



Eastern Washington-Idaho

Synod supplement

# Safe-guarding the word

See what it means to let the gospel loose in the world

Story and photos by the Revs. Gary and Ruth Larson

**D**uring worship on a Friday morning at our church in Bangladesh, 12 new believers were introduced to the congregation and a few of their stories shared. One young man recently was serving as *imam*, leading the prayers of a local mosque. Apparently there were some who noticed a dramatic change in him over some months, and they came to confront him directly.

There were quite a few men, and they seemed threatening. Yet this man felt assured by God to speak with them about his newfound faith. For a half hour, he shared with them why he had come to believe the message about Jesus. And he noticed several men were quite angry with him, ready to attack.

So he quickly inserted, “The first man to touch me, I tell you the truth, will certainly become a Christian!” And not one of them lay a hand on him.

When Mary and Joseph headed for Bethlehem under the command of the emperor, we can imagine they were very quiet along the journey: Pondering, worrying about how the world might react to this very child of God. Working and reworking in their minds how they might ensure his safety under extremely watchful eyes.

Maybe no plastic knobs on door handles, stairway gates, or catches under the kitchen sink. But just the same, every precaution must be made that he not stumble down stairs, fall in a pool of water or ingest poison. This is, after all, the only begotten Son of God, and the world must provide safety for him.

They made it through the 2s. But then they had to flee the country when Herod’s anger blew

up. It was their primary responsibility of protecting the world’s treasure from the hands of a killer.

Those of us who have children know this responsibility of hovering over them for their safety. And yet we also know, with Mary, that even our most devoted attention cannot guarantee protection.

Even for the very Son of God, at the crucial moment, all protection was off. And his given life is the very treasure that we, the church, now hold in precious keeping for the world.

The church in Bangladesh has been given the very primary responsibility (as we in the ELCA have) of protecting the world’s treasure of the gospel from decay or misuse for the sake of the world. This responsibility requires making wise decisions to prepare the ground for the treasure to be received in faith.

It is in this safeguarding of the gospel for the world that we were called to Bangladesh. Gary is directly involved in teaching at the ecumenical seminary, the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh, helping to educate leaders for the churches of this country.

At the same time that we, the church, guard the treasure by preparing the soil for receiving the Word-Made-Flesh, we also know that the Great Sower is very careless with his seed.

God scatters it even among the brambles, where taking on faith can put believers into very dangerous situations. And where our clean lines of doctrine and tradition can become quite



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**The Larson children—(from left) Marta, 8; Hannah, 10; Jonah, 12; and Gracia, 4—spend Saturdays helping their mother, Ruth, with a ministry for street children in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Gary Larson teaches at the ecumenical seminary there.**

blurry. We know that at the crucial time, the Sower calls all protection off and risks for the world.

Sowing seed into dangerous territory, where the gospel can be ignored, misconstrued, even trampled under foot. And this is where the church finds its own life too, being called to risk the very treasure it guards, into an unpredictable world.

The church in Bangladesh, like the rest of us, certainly struggles in keeping the balance. As we in the ELCA may worry, for example, that our style of worship might change if we completely let the gospel loose on the world, the Bangladesh churches worry about losing the traditional name for Jesus, *Jishu*, to the name used in Muslim circles, *Isa*, or losing other traditional words for the faith.

It remains a hard issue—to consider “losing” the tradition for the sake of being evangelical toward the Muslim neighbor.

And yet we have seen some churches here make this incredible leap, and their effort has certainly been rewarded with faith. There

is something to be harvested even among the brambles.

This letting Jesus loose on the world definitely is the harder challenge to being the body of Christ. We understand better the desire or nature to protect. We do wish to baby-proof the world. For there is no telling what sort of cost is involved in letting the gospel loose.

Ruth and our four children have been involved recently in a street (beggar) children’s ministry here in Dhaka on Saturday afternoons. The children run around together, sit down for a Bible lesson and help pass out dinner to 200 to 300 other children.

It is quite a rough two-and-a-half hours, with way too much crowding around, touching, pushing, begging, pulling hair, rubbing up against boils and scabies and all that. And even after all the rough and toughness and scary germs, our children (to our amazement) look forward to going back.

