

THE VOICE OF RENEWAL

The Newsletter of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

Serving all Lutheran churches since 1971

MAY, 2020

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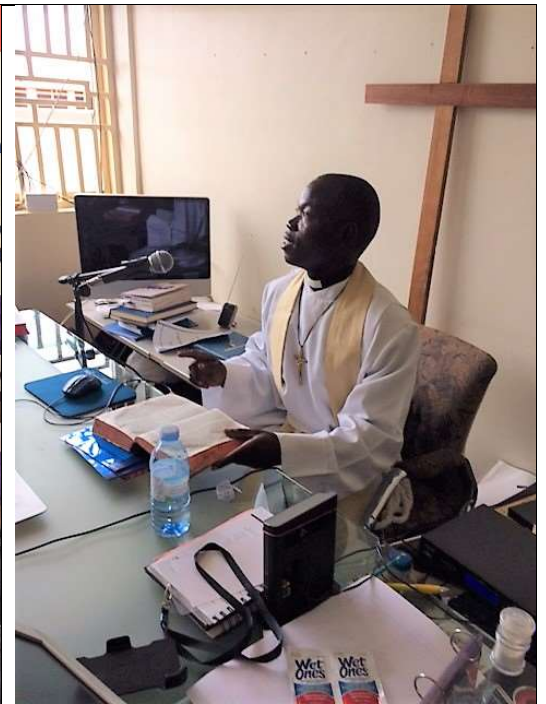
LLR'S MINISTRY CONTINUES DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Churches all across the U.S. have been closed for two months now, so of course we have not been able to hold any renewal weekends, retreats or workshops here. Our mission trip to Uganda, scheduled for April, also had to be postponed and is now tentatively scheduled for July. While some doors to our ministry have been closed, however, God has been opening others. We have been working with our partner, the Lutheran Church of Uganda, to provide some of the critical support the church needs.

Uganda, like the U.S., has been shut down and churches there also have been closed. As a result, the Lutheran Church of Uganda started a weekly radio ministry to reach those people who have not been able to attend church and Lutheran Lay Renewal has been providing much needed funding for these broadcasts in Eastern Uganda.

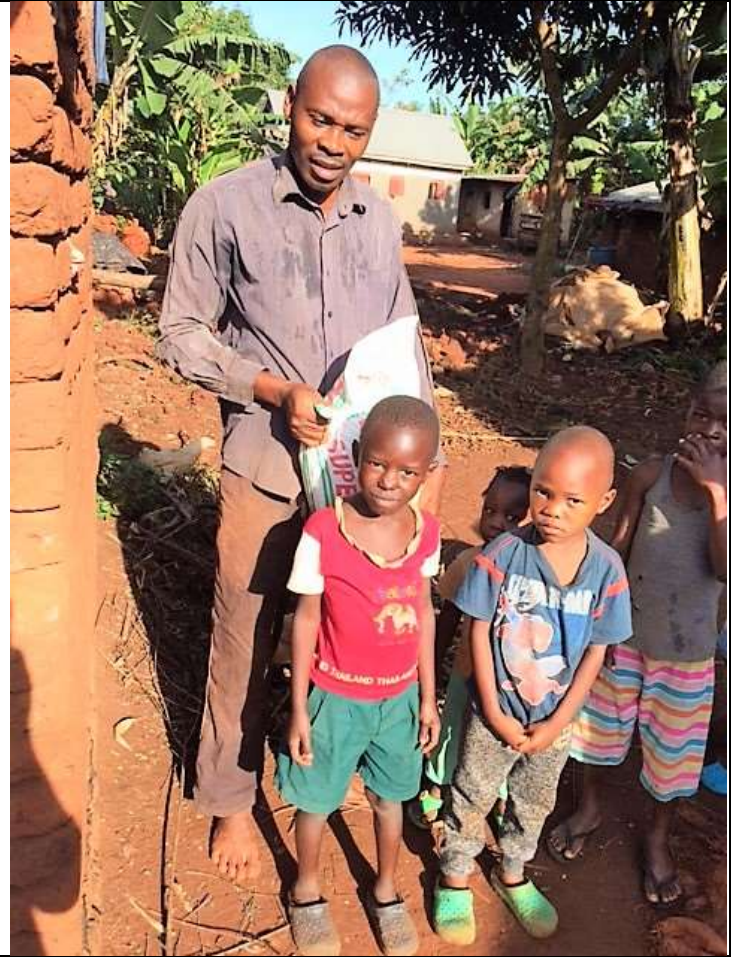


Bishop Charles Bameka and other LCU leaders at the first radio broadcast



Rev. Peter Maganda broadcasting on Easter

In addition, because of the nationwide shutdown most people are not able to work, leaving many families without the financial resources they need to buy food, so Lutheran Lay Renewal has sent funds to the LCU to provide food for 15 seminarians and their families, as well as 29 other families at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Magamaga.



Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. – Galatians 6:9-10

INVITATION TO MINISTER IN RWANDA

On May 7 we were contacted by Pastor Jean Claude Maniragaba, President of the Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda, who found out about our ministry through Bishop Charles Bameka of the Lutheran Church of Uganda. Pastor Jean Claude writes:

“We are very much interested in the work of Lutheran Lay Renewal of America after we went through great ministries in this work of God. We would like kindly to request your programs in which you can provide the opportunities for people in our congregations to strengthen their faith, build deeper Christian community and have a closer personal relationship with Jesus Christ. If you grant this request, glory will be for the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior.”

The Board of Directors of Lutheran Lay Renewal has accepted this invitation and we will be visiting Rwanda in conjunction with our next trip to Uganda. The plans are for our Executive Director to lead a three-day renewal conference in each country. The first two days of these conferences take pastors and lay leaders through an actual Lutheran Lay Renewal Weekend, so they can experience it for themselves and become familiar enough with the weekend to take the program back to their own congregations. On the third day we lead a retreat on Seven Lessons for Living the Spiritual Life. Due to the global pandemic, both Rwanda and Uganda currently have a mandatory 14-day quarantine for anyone entering the country, so final dates cannot be set until these restrictions have been lifted.

Funds are greatly needed to pay for the expenses of this next mission, please help us minister to these churches!

JOIN US IN ISRAEL IN 2021!

Our 2021 Israel tour has been scheduled for January 11-20 and we are now accepting registrations. We have 52 exciting Old and New Testament sites on the tour that will greatly expand your knowledge of Christianity, Judaism, biblical history and archeology. Walk in the footsteps of Jesus in Nazareth, Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, Bethlehem, Bethany, the Jordan, Capernaum, Magdala, Mt. Tabor (the Mount of Transfiguration), the Mount of Beatitudes, Caesarea Philippi, and enjoy a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. We'll also visit Masada, Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, Herodian, Jericho, Caesarea Maritima and many other historic sites. A tour of Israel truly is an experience you will treasure for the rest of your life. Tour arrangements are being handled by Imagine Tours and Travel, a company that has led hundreds of tours to Israel for over 30 years. Call or e-mail our office for a brochure and registration form, which we can send you either by mail or e-mail.



Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, built in the mid-6th century, traditional site of the birthplace of Jesus

PROGRESS IN BECOMING MORE AND MORE TRANSFORMED BY THE SPIRIT

One of the joys of parenting is to watch children grow in their understanding of God and faith. To a toddler the Jesus figure in a Palm Sunday parade is literally Jesus and needs to hear the explanation that he is Mr. Jones, acting like Jesus. Beyond toddler literalism, middle-grades school children focus on fairness and see God as the judge handing out penalties for wrong behavior. They have a **First Stage Merit-Based Faith**. That's the stage of most world religions.

A second stage is recognized by mainline churches at confirmation. Eighth graders affirm the faith they have been taught by their church—with as much understanding as a fourteen-year-old can have. In earlier centuries most church members remained at this **Second Stage Confirmed Faith** because they ran into few challenges. We are, of course, in a different world now. High school and college now present basic challenges to fundamentals of biblical faith, and many teens and college students abandon their confirmed faith.

We need now to focus on **Third Stage Convicted Faith**. With the help of supportive pastors and campus Christian organizations, some mainline young adults do reach that new stage and come back to their faith. Mainline churches that want to do well in this new culture will have to get better at helping youth reach third-stage-convicted faith. They should be asking, how do we get beyond confirmation faith?

Recognize also the fourth stage described by Paul: “Be joyful always, pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 5: 16,17). Call this a **Fourth Stage Close-to-God Faith**. This is what Paul also described: “We are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3: 18). I suspect in this passage many are confused about whose glory is increasing. The root meaning of the Greek word “glory” is a brilliant radiant light that comes from God. It is God’s radiance that is increasing as his people reflect his light in their Christ-like living.

Martin Luther himself offered a **three-stage model** very useful today. It appeared as an illustration in a sermon preached in 1521. Using the analogy of a sanctuary, he described a church-yard conscience, which concentrates on getting the rules of church life right. A nave (pew section) conscience characterizes those who are living faithfully but out of guilt with no joy. Progressing forward, those who are living with a heart changed by the Spirit have a chancel conscience. “Conscience” in classical theology describes what I am calling motivation.

Here is Luther’s ideal stage: “When the Spirit comes, he makes a pure, free, cheerful, glad and loving heart—a conscience made righteous by grace, seeking no reward, fearing no punishment, doing everything with joy.” Getting to this kind of glad and loving heart takes the Spirit’s work. It is not a human achievement.

Here is the proposed **four-stage** understanding of the faith-based relationship with God:

- Stage One — Merit based Faith
- Stage Two — Confirmed Faith
- Stage Three — Convicted Faith
- Stage Four — Close-to-God Faith

With Luther, I believe that all those who confess Christ as Savior will have eternal salvation, whatever the stage of their personal faith. Indeed, Jesus taught that unless you receive the kingdom as a child you will not enter it. The fourth stage is what the Apostle Paul described when he urged the Thessalonians to: “be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.”

