

# Two Wings of Effective Mission

*Co-Missioners,*

This week our mission correspondent, Richard Gahl, reflects on some examples of effective mission that honors Christ and shares his promise.

*Peace and Joy,*

*The Crossing Community*

---

## Two Wings of Effective Mission in Columbus, Ethiopia, and Cleveland

by Richard Gahl



Some fifteen years ago I had the privilege of working with Berhanu Ofgaa, a Lutheran from Ethiopia, who brought together clusters of Ethiopian and Eritrean people into worshipping communities across the Midwest: Columbus, Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo, Cincinnati, Pittsburg and Indianapolis. In time he identified one or two people from each place to train as leaders. This meant gathering in Berhanu's Columbus home after work on Friday, working all night, praying, and preparing sermons and services before dispersing back to the various cities on Saturday morning. The leaders would gather their local communities for worship on Sunday. This was amazing to observe! The energy was inspiring. When I retired in 2005 I lost track of what was happening, but I did see that Berhanu went back to Ethiopia as General Secretary of the church body. Reports in the church press indicated that the church body was experiencing significant growth. I was not surprised.

In March of 2019 the two LCMS seminary presidents travelled to Ethiopia to see first-hand what continues to happen in mission in that country. Their [report can be found in the Spring 2019 Concordia Journal](#). They went with at least two questions. What can we learn from these brothers and sisters?

How might the seminaries assist in theological training conducted by the Ethiopian Evangelical Lutheran Church Mekane Yesus? What they learned is that mission in Ethiopia has two wings: evangelization and human care. The church body recognized

## ETHIOPIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH MEKANE YESUS

### EECMY:

- A fast growing African Evangelical Lutheran Church.
- Has above 8500 established congregations organized in 24 Synods with close to 7 million members.
- serving the people for more than a century upholding "wholistic Ministry" principle (Gospel ministry and Diakonia/development works)

that nation-wide grievous poverty must be addressed. One program brought together 15 members of a congregation and 15 non-members to train in entrepreneurship and thus have the possibility of working themselves out of poverty. A retired Ethiopian bishop summed up the two-pronged emphasis: "In Ethiopia we operate with the understanding: Don't tell me what a friend I have in Jesus until I see what a friend I have in you!"

From Columbus and Ethiopia, I turn now to a suburban congregation in Cleveland. Twenty years ago, their impressive work in human care caught my attention. I recall surprise at learning that they had established 27 unique caring ministries. On the assumption that this caring emphasis had continued, I undertook last month to learn what it looked like 2019.

Royal Redeemer Lutheran Church is located in North Royalton, Ohio, a suburb of 30,000 with a median income of \$68,000. The congregation has six services on the weekend with an average attendance of 933. Their membership is 2800 baptized with an elementary school begun about 20 years ago that now enrolls 389. The congregation also is sponsoring two new church starts in nearby communities.

Like most suburban communities North Royalton has significant, but easily overlooked, pockets of poverty. The city had operated a food bank in its municipal building. But the need outgrew available space. So Royal Redeemer was asked to take on the program. Now 100+ families per month pick up groceries, including home grown vegetables from a large garden at the church and from members' back yard gardens. Two new ministries pick up seasonal emphases relating to families in need. "Supplying Success" gathers and distributes school supplies in the Fall, and the congregation serves as the regional center for "Operation Christmas Child," gathering toys and goodies for children in needy families. In addition, 300 volunteers prepare

1600 meals for the community Thanksgiving dinner.

