



## O Day Full of Grace

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Accessibility Award Contest; New  
Accessibility Resource

Advocating for Patients in a Stressed  
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*Pastor Julio Ross and the new La Anunciacion church in San Gregorio, Argentina*

Story by Pastor William “Chip” Fairchild

Wednesday, March 10, was a beautiful late summer day in the village of San Gregorio in the Santa Fe Province of Argentina, about five hours northeast of Buenos Aires.

It was a perfect day for a celebration for two Lutheran congregations, the La Anunciacion mission congregation in San Gregorio and Christ Lutheran Church in Conyngham, Pennsylvania.

My wife, Sandy, and I made the long but wonderful trip to San Gregorio to meet the pastor and congregation of La Anunciacion and to participate in the service of dedication for their new church building. Brian Adams, a young man from Christ Lutheran and a freshman at Bloomsburg University, was also there to represent our congregation.

Brian's presence was very important because Brian was a catalyst God used to make this new church building a reality. Three years ago, he had traveled to Argentina with a delegation from our synod led by Bishop Strobel to strengthen our companion synod relationship with the Iglesia Evangelica Luterana Unida of Argentina and Uruguay (IELU). While on that trip, Brian visited several Lutheran congregations across Argentina and experienced the work of the Church in many places. But it was his visit to San Gregorio that eventually led to a companion relationship between our two congregations.

At the time, the congregation in San Gregorio was worshipping in a small garage next to the home of the Becker family. Mr. and Mrs. Becker moved to San Gregorio many years ago and, with the help of the IELU, began organizing a Lutheran mission congregation there. The congregation originally met in their home but soon outgrew that space, so Mr. Becker converted his garage into a sanctuary.



Brian learned that the congregation had long dreamed of building their own church building on land given to them on a street near the center of the town of about 4,000 people. The estimated cost to build the first phase of their dream, a new church sanctuary, was \$11,000 (about 33,000 pesos at the present exchange rate).

Brian also learned that the congregation had saved \$3,000 toward their dream — a very difficult task given the poor economy in Argentina and the very limited financial resources of the people of San Gregorio. But when the small hospital in San Gregorio was in serious need of some medical equipment to care for the people of the community, the members of La Anunciacion made the decision to give the money they had saved toward providing that equipment. They believed that it was what God was calling them to do, and if God wanted them to have a new church, somehow God would provide the funds.

Brian knew that our congregation in Conyngham had just voted to purchase a new sound system for \$18,000, and he realized that for much less than that we could have built their new church. When he returned home, he shared his experiences in Argentina with our congregation and told us about the need for a new church building in San Gregorio.

As he told of the wonderful people of San Gregorio, of their faith and devotion to the Gospel, Brian challenged us to use our blessings to be a blessing in San Gregorio.

Christ, Conyngham is a congregation committed to sharing its blessings. We held a congregational meeting to take up Brian's challenge. There we made the decision to give the money needed to build their new church sanctuary to our fellow Lutherans in San Gregorio, using funds received from a small bequest and from our *Growing with Christ* mission fund.

In June 2003, congregation members Tony and Mary Lou Deisroth joined Bishop Strobel and others to go to San Gregorio for the groundbreaking ceremony. Brian was not able to make this trip, which disappointed the congregation because they had learned of his witness to their need and he had become quite a folk hero among them. Nevertheless, it was a great day not only for the mission congregation, but also for the whole town.

Finally, on March 10, 2004, the long-awaited day of grace came. Well before the start of the dedication service, a large group of children and adults — almost everyone in San Gregorio — had gathered in front of the new church. A bright ribbon hung over the front doors. The procession included the pastor of the mission, Bishop Furlan of the IELU, Pastor Garbe, others, and me. But the honor of cutting the ribbon and leading the way into the new nave was given to Mr. and Mrs. Becker.

The two-hour service of Holy Communion was glorious and emotional and filled with tears of joy. There were so many highlights, but two stand out. First, during the service, Brian was ushered forward and given a certificate of honorary membership in the congregation.

Second, Pastor Bob Von Frisch, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Leighton, and Lois Bernstein, a lay member of that congregation, surprised the people by presenting a check for \$16,000 to build the second phase of

their dream, a wing of classrooms and offices. The nave erupted with applause and more tears were shed.

All of us returned home from Argentina feeling blessed by the people of San Gregorio and the whole Lutheran church in Argentina. Our participation in their ministry is a gift to us. We are spiritually enriched by their love, their hospitality, and their passion for the Gospel in South America. We look forward to praying for each other, sharing with each other, and being together again with our friends as they come to visit us and we them.

