly clear that while I felt powerless in the face of this tragedy, God's presence and intervention were far greater than my limited human comprehension.

Throughout the arduous process of planning Ben's funeral amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was enveloped in the warmth and generosity of both friends and strangers alike. They provided me with shelter, shared their meals, and displayed unwavering solidarity during a time of global crisis. A friend of a friend selflessly offered to drive me to St. Croix, Wisconsin, ensuring I had a support system when facing the reality of seeing Ben's lifeless body for the first time. She stood by my side as I shared cherished memories of our relationship with his family and friends, shielding me from any sense of inadequacy or judgment. Her unwavering presence filled my heart with gratitude and renewed faith, assuring me that this new path I embarked upon was not one I would walk alone. In her selflessness, I glimpsed a reflection of the divine, a reminder that God would accompany me every step of the way.

After the burial and the gathering of family, it was time for me to return to my empty home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As I stepped inside, I was greeted by a disheartening sight. My roommate had cleared away everything except for the belongings within the confines of my bedroom, leaving the rest of the space stark and bare. Overwhelmed by a sense of loss and betrayal, I collapsed to my knees and cried out in anguish, questioning the cosmic injustices that had befallen me. It was in this moment of despair that Ruth, ever watchful and caring, reached out to me, her voice filled with concern: "How are you doing?" My reply was nothing short of a primal scream, an outpouring of raw emotion that she likely couldn't comprehend. Nevertheless, her response was resolute: "Okay, I'm on my way." In her unwavering support, she collected me from the emptiness of my home and transported me to her own, where she had carefully arranged some of my belongings. She took charge, organizing for my place to be cleaned and furnished, transforming the desolation into a sanctuary of solace and hope. In this act of love and kindness, Ruth offered me not just material comforts but a glimmer of a new beginning.

As the days stretched on, I found myself relentlessly questioning God's presence and purpose. Why? Where was He in all of this? Countless "whys" echoed through my mind, valid queries from a wounded soul seeking understanding. And through my pain, I began to realize that these questions were not lost on God. He, in His infinite wisdom, comprehended the depths of my anguish even when my human mind could not. It was during a visit from Pastor Tim Dawes, sent by my host mom, Marsha Davis, to check on me, that I found solace for my weary heart. Listening attentively, he acknowledged the validity of my anger and doubts, assuring me that God understood my struggles. And in my most vulnerable state, he shared a powerful truth: "Let the communion of saints pray for you." Whether I felt ready or not, he invited me to return to the table of God, to partake in communion with fellow believers. He explained that in those sacred moments, I would be reminded that

Ben, too, would be partaking in the divine presence, a unifying force beyond the boundaries of life and death. This revelation altered the course of my grieving journey.

This story, though lengthy, bears a significance that must be shared. It serves as a poignant reminder that God reveals Himself to us in myriad forms during our most trying times. His voice is never silent. As I reflect upon my journey, I see now that God was present throughout, manifesting His love through the countless individuals who extended their hands to me. They offered shelter, wisdom, and reminded me of God's unwavering love. They reached out to others, mobilizing a support network that transcended personal boundaries. A friend of a friend selflessly drove me across miles, ensuring I would not face the pain alone. Each person who crossed my path, whether a familiar face or a stranger, became an instrument of God's divine affection. It is true that I felt shaken, lost, and consumed by grief. Yet, in my reflection, I have discovered that Ben's passing has not only saved me but has brought me closer to God. For this, I owe him a celebration of a life that paved the way for a renewed journey of faith, a deeper relationship.

I leave you now with a question to ponder: How can you express love to those whose lives have been thrown into chaos, who have lost everything they held dear? And as you extend that love, how can you ensure it endures, guiding them through the tumultuous journey of grief towards eventual peace?

MARCH

Barbara Nugent,
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Glenshaw

Psalm 46:1-2 ... "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.."

I grew up attending Sunday School and Church with my family as something we just did. Never really thought about it. I had moments in my life that helped my faith grow but I never dreamed of knowing the reality of God actually carrying me in troubled times.