Though it would be more fun to hang with their friends, it seems they have been able to see God scattering

his seed. It seems they have been able to witness God working through these children.

It is in this very “noticing” of God’s kingdom at work in the world, that we, the church, are finally empowered to let go of the tight grasp we have on the treasure. To finally give way to the only begotten Son to take his steps freely into an unpredictable world. To trust the Sower’s judgment on how and where he sends his precious Word-Made-Flesh.

In these two-and-a-half years of living in Bangladesh and noticing God’s kingdom at work, we have been challenged and changed and transformed over and over again by the awesome faith of Bengali brothers and sisters who now proclaim Christ and continue to proclaim Christ in spite of all the persecution they must face.

Most of them see abandonment by family and friends and community. Some even receive physical threats, harassment and bodily harm. They are living proof that this Word of God is treasure worth holding onto. And that Jesus himself is certainly making his way through the streets and slums and villages of Bangladesh.

The good news that the Divine Child of Bethlehem was indeed lying safely in a manger long ago has come to us anew in Bangladesh. Perhaps it is because of a new recognition of the world around us and so many not-yet believers in this One.

But maybe it is that we all yearn to be reminded how God makes his way into the world not in judgment but in gift—*Unto you a son has been given!*

Though the care and love of the Christ Child has been out of Mary's and Joseph's hands for some time now, their joy in him continues to fill the world. The same joy fills us, too. □

## Who are the Larsons?

The Larson family lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Gary works full time at the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh through a call with ELCA Global Mission, under the care of World Mission Prayer League.

Ruth teaches confirmation to the expatriate Lutheran community youth in Dhaka and also is one of the youth leaders of Kingdom Kids, a weekly youth program sponsored by Dhaka International Christian Church.

In Washington, Gary and Ruth served together from 1999 to 2004 at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Colville. Before moving to Bangladesh, Gary served as interim pastor of St. Paul of Shorewood Lutheran Church (Seattle). The couple served three congregations in Nebraska from 1994 to 1999.

The family's home congregation is St. Luke Lutheran in Spokane. The couple was commissioned there, and the congregation supports them with prayer and with financial contributions. Ruth's parents, Nathan and Linda Stime, are members also.

The family has been serving in Bangladesh since June 2005 and will stay until their first furlough or home assignment in 2009.

The synod has set up a fund to accept contributions of financial support for the Larson family. The "Good News Walking" fund is used to buy shoes for the family. Contributions can be sent to the synod or to the Financial Services Office with regular benevolence contributions. □

## The true gift of Christmas

*Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, ca 342  
Celebrated December 6.*



Many of us continue to struggle to find the right balance around gift-giving at Christmas-time. On the one hand, we know the gift is already given—Jesus of Nazareth, the Babe and Christ of God. Gifts are given among us in order to remember and celebrate God's supreme gift. Our gift giving is an echo of the resounding enfleshment of God with us, Immanuel.

On the other hand, many of us have vocations dependent on our consumer culture. For many businesses up to one-half of yearly income must be generated in "the winter holiday season." Add to these stresses the overwhelming expectations built up in our children and the season becomes pressured and freighted with a foul sense that we're trapped in an endless loop where our job is to spend and spend.

*Sinter-klaas* (Santa Claus) is Dutch for St. Nicholas and is part of the legend of St. Nicholas that has been developing for centuries. Our contemporary challenges are not new, just part of a slowly evolving story that gathered up the English Father Christmas, the Nordic Christmas Man and the northern European *Thor* (god of peasants—jovial, stout, with a long white beard) along the way. Since very little is known of the original St. Nicholas, legends have served the various purposes of cultures eager to make something of kindness and gift-giving to children, darkness and a fallow commercial season.

Like many of you, our family was locked into seasonal expectations while serving at Holden Village. We needed to be present in the remote village to receive our guests, but that meant the traditional Briehl Family Christmas either had to happen without us or at another time. One year we finally did it and marked our Christmas on Dec. 6, around the feast day of St. Nicholas.

