We turn to serve and love our neighbor

I share two stories that I heard in the last two weeks.

The first story I heard was from Pastor Ron Glusenkamp from a trip he took to Senegal with other ELCA folks:

We landed in Dakar, Senegal where the people are 95% Muslim and the other 5% are Christian or something else. Our group traveled to a small village to visit a Lutheran health center that is funded by ELCA World Hunger. When we arrived, we met ten guests who were living there. They all were HIV positive and all had been banned from their homes and so lived together with about a hundred others at this Lutheran health center.

When we asked the group how they were doing, one of the women spoke. She spoke in her own dialect that was translated to English. She spoke eloquently and simply. She said, "If it wasn't for this Lutheran clinic, I would be dead."

The second story I heard while attending the Conference of Bishops in Chicago. There we heard of Lutheran owned and operated Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem. The United States government had voted to continue funding this important medical center but for some reason they are not releasing the money. This is putting people at risk. Chemotherapy is not able to be administered. Surgeries are unable to be performed. Children, especially, are dying.

While this is a complex issue, the stories we heard compelled Presiding Bishop Eaton to write a letter to the administration. She and all 65 bishops signed this letter requesting the United States government to restore the millions of dollars in funding promised to Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem that primarily serves Palestinian Christians. This hospital, owned and operated by the Lutheran World Federation and is supported by the ELCA, is vital as it is the only medical center there. (Read the letter here: www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8009)

In the first story above, I don't know what happened to this woman or the other people gathered that day in Senegal. I hope all of them are still living and still receiving care. In the second instance, I do know that many of the people treated at AVH are Christian Palestinians whose only access to healthcare is through AVH. And I do know this: As people of God, we hold all people sacred. As people who believe in the priesthood of all believers, we know that the staff and volunteers at these health centers are doing holy work. As people who believe in Jesus, we know that Jesus is in the midst of those that others have rejected. As people of the cross, we know that in the midst of suffering, Jesus is there.

You see, as Lutherans, we take seriously what justification by grace alone means: Salvation is not the process or goal of life but rather its foundation. Because we are claimed by God through no merit of our own, we are free to live and love and serve our neighbor – whether it is the neighbor next door or the neighbor in Senegal or Jerusalem.

Way back in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther wrote about establishing a common chest for the sake of the poor in the city of Leisnig, "Those individuals in our parish … who are impoverished … shall receive each week on Sunday … support from our common chest … This is to be done out of Christian love, to the honor and praise of God, so that their lives and health may be preserved." (LW, 45:189)

I read Martin Luther's words and they remind me that we are called out into the world – not because we have to but because of what God has claimed for us. I am so thankful that as we remember the Reformation on October 31 we continue in the footsteps of Martin Luther and the other reformers: Trusting in God's grace through Jesus, we turn to serve and love our neighbor – whoever or wherever that neighbor is.

Thank you for the love and care you are showing to your neighbors – both near and far – as we see the face of Jesus in all.

In God's Peace and Joy,
Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

"And who is my neighbor?" asks the lawyer in Luke 10:29. Although Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is the question itself that is particularly relevant to the work we are called to do as we strive to implement the "Strategy Toward Authentic Diversity in the ELCA" adopted by the Churchwide Assembly in August.

Who is my neighbor? The adopted plan envisions all expressions of the church matching the ethnic and racial composition of their respective ministry contexts. In order to do this, we need to look closely at the neighborhoods in which we live, worship, and serve. In fact, the plan calls on synods to encourage all congregations to learn about their communities and neighborhoods. One way the NWWA Synod does this is through our Living Local Initiative, an approach that encourages congregations to live more intentionally into the mutuality of God's world by attending more explicitly to what God is already up to among neighbors and neighborhoods.

Who is my neighbor? My neighborhood is diverse. My closest neighbors are a blended family with two moms and two children, a Latinx family with a middle school aged son, and a young family with one small child. My spouse and I are a mixed-race couple of empty nesters. I have neighbors from Russia, the Philippines, Thailand, Somalia, and Vietnam. The school district in which I live and work is home to speakers of at least 99 home languages. My congregation reflects some, but not all of this diversity.

Who is our neighbor? Lutherans have been called "the Whitest denomination in the US," but we are also an immigrant denomination. The history of the ELCA is rooted in Germany, Norway, Denmark, and other northern European countries. These people were strangers when they arrived here and their languages, customs, and traditions worked their way into American Lutheran culture, but being Lutheran is a theological identity, not a racial or ethnic one. The NWWA Synod has nine language specific congregations encompassing at least six distinct languages (Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Amharic, Taiwanese, and dialects from Indonesia). The members of these congregation may look and sound different from European descent Lutherans. They may eat injera, rather than lefse, but it is still one bread and we are one body in Christ.

Who is our neighbor? Committed to being a diverse church, how do we "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation?" (Luke 16:15). One way we can do this is to "seek out, lift up, and support gifted leaders in our church to write and translate appropriate materials for education, teaching and worship for the diversity of the Body of Christ," as a new synod initiative regarding language specific resources suggests. We can also increase our level of intentional engagement with our ecumenical and interfaith partners in mission and ministry for the sake of all the world, addressing issues of justice, anti-racism, and reparations for past harm.

Who is your neighbor? What have your congregations done to engage with your neighbors? Please share your stories and ideas. We are church. We are church together. We are church for the sake of the world. We are neighbors.

Here is an update on some things I and/or the synod council have been up to in the last month:

- I attended the NWWA Synodical Women's Convention, "Footprints of our Foremothers: An Immigration Story" on October 5.

- On October 11, I attended a lecture at St. Mark's Lutheran Church by the Narrows in Tacoma, "Apocalypse and Ecology: Is this the End of the World?" which was co-sponsored by Lutheran and Catholic congregations in Pierce County (SWWA Synod).

- I joined a group from Nativity at a Living Local event at Lord of Life in Renton. The focus was "Communal Spiritual Discernment."

- Synod Executive Committee met on October 10.

That's it for this month. I would love to hear about what is happening in your corner of the synod and would be very happy to visit and worship with you. Please don't hesitate to contact me: **veep@lutheransnw.org**