I married young, bought a house and started my family with three sons. We never had much money but life seemed normal until my husband got sick. He had many hospitalizations that would each last six to eight weeks at a time. I was working part time but it wasn't enough to pay the bills without my husband working. So many times I saw the Lord's hand in my life. Things would happen with absolutely no other explanation. It had to be the Holy Spirit. One evening I had just packed the kids in the car with a casserole, on my way to an evening social event at church. As I backed my car out of the garage, my bumper caught the garden hose that had been hanging on a pipe in the garage. As I backed out, the hose came with the car, pulling on the soft copper pipe. Yep, the pipe broke. Water spraying everywhere. As I was shutting off the water I heard the phone ringing. Answering the phone the voice on the other end said "Barb, are you OK? I just had a feeling to call you." It was my friend Janice, who lived just a few streets over. Her husband came over immediately and was able to repair the pipe. When I got back in the car with the kids, the aroma of broccoli & cheese casserole filled the car. Another time I was working as a sitter for a neighborhood church's weekly Bible Study to earn extra money. One day when I showed up I was told I wasn't needed as there weren't any kids that day. They paid me the \$15 for just showing up. Since I had the time, I stopped at the gas station as my tank was close to empty. It took exactly \$15 to fill the tank (you can tell this was decades ago). I could go on and on but the point is; God was my refuge! It was becoming more and more obvious He was carrying me. When my husband passed away leaving me with three small children I relied on Him even more.

A couple years had gone by when I met my current husband. The story of how we met was undeniably divine driven. During our first year of marriage we had a son who was born with multiple birth defects. He had five surgeries in his first four months of life, then passed away at six months of age. He is our angel.

I have learned throughout my life that no matter what life throws at you, God will carry you through it. The times I don't remember this, become very obvious very quickly. How do you get through the rough times in your life?

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, thank you for carrying us, guiding us and giving us the Holy Spirit. Please give each of us the ability to share our own story with others so that they too know You. In Jesus name, Amen

APRIL

Pastor Jeff Truscott,
Trinity Lutheran Church, Freeport and Faith Lutheran Church, Natrona Heights

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

I never intended to become a missionary, but that is exactly what happened. I was nearing the end of my graduate studies when I received a phone call from ELCA Global Mission (as it was known 24 years ago) about teaching in the Lutheran seminary in Tokyo, Japan. At first, I did not think that Global Mission was serious! But I realized that it was when I was sent to Tokyo for an initial interview with the seminary. Soon afterwards, I was called to the position and taught at Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary until 2004. For me, it was like living on another planet or stepping through a looking glass into a world that I could never have imagined. Culture shock was inevitable, but fortunately I worked through it, and came to appreciate the Japanese culture and the Christians of Japan who have found creative ways to adapt church life to Japanese culture. I established life-long friendships with teaching colleagues, other ELCA missionaries, and with members of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. And all of this was completely unexpected!

But the surprising twists to my professional life were to continue. As I neared the end of my 4-year term in Tokyo, Global Mission approached me about teaching at a multi-denominational seminary in Singapore supported by the Lutheran Church in Singapore. For me, this was a professional promised land because I would not have to teach with an interpreter since English is an official language of that city-state. What stands out most about my Singapore experience is my development as an instructor of homiletics (the art of preaching). My academic background was not in preaching, but in worship. Three years into my work at Trinity Theological College, however, I was asked to "teach" the second preaching course, which really meant listening to student sermons and commenting on them. But a few years later, I was asked to teach the first homiletics course for just one semester. This meant having to get my act together on homiletical theory! So I immediately (re-)read classic texts on preaching by the Lutheran authors Richard Caemmer and H. Grady Davis. The thoughts of both of these men continue to echo in my mind, for example, Davis' idea of designing a sermon (as opposed to haphazardly slapping it together), and Caemmer's notion of "goal, malady, and remedy" in a sermon. This teaching experience had a positive impact on my own preaching.

But there were two more serendipitous experiences in Singapore. First, a teaching colleague asked me to review and comment on the manuscript of a homiletics textbook that she was preparing. Having to read something closely enough to

comment intelligently not only made the ideas stick in my mind (and I hope, further improve my own preaching), but also inspired me to use her book in my homiletics class (even though this course was not supposed to include lecturing as such).