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## Accessibility Award Contest New Accessibility Resource



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### **Accessibility Award Contest Begins; New Accessibility Resource Added to Resource Center**

Each year from April 1 to May 31, congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are invited to nominate themselves to receive the annual **ELCA Accessibility Award**. The competition for the award is among congregations that are seeking to do ministry with people who are differently-abled.

The winner of the Accessibility Award will receive \$1,000, which is contributed by the **National Organization on Disability (NOD)** and **Aetna Healthcare**.

According to the Rev. **Lisa T. Cleaver**, director for disability ministries and deaf ministry in the **ELCA Division for Church in Society**, three areas are considered in evaluating nominees. First, how accessible is the congregation’s physical plant? Second, is the congregation trying to reach out to people in the community who are differently-abled? Third, and perhaps most important, how are people who are differently-abled being included in the life of the congregation? Are they being invited and encouraged to serve the congregation in their own way?

Previous winners of the ELCA Accessibility Award have been **Good Shepherd Lutheran Church** in Raleigh, North Carolina, **Ascension Lutheran Church** in Albert Lea, Minnesota, **St. Paul Lutheran Church** in Hampton, Virginia and **Peace Lutheran Church**, Gahanna, Ohio.

“Each of these congregations has gone that extra mile to make persons who are differently-abled feel welcome, included and valued as members of the Body of Christ,” said Cleaver.

Any ELCA congregation may apply for the 2004 ELCA Accessibility Award by contacting **Pastor Cleaver** at 800-638-3522, ext. 2692, or [lcleaver@elca](mailto:lcleaver@elca).



org and requesting an application.

### **New ELCA Accessibility Video Available**

*Toward The Goal* is a new two-piece resource designed to assist congregations toward the full inclusion of people with disabilities. It contains a booklet that provides practical suggestions and stories from congregations that are reaching out to differently-abled people. The second part is a video that opens with a statement by ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, encouraging all ELCA congregations to provide accessible and inclusive worship and congregational life experiences for all people, including people with disabilities. The resource (catalog # V21672) can be borrowed from our synod resource library. Contact **Judy Gifford** at the synod office at [jgiff@rcn.com](mailto:jgiff@rcn.com) or 610-395-6891.

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## Advocating for Patients in a Stressed Health-Care Environment

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Keynoters Pastor John Richter, right, and Jill Heidel, center, share a moment with Rhoda Lyons of Leesport, PA.

Photo and story by Mark Staples

Pastor John Richter of Atonement Lutheran Church, Wyomissing, Pa., and Atonement Health Ministry Advocate Jill Heidel movingly described the challenge of representing aging and ill patients in what sometimes becomes an adversarial health-care system.

They were the keynote presenters at “[Health Ministries Advocacy – A Matter of Love and Justice](#),” an event that drew about 80 pastors, nurses, health ministry professionals and concerned people of faith to the [Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia](#) on March 13, 2004.

Pr. Richter documented the complex and dramatic changes in the health-care system with personal stories. He began by recalling the health decline of his grandmother in the late 1970s. “She was dying of cancer, but really she was dying of old age. She was winding down, becoming older and more frail, slower, showing signs of dementia.”

He went on to describe the assistance provided by a social worker at the Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn after his grandmother was moved there, including figuring out what nursing home to select. “When it came time for my grandmother to go to a nursing home, my mother told the social worker she could use a few more days to get prepared, and the social worker saw that the hospital granted that extension,” he said.

“Fifteen years later my father was dying,” he continued. “He was also in his 90s and slowing down and becoming more frail with dementia. He was in the same medical center that had cared for my grandmother. This time, however, the social worker assigned to my father was regarded as an adversary. Things seemed different. There was tension, strain, and there were tears.



“The rules changed,” he said, “and I could understand this intellectually, but at the same time I was sitting across the table from my mother, and I was hearing her cry. There was no one in the hospital to help her with her perception of how things had changed.”

These experiences helped open Pr. Richter’s eyes to the changes in health care, changes driven, he said, by spiraling costs, rising health insurance premiums, all resulting in a health-care system in need of reform.

He began to think about the dozens of folks in his congregation on Long Island who were elderly or who lived alone. “I thought, if my mother had trouble, what about the members of my own flock?”

At first the Long Island congregation thought about engaging a parish nurse to deal with issues like health education, wellness and preventative health care. “But we were concerned about providing for our members someone concerned about advocacy, someone prepared to see a patient through the system. The ideal mix of skills may be a parish nurse with social work or case management experience, or a social worker with a nursing background,” he said.

Those two roles have come together in Jill Heidel, Health Ministry Advocate at Atonement.

Ms. Heidel described herself as “a registered nurse with a background in case management.” She portrayed her role as “meeting a child of God wherever he or she is at a time of vulnerability. We help people live with the tensions of that time, often in the presence of limited resources.”

Helping people discover their health-care options, often when they do not know what they are, is a key role for Ms. Heidel. “The options simply are not made clear otherwise,” she said. The support may also involve looking after caregivers who administer hospice and other kinds of care to loved ones.

Pr. Richter noted that an appropriate role for a health ministry advocate might be to seek changes in public policy. “That hasn’t happened at Atonement yet, but it may be something we are heading toward,” he said, adding that Ms. Heidel is serving an ever-widening circle of people in need, beyond the congregation. “All are served at no financial cost or obligation,” he stated.

Ms. Heidel said she frequently cooperates with willing hospital professionals to work on treatment plans of patients to be released. She assists with discharge planning and informing patients about their prognosis and options. “Sometimes people and their relatives just don’t know what is going on. I help them learn answers to the questions they have.”

At Atonement, Heidel also oversees a wide variety of health-care forums and educational events, such as stewardship of the body programs, teaching about eye care, Parkinsons, dementia and Alzheimers; running vaccination clinics; sponsoring a caregivers support group; helping people cope with chronic pain; and sponsoring a chronic diseases group.

“We try to teach that healing can occur even when a cure is not available,”

she told the group.





## Farmers Enjoy Night of Food, Fun and Festivities



Lynn Eckert and the Outlaws lead the square dancing

Photos by Karl Allmendinger; story by Elsa Kerschner

*(This article is excerpted from one that appeared in the March 18, 2004, issue of Northwestern Press and is used by permission.)*

More than 800 farmers from Lehigh, Northampton, Berks and Schuylkill counties and other farm family supporters attended a Farm Family Appreciation Celebration held at the Hamburg Field House on March 13.

The night, which offered free roast beef and chicken dinners for farmers, welcomed some 226 guests who had paid a small fee to give their thanks and support to the farmers. A hoedown with music by Lynn Eckert and the Outlaws followed.

The Farm Family night out is sponsored by Diakon, the Lutheran Home at Topton, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Ziegels Lutheran Church, and the Lehigh-Northampton and Berks County Pomona granges.

The celebration for farm families began five years ago following a devastating drought. It has been held four of the last five years. It is a true family event, with all ages represented from babes in arms to grandparents and great-grandparents.

The Rev. Gene Handwerk, associate of the bishop, says he thinks the evening is a wonderful coming together of people who really care about farming. Too often farmers are taken for granted, he said.

He recalled that when he was growing up, farming was considered a noble profession for people who were proud of their ability to raise high-quality food and they still want to do their share to make the world a better place. Now it seems some people think the bottle of milk in the supermarket comes from a machine and never think of the hard work that goes into its production.



He said that farmers come to the appreciation celebration and feel that, at least for one night, they are appreciated.

Many of the dinner attendees expressed the same sentiment, saying they really enjoyed the night out, whether they were there for the first time or had attended all four celebrations.

Lynn Eckert and The Outlaws provided the music for the hoedown. The Schnecksville Grange supplied the flowers. Chocolate coin candies came from Palmer Candy in Reading, and Johanna Adams provided a favor for each place setting.

Big John's Catering provided the meal, with leftover food packaged in meal-size portions that could be taken home by attendees.

Master of ceremonies, the Rev. Thomas Reinsel, who represented Diakon, said residents should try to "buy Pennsylvania."

"If we don't take care of the small farm family and buy from them, they may disappear."

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APRIL 2004



The Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod

New Consecration Sunday is  
"The Way to Go"

Blessed  
to be a  
Blessing



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Reading

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Stewardship work in the church should be a good experience.

Too often, however, it is "as much fun as a root canal," to quote Herb Miller, nationally known author and church consultant on stewardship.

On March 14, 66 people from 25 congregations met at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Reading (Tuckerton), to explore Miller's faith-based stewardship concept. Pastors Gene Handwerk and Jim Wolford, associates of the bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, were the workshop leaders.

The March 14 workshop, *Blessed to be a Blessing: Linking Financial Giving and Spiritual Growth in Your