It's difficult to describe what this change meant. At the very least, we all expressed relief at being freed from the fevered season of crammed commercial buzz. Don't get me wrong: We still gave presents and still honored the relationships among us. But it was different and sweet, and as the now generous weeks of December unfolded, we felt extravagantly (smugly?) disconnected from the crass inducements of the days.

I wish you deep grace in these days. Our gift is Jesus and finally, his life for ours. I hope you have the chance to look for opportunities to experience this grace and lay aside the pressures of culture.

God is with us,  
Pr. Martin Wells  
Bishop

## Commissioned to serve, elected to lead



**G**race and peace to you sisters and brothers in the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve

as synod vice president. When I took office Aug. 1, my first duty was to attend the 2007 Churchwide Assembly in Chicago. What a way to begin this term: inspirational worship, excellent Bible studies, motivational speakers, respectful conversations and a strong reminder of how daily nearly 5 million ELCA Lutherans impact our local communities, nation and world. I came home grounded in God's word, renewed by the Spirit and motivated to help you shape our future as a synod.

This is the beginning of my 10th year living in Pullman, Wash., where I serve Trinity Lutheran Church as the director of family and youth ministries. I have the joy of working with my husband, Tor, who is the pastor. We have been blessed with a 13-year-old son, Micah, and a 10-year-old daughter, Hannah.

Pullman has been a great fit for our family and our ministry gifts. Although a Pacific Lutheran University Lute to the core, I have become a WSU Cougar fan. Other passions include walking with friends, camping, gardening, endless home remodeling projects, jewelry making, reading and planning parties.

My educational background includes degrees in education and counseling. I have served on the Synod Council for the last six years as an at-large representative. The last

two years have been the most energizing and empowering—working on the Great Commission-Great Commandment effort. The need to reclaim these primary invitations of Christ is clear: The world is hungry for what we have—God's love and grace.

Our task is simple: We are called to show God's love and share God's word and stories of our faith journey. I'm reminded of a question I asked during the children's sermon: "Who is missing from the table?"

I pray that we can lift our eyes and see the needs in our communities. I pray that someday all will be welcome, invited and included at Christ's table.

At our September meeting, the synod council committed to a Relationship Covenant—how we promise to work together—which is grounded in prayer, accountability, effective communication, respect and encouragement. It is our hope that we will be able to lead this synod in reclaiming the Great Commission and Great Commandment: to shift from our maintenance model of functioning (looking inward) to a mission-minded model (looking outward.) We are exploring what this shift means in our agendas, reports, committee actions and synod functions.

Please keep the council in your prayers as we delve into the Great Commission-Great Commandment effort and strive to fulfill the current synod mission statement, "Equipping God's People for Ministry." I am excited to participate in the unfolding of this adventure.

Remembering whose we are will be vital. Communication will be key. Supporting one another will be essential. We must celebrate when things go well and be thankful for

grace when we fall short.

Thanks to former Vice President Ray Boyd for his years of leadership and service. He has been a valuable mentor and a supportive cheerleader. I must also thank Bishop Wells, our synod office staff and the synod executive committee for their partnership. Their prayers, insights and encouragement continue to be vital in this time of transition.

Susan Berg

## Cultural exchange brings Salvadorans to Yakima

**O**ver the last few years, people from Central Lutheran Church, Yakima, have helped build four Habitat for Humanity homes in El Salvador, and the congregation has financially supported many more homes.

During the first week of October, Claudia Garcia, José Flores, Claudia Romain, Mario Reyes and Salvador Shul, all from El Salvador, experienced the other side of Habitat Global by coming to Yakima.

"Our congregation could get a better vision of what was happening in El Salvador, and our guests could experience being in a foreign culture and gain a broader perspective, knowing more about where their visitors and funds came," Ann Willis, a Central member, wrote in an e-mail.

"In this adventure of cultural exchange, both the members of Central Lutheran in Yakima and the El Salvador Habitat team have grown and been blessed," Willis wrote.

Central held fundraisers to pay for their guests' airfare. □

Kimberly Manz

*Manz is the synod's supplement editor.*