Second, my (one and only) Lutheran colleague in Singapore drew my attention to a classic textbook on preaching by the Lutheran New Testament scholar Richard Lenski (1864-1936). Although somewhat outdated, Lenski's book was actually a treasure trove of ideas on deductive preaching (stating a main idea at the beginning of a sermon and then sharing "subpoints" that develop that idea). When I later moved to Siantar, Indonesia to teach, I incorporated Lenski's ideas into my homiletics course. Although my Indonesian homiletics students struggled to understand Lenski, teaching his ideas deepened my own thinking and practice of preaching. Unfortunately, I was unable to complete my initial four-year term of teaching in Siantar. But much good came of that experience anyway.

My journey as a missionary has shown me that God uses us in unexpected ways, both for the good of others and for our own good. What's more, God not only calls us to use our gifts, but also to improve them and to develop new gifts for ministry. Responding to God's call takes courage because sometimes the call seems implausible and the work impossible. But God upholds those whom He calls. Mindful of God's grace, we are constrained to take up the call to share ourselves despite doubts and misgivings.

What is God calling you and/or your church to do now? Does it seem far-fetched? Unlikely? Too much of a stretch? Fear not! God will provide--and then some!

MAY

Traudi Tropea,
Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church, Glenshaw

*But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.
2 Thessalonians 3:3 NRSV*

Growing up in Germany, I was raised Lutheran and actively participated in church life until the age of 17 when my priorities shifted and I began to distance myself from God and the church. My separation from the church continued when marrying my American husband who came from a different faith tradition. After moving to the United States, I was going through a difficult time adjusting to a new country and its culture while my spiritual life continued on a downward slope. I often felt lonely and deserted with a void that I could not articulate at the time. Things finally started to turn around during the latter part of my college years when some friends shared their faith with me and as time went on, I began to draw closer to God. My prayer life became active again as I began a renewed relationship with the Lord but I remained without being connected to any sort of faith-based community for several years which hampered my spiritual growth. The life changing event of the birth of my first child eventually gave me the last push to find a church and have my baby baptized.

Having moved into a new neighborhood, I stumbled across my current congregation through the recommendation of the Welcome-Wagon-lady. Even after joining the church, it took quite some time for me to get connected and feel grounded because I spent most weekends out of town visiting relatives. Also, I was not very familiar with the ways the church operated which was different from what I was used to in Germany. The birth of my second child decreased my weekend travels which ultimately led to more regular worship attendance and eventually the participation in Sunday school and other church activities. Under faithful pastoral leadership my spirit was being nourished over the years and my faith grew deeper with the help of the Holy Spirit. Little did I know that God would reveal himself to me in a much bigger way yet. On Epiphany Day in 1999 I experienced the healing touch of God on my own body. As my children and I were getting ready to return to the US after visiting with family in Germany, I hurt my lower back when lifting a fully packed suitcase. I was in agonizing pain trying to fall asleep, worrying about how I ever would be able get on that plane in the morning. All I could do was pray, pray incessantly. I pleaded with God to take away the pain so I could at least manage to travel. As I laid in bed not daring to move because of the shooting pain, I suddenly felt a warm touch on the inside of my lower back pushing something into place. There also appeared a warm brightness in the room as I sensed the presence of Jesus but literally was scared stiff of what was happening. I was in disbelief and was wondering if I was imagining things. In awe and fear at the same time, I decided to

wait until the morning to see if my experience was for real. To my amazement, I had no pain left at all when I rose the next day. It took many months for me to process this healing experience which I initially had kept to myself. I was deeply touched and felt extremely relieved when I was finally able to share my encounter with God at my first church discipleship retreat. It was a very liberating moment which opened my heart to become more receptive to the Holy Spirit and eventually led to my involvement on the evangelism committee. My desire to learn and grow in my faith has not stopped since and I am grateful to be part of a vibrant church community where my spirit continues to be fed but most of all, I thank God for never giving up on me.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank you for being faithful to me even when I stray. Please guide me and strengthen me on my journey of discipleship. In your name I pray, Amen.

JUNE

Rev. Dr. Alexander Y. Sumo,
Pittsburgh Lutheran United Ministries (PLUM)

Transitions can be difficult but trusting and resting in God's faithfulness can bring miracles through them...