A reasonable goal for a church pastor is to help participants move from Stage Two Confirmed Faith to at least Stage Three Convicted Faith. Congregations where most stay at Confirmed Faith are not going to do well in this new American culture we face. Further, what more practical question can church leaders deal with than guiding believers to be moved by the Spirit to the transformed life of Stage Four – Close-to-God Faith.

Stages Three and Four are an opportunity, not a duty. They are available only through the work of the Spirit. Reaching conviction brings welcome assurance of who a believer is in this current conflicted culture. Stage Four of living close to God brings the life-affirming special blessings of the fruit the Spirit produces: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Rev. Dave Luecke, Ph.D., LLRA Board Member

OBEDIENCE

Many decades ago, I heard a retired missionary tell his life story. He began with graduating from Bible college, not knowing what he was going to do after graduation. So, the night before graduation he went into the chapel alone and placed a paper on the altar. On the paper was a list of all the things he was willing to do to serve God. He then slipped into one of the pews and began to pray. His prayer was this: “Lord, I offer up this list on the altar before you; these are all the things I’m willing to do to serve you.” He felt very proud and self-satisfied with his list but as he prayed, he felt the Lord was not accepting it. The more he prayed the more he realized the Lord was not accepting his list and he didn’t know why. He began to wrestle with God in prayer, searching for an answer.

Finally, the Holy Spirit spoke to his heart and said, “Just put a blank paper on the altar and let me fill it in.” And so, he did. Shortly after graduation he was called to the foreign mission field, something that was not on his list. From there he went on to talk about his life and experiences on that foreign mission field. I was so impressed with this man’s faith that I have placed my own blank paper on the altar before God and dozens and dozens of times I have prayed this simple prayer: “Lord, my life is always a blank paper on the altar, for you to fill in.

Obedience is not a popular topic, either in secular society or even in the church. When was the last time you heard a sermon on obedience? Probably never! It’s a topic pastors don’t want to preach on, or perhaps are afraid to preach on, and it’s a topic people don’t want to hear about. Yet, it’s a critical virtue to acquire in order to advance in the spiritual life.

There is a very strong correlation between our faith in God, that is our trust in God, and our obedience to God. These two virtues go together as Dietrich Bonhoeffer made very clear in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*: “Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes.” In other words, if our faith is genuine it should lead to obedience to God.

And St. Teresa of Avila wrote: “Remember, it is of the greatest importance—the sole aim of one beginning to practice prayer should be to endure trials, and to resolve and strive to the utmost of her power to conform her own will to the will of God. Be certain that in this consists all the greatest perfection to be attained in the spiritual life, as I will explain later. She who practices this most perfectly will receive from God the highest reward and is the farthest advanced on the right road.”

I know, I know, as Lutherans we’re very uncomfortable with talk of perfection because none of us will ever be perfect, but the main point of conforming our own will to the will of God is nevertheless a crucial lesson for us to learn.

We all have read the Great Commission many times, and with Ascension Day coming up this week this is a good time to read it again: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” – Matthew 28:19-20. It seems to me that contemporary Christianity in the Western world does a good job of highlighting the importance of everything in this passage – except the “obey” part.

We all want Jesus to be our Savior but do we really understand what it is for Jesus to be our Lord? And do we really want him to be our Lord? One of the most important lessons I have learned about the Christian life is this: *God can use us only to the level of our obedience to him.* Placing the blank paper on the altar before God can be frightening because it means giving up control, it means making ourselves vulnerable and sometimes it means doing things we don’t really want to do; but I have also found that it’s liberating when I don’t have to be in charge and I have found that the rewards of living life this way far outweigh anything I ever had to give up.

Bill Oehlschlager, Executive Director



Members of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Magamaga receiving food supplies

“Like” us on Facebook - Lutheran Lay Renewal of America

We post all of our upcoming events on our Facebook page, as well as a thought for the week every week.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Healing for Dan and Kathie Klueg, and Kathie’s father
- Comfort, peace and healing for Dick Brown
- Healing for Elaine Schomaker and her daughter Alexis Gurnard
- For the Lord’s protection over all doctors, nurses and other hospital workers, police officers, firefighters and all men and women in our armed forces
- For the Lord’s blessings on our ministry in the U.S., Uganda and Rwanda and for the financial resources that are needed for this ministry
- For wisdom and guidance for the LLRA Board of Directors, as we seek to grow and expand our ministry

Lutheran Lay Renewal of America is eligible to receive Choice Dollars Grant Funds from the Thrivent Financial Choice Dollars program. We are grateful to Thrivent Financial, and those individuals who designate their Choice Dollars to us, for their support of LLRA and its ministry.

LLRA is a 501 (c) (3) tax exempt organization and depends on contributions from churches and individuals who have benefited from our ministry to help us continue to bring this ministry to more and more congregations all across America - and now also to Uganda and Rwanda!

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