

## Bishop's Page

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What do you see when you look at this picture? If you love antiques, perhaps your eyes are drawn to the sewing machine in the front of the picture. If you are a photographer, the over-exposed windows may catch and hold your eye. If you teach home-ec, you may see a hundred things that belong in a classroom, but that are not in this picture, that are conspicuous by their absence. It is a sparse room!

In our recent trip to Madagascar, we had to learn very quickly to see past many of the things that first caught our eyes in order to learn how to see what we were being shown.

This picture was taken at the Women's Center near the capital city of Antananarivo. Where our eyes naturally saw lack, we learned to see fullness and joy.

We flew from Pittsburgh to Paris, where our eyes were drawn to those details of life that were different from life at home: signs in French, small cars, sidewalk cafes. But honestly, nearly everything we saw was familiar. Then we flew from Paris to Madagascar. And suddenly, nearly everything around us seemed strange and different. We walked across the tarmac from the plane to the airport, and retrieved our bags from the pile of luggage deposited just outside the main doors. We exchanged \$600 at the airport, and received 1.2 million ariary. Just riding from the airport to the Lutheran Compound in Isoraka we saw:

- city buses that were about the size of a 15-passenger van, and at every haphazard stop, people would jump in the open back door, pay the conductor who stood there, and squeeze inside;
- women carrying heavy loads on their heads while managing babies tied to their backs;
- whole villages of people tied to the work of making mud bricks;
- newly-washed clothes drying on the grass;
- and people everywhere, crowding city streets and roadside shops jumbled together. Our first official visit, on our first day there, was to the Women's Center. That visit began the work of teaching our eyes to see what we were being shown. At first glance, we saw only simple buildings with very humble furnishings. By the time our visit was over, we had learned to see a place of hope and opportunity, a social commitment driven by the joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Women's Center is a place where young women learn life skills to help them provide for their families, and where they learn leadership skills to help them develop personally and be role models for others in their communities. Some of the young women live close enough that they come for the day and return home at night. Others come from far away, and live there for months at a time, staying in simple dorms.

While we were touring the dorms, suddenly from the open windows of another building, we heard singing. The students were singing a traditional Malagasy song, which sounded to our ears like a marvelous blend of African and Polynesian songs. The song had a strong, motivating rhythm, but the lilt of the tune was unhurried, almost carefree.

This social ministry belongs to the whole synod, and is a direct answer to the lives of poverty that many girls and women are stuck in. It's an intentional connection between the Gospel of hope and the lives of people in Madagascar. We were glad to have an offering with us to give the director's husband (the director was out of town), an offering that the women of our synod had gathered as a sign of our partnership in ministry.

They are building a new building on the property, which will be the main offices of the Women's Organization of the Malagasy Lutheran Church. It seemed that nearly everywhere we went, the church was building, both with bricks and with words.

There is no question that each place we visited, our eyes saw incredible poverty, a lack of basic material things, or the

most modest of provisions. But what we learned how to see beyond and through those first glances was a church whose people had a message of hope.

As I reflect on our trip to our companion synod in these Echo articles over the next few months, I will make every effort to help you see beyond the surface of the pictures posted on our website to the stories that lie behind them. There, I believe, you will rejoice to see a people of hope, very much like us, telling the story of Jesus Christ, and putting that story into action for the sake of their neighbors.

With you in Christ - Kurt F. Kusserow, Bishop

A Pastoral Letter from the Conference of Bishops  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Almighty God, . . . teach us how to govern the ways of business to the harm of none and for the sake of the common good; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 78  
Grace and peace to you.

As bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are deeply concerned about the current financial crisis, which is affecting not only our nation but the entire global economy. This crisis is causing fear and loss in our country as thousands of families face unemployment, foreclosure, and uncertainty about savings and pensions. Meanwhile, they struggle to put food on the table and gas into their cars. The future is uncertain for all of us, but it is especially frightening for those who are already vulnerable and struggling to survive. We offer our prayers for those whose lives are being affected and for our national leaders as they seek to address this complex matter.

We call on all people in our own communities of faith and those from every segment of our society who seek the health of our nation to join in conversation and prayer about our collective economic life, our financial behaviors, and the interconnectedness of all life and creation that cries out to be reclaimed.