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." James 3:17 (NIV)

Transition is something many of us will easily not want to experience in life, whether it is transition with vocation or transition with career or even transition in our faith journey. Transition can be hard and difficult; it is often not so easy as it seems. Over a year ago, I accepted a pastoral call to the Pittsburgh Lutheran United Ministries (PLUM). The transition from my previous call in Columbus, Ohio to PLUM started just when my mother was diagnosed with a terminal cancer, and doctors in Liberia believed she may not survive the disease. I almost did not want to venture into a new call with such a health crisis in my family – our matriarch was dying and everyone in the family was looking up to me for almost every decision regarding her care. This was the most difficult transition in my 20 years pastoral vocation. I chose to trust God in the process. I agreed to submit to God's dream and purpose for my life even though I was not humanly willing to face the reality of the situation. I knew God was up to something Marvelous in this transition, but the clouds of fear and the health crisis in my family were dimming my spiritual vision. I chose to follow and submit to God's wisdom through this.

In this transition, I've come to realize that when God gives you a dream, you won't just accidentally fulfill it. You have to be intentional in making several critical decisions that will help grow your faith and move you toward fulfilling the dream God created you to fulfill.

Here are two decisions that are necessary:

First, you need to invest. You have to decide to invest your time, your money, your reputation, and your energy in the things that will advance your pursuit of God's dream.

In other words, you need to stop making excuses and take the plunge. This is when you say, "God, I'm not going to procrastinate any longer. I'm going to do what you've told me to do."

Second, you need to let go of security. You can't move forward in faith while holding on to the past.

A great picture of letting go of security is a trapeze artist. She swings out on one bar—but before she can grab the next bar and swing to the other side, she has to let go of that first bar. The bars are far enough apart that she can't hold on to both at the same time. At some point she must let go of the security of the first bar. Then, for a split second, she is flying in midair, holding on to neither one.

Maybe you've never swung on a trapeze, but have you ever been at the point in your career or vocation when you've left one job and are looking for another, and there is nothing in between? It feels like you're a hundred feet in the air with no net below. But if you don't let go of your old life and grab on to the vision God wants for you, then you'll simply swing back in the old direction—only you won't swing all the way back. You'll just swing lower and lower until you finally stop, hanging there with only one way out: down.

Like the trapeze artist, you have to decide to let go of your security in order to take hold of your dream. In my case, I had to put all my fears and apprehensions and unwillingness in the hands of God... and so, I took the plunge onto the unknown and made the transition to Pittsburgh... see what the Lord has done!

When you're making critical decisions to follow God's dream for you, it's not about making quick decisions. It's about making the right decisions. Quick decisions are easy—and usually wrong. It takes wisdom and time to make the right decision. Where can you find wisdom? In James 1:5, we're told to just ask God, and he'll generously give his wisdom to anyone who is faithfully sincere in their request. And "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17 NIV).

PRAYER

God of wisdom and courage, we thank you for your faithfulness and love that is always available to us. Help us to be reminded and to rest in your unfailing wisdom for the mission and ministry you have called us to. May your Holy Spirit be our guide in the transitions we may face in life. Amen!

JULY

MaryAnne Novak,
Christ Lutheran, Duquesne

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8: 38-39.

The 1980s were a most difficult decade for me, but it was also a decade of growth, both emotionally and spiritually. I grew up in the city of Duquesne, PA and Christ Lutheran was and continues to be my home church for nearly 62 years. That decade was marked by the demise of the steel industry which impacted both my family and fellow parishioners. The mills provided a strong middle class in the city and was a place where many parents could finally afford to send their children to college. The residents of the community always thought we would be part of the steel capital of the world. During this time, our church was being divided by those who were rebelling against Mellon Bank and U.S. Steel for destroying the fabric of the community, and those who were blue collar workers and the corporate loyalists. Our congregational membership was comprised of both types of parishioners. Those were the days of the Denominational Ministry Strategy of which our pastor, John Gropp, was heavily involved. Not only did my husband and I belong to the church, but also my parents and my in-laws. My husband was an advocate for DMS, and my in-laws were strongly opposed. The result was a feud in our family; the likes of which I have never experienced. Personally, I only knew one grandparent as a child growing up, so it was very important to me to have my children know and love their grandparents. Needless to say, I was caught in the middle struggling with the discord that was happening in my family and being sensitive to those who were losing their jobs, homes, and dignity. The tension within my family existed for many years to come. Then in 1987, my husband died in a company vehicle and my father died later that year of cancer. I had lost two significant male role models in my life in one year. The tension between my husband and his parents was never resolved prior to his death, and it was then up to me to move forward in reconciliation. However, I also knew there could be no reconciliation without change, and someone was going to have a change of heart.

So, there I was in a new world where all the boundaries of life had to be redefined. Making the transition from being a couple to being single (at the age of 34) and becoming a single mom of children ages 7, 5, and 1 (one of which was special needs) was a world I never thought I would find myself in. I always envisioned my life as one within a cozy little home with a white picket fence. After my husband died, I distinctly remember reading the 8th chapter of Romans over and over again as I waited to pick

my children up from school and daycare. My faith was secure; however, I just didn't know how I was going to get through it all and I knew in my heart I could not do it alone.

I was faced with the task of rebuilding the family without sacrificing what I believed to be right. Needless to say, it took years if not decades to strengthen the relationship between myself and my in-laws. I did not sacrifice my ministry to those who were affected by the demise of the steel industry, but I consciously decided to simply love my in-laws. Even though they left the church in Duquesne and joined another, I became involved in some of their new church's activities and became friends with their new pastor. My children grew up to love their grandparents. I supported my mother and father-in-law where they were; and until they died, they never really got over the death of their son. Love and care for them was what worked even though I disagreed with them on many issues. Love transcended those disagreements. It was the Holy Spirit that led me down that path, and I feel in retrospect it was the right choice. Even amidst discord, I was continually encouraged that God never abandoned me and showed me the way.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for being the constant in my life amidst the turmoil, for offering your Son when I fail in my humanness, and sending the Holy Spirit to offer direction when I am surrounded by so many unknowns. Amen.

AUGUST

Ron Manges,
Bethlehem, Glenshaw

Jeremiah 17:7-8, 14 - Blessed are those that trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit...Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me and I shall be saved; for you are my praise.

"Its cancer", voiced the surgeon, still in her operating-room attire after performing an emergency procedure on my 17-year old son's abdomen. Her words weighed heavy on my wife and me as we were struggling to process the whirlwind 24 hours of medical tests, prodding, and poking, surrounding the diagnosis of his sudden onset of severe stomach pain.

As we walked away from this brief post-op meeting with the physician, the gravity of the situation began to sink in. Wow. Our son has cancer. I have never processed such ominous words. As my mind began to swirl and comprehend this paralyzing news, next to me stood my wife with her ever-present calmness and resolve as a strong mother ready to faithfully deal with this situation. The day prior she shared with me a discussion that she and our son had after the doctor explained that the surgery was needed and that cancer was a possible source of his pain. "What if it is cancer", my son asked her. She told me that she responded, with confidence, "If it is there are treatments that we will go through and we will knock it out". Her strength gave him strength. I admit, it took me a couple of nervous days of dealing with swirling up and down emotions of both confidence and negative "what-if's". Through prayer and discussions with numerous friends and family, a calmness came over me where I realized that we were not alone in dealing with this urgent medical situation. God was and always is with us, and we knew that our faith would help us to get through this. From that point forward there was never a doubt in our minds that the treatment would provide healing and positive outcomes.

We never left our son's side as he went through nearly 4 months of hospital stays and treatments. Our church family never left our sides while we experienced this turmoil, providing sources of support and faith building that impacted our lives forever. Friends, and even many folks that we never knew, reached out with calls of support and offers to assist in any way.....prayers, a meal, a card, lending concerning ears, and welcomed hugs. The Christian community was there for us, and with us, full of empathy and compassion. You could feel the healing energy of the Holy Spirit ablaze in their sincere efforts and concerns of support.

The road wasn't easy. Five months later the post-treatment scans showed the cancer was gone. Amen! Through this challenging process we became closer as a family, and experienced the immense power of our Christian community in action. Please remember, church is not just a Sunday event. It is a family that is always there to share in the ups and downs of our earthly journey. I implore everyone to get to know the members of your church family better. They are there for you as well as you are for them, providing the vibrant love and warmth of our Christian existence.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we are ever so grateful for your love and the life that you give us. Please help us to be loving neighbors to one another, and to take the time to build relationships with members of our church family who experience the same trials and triumphs that we do. Through confidence in your unwavering love for us, may we extol Christian actions of love, kindness, forgiveness, empathy, and compassion. It is these things that we pray for as we profess our love for you. Amen.