This 300-volunteer number applies to three other large caring events. Two of these are Spring and Fall "Servant Saturdays." Working with the mayor and community organizations who assist in identifying needs, the congregation deploys work teams for yard work, home improvement projects, nursing home visits, etc. The mayor, who is not a member of the congregation, regularly shows up in work clothes to participate. The Saturdays begin with breakfast and the formation and deployment of project teams. They conclude with lunch where people share their stories and joys. The third event, "Night to Shine," occurs around Valentine's Day. With initial impetus from the Tim Tebow Foundation, the congregation puts on a "prom night experience" for developmentally disabled young adults. "Friends of Jesus" continues year-round serving people of all levels of ability and disability. This midweek event begins with a worship service in the Sanctuary, then continues in the Gathering Room with fellowship and opportunities for all involved to use their gifts in volunteer service projects.

Many volunteers have been given training for specific caring roles. Stephen Ministry has been a foundation for adaptation in many areas. Buddy Break is a program for parents of special needs children giving a time for date night or respite while the children have well supervised fun experiences. Other programs and events include an annual community Health Fair,

Divorce Care, Bereavement Team, Divorce Care for Kids, cancer support, prison ministry, ministry with families having someone in prison, an auto repair team, and Caring Café (frozen prepared meals and bakery on a grab-and-go basis for people dealing with a recent hospitalization, death in the family, new baby, etc.). Care to Learn, a tutoring and mentoring program, works with children in the school whose families are struggling with life issues, and is coordinated with the school administration. The list goes on.

Not every activity is conducted on the congregation's campus. Volunteers are deployed to the Redeemer Crisis Center (an inner-city congregation) and the Cleveland Pregnancy Center. 20 volunteers make 40 runs a month picking up bread and bakery items and delivering them to hunger centers on the west side of Cleveland. The local Meals on Wheels also operates out of Royal Redeemer.



*LCMS Communications/Joe Isenhowe Jr.*

Rich Utech of Buena Vista, Colo., left, leads a prison-ministry conference workshop on "Getting on after Getting Out." He emphasized that the most effective re-entry program for those imprisoned will address real needs; relate directly to the offender, family and employer; and will speak to the expectations of everyone involved.



When I asked whether the caring DNA of the mother congregation is evidenced in the two new church starts, the immediate answer was “Yes.” The leaders had each been active in leading caring ministries at Royal Redeemer before being commissioned for the new endeavor. They have both continued and expanded that compassion in the new starts.



Royal Redeemer is a can-do place that deploys a large number of caring people in community service. I suspect that at least a third of the baptized participate in one act of caring. (The congregation does not have an official count.) The congregation publishes a 28-page booklet describing the services offered so that individuals can

find the help they desire, and members can connect with opportunities to serve others. They identify the purpose of Care ministry as demonstrating God’s love for those in need – emotional, spiritual, physical, financial. “We do this as a way of inviting people to experience the quality of life Jesus offers.” This is a congregation that is continually looking for new ways to engage their community and make new friends.

As an aside, many congregations probably do similar kinds of caring activities, if not to the extent of Royal Redeemer. But pulling it together in printed form is a way both to help the entire congregation give thanks for all the things they do together and also to enlist new members to try out some new ventures while making new friends at the same time.

One Sunday a member of Royal Redeemer’s pastoral staff was visiting churches in a gentrifying community of Cleveland. He engaged in conversation with a young, professional looking woman

coming out of one of the churches. He asked her: When you woke up this morning, why did you come to church today? She immediately responded, "I feel the presence of God here. They reached out to me when I was in juvenile detention."

Two stories about God's people continents apart: in the impoverished country of Ethiopia where Lutherans reach out with two wings to demonstrate care and to connect people with a Christian community that trusts the Promise of God; in suburban Cleveland where a Lutheran congregation radiates care and compassion throughout their region inviting people to experience the quality of life Jesus offers. Isn't this what all God's people are sent into the world to be about? What every congregation should be doing to equip the saints as agents and witnesses to the Good News?

Two wings—evangelization and caring. From Ethiopia to North Royalton the emphases may change with times and circumstances. But the caring congregation understands that "Don't tell me what a friend I have in Jesus until I see what a friend I have in you" is a dictum that applies the world over.

---

**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**

A publication of the Crossings Community