This church has addressed the issues surrounding economic life in its social statement, "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," ([www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Economic-Life.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Economic-Life.aspx)), and we encourage the use of this statement as a way to understand more fully how the following theological and biblical principles are central as we respond to this situation.

#### Concern for People in Poverty

The constitution of the ELCA calls this church to serve by "standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs" (ELCA 4.02.c.). We are grateful for the pastors and leaders in our congregations who already have stepped forward to care for those who are suffering, and we encourage them to continue this response and to provide leadership in the task of turning our attention to the causes and effects of this crisis. We are called to work toward an economic system that truly serves the common good and especially the needs of the poor. We look for partnership with all those who seek to address this financial crisis in a way that also recognizes the humanitarian issues involved.

#### Personal and Corporate Responsibility

The ELCA social statement on economic life calls for individuals to live responsibly and within their means and to beware of the dangers of over-consumption and unnecessary accumulation, which draw us beyond authentic need into excess and destructive indebtedness. We call on businesses and corporations of all sizes to consider the social implications of company policies and to practice good stewardship of creation (Genesis 1:26).

#### The Need for Good Government

We hold and teach that government has an instrumental and constructive role to play in our shared life. This role includes "limiting or countering narrow economic interests and promoting the common good" ("Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All," p. 11). We call on government to hold corporations and other powerful economic actors accountable for the effects of their practices on workers, communities, and the environment.

#### The Benefits and Limits of Free Markets

For many people, the current market-based economy has proven to be effective as a system to meet material need,

generate wealth, and create opportunity. However, we hold and teach that any economic system should be measured by the degree to which it serves God's purposes for humankind and creation. Those who have been blessed by the fruits of our economy are called to be generous in giving to those who have lost much and to advocate for accountability and appropriate regulation in this system.

As people of the God who calls us out of fear into hope and community, we welcome all people into widespread and respectful discussion about this current crisis. In this way we can create partnerships that will help those whose lives are being shattered and encourage responsibility and integrity in our national economic life.

As people of faith we pray:

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ dignified our labor by sharing our toil. Guide us with your justice in the workplace, so that we may never value things above people, or surrender honor to love of gain or lust for power. Prosper all efforts to put an end to work that brings no joy, and teach us how to govern the ways of business to the harm of none and for the sake of the common good; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Conference of Bishops  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
October 7, 2008

(Following is a statement from Bishop Mark Hanson that puts forth the biblical foundations for the new ELCA tagline, "God's Work, Our Hands," and brand mark:)

Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.

A brief elaboration of "God's work, our hands."

God's work. God is at work. As in the creation of the world, what God is bringing into existence is very good — the new creation. Jesus is the embodiment of what God is working on. Jesus' life of mercy for outcasts and sinners, offered fully on a cross and raised from the dead, is the new life God promises for the whole world. The new creation God has begun in Jesus is good work for all, and God will bring this good work to completion.

Our hands. This new creation is God's work. God is working it both in us and through us and our hands. In us God's Holy Spirit is accomplishing what nothing else, not even God's law, could accomplish — a liberated life. God frees us from enslaved service to sin and death, frees us to use our hands generously, lovingly, faithfully -- to live in service of reconciliation, to live for the life of the world, to live in joyous hope of what God will bring to completion in the day of Jesus Christ.

As a Book of Faith church, our witness and work emerge from our dwelling in the Word. Here are some "handholds" for "God's work, our hands" in the Scriptures and Lutheran tradition.

God's work is the new creation in Christ. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

God's work is mercy for sinners and outcasts, good news for the poor and oppressed. "Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." "And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. "Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." — Luke 4:17-21. See also Matthew 9:9-13; Romans 5:6-8

God will complete this good work. 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." — Philippians 1:6; 2:13

God works in us. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 'For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 'so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.' — Romans 8:1-4.

God works through us, our hands. "So we receive our blessings not from them [other human creatures], but from God, through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings." — Martin Luther, explanation of the Commandment, Large Catechism (Kolb/Wengert, The Book of Concord, p. 389;

Tappert, The Book of Concord, p. 368)

Our hands serve God's work. "Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians." &mdash; Martin Luther, The Freedom of a Christian (Luther's Works, 31:367-8)

Our hands serve the world. "We do God's work not because God needs us to do so, but because our neighbor does. We do God's work in Christ's name for the life of the world." &mdash; Bishop Mark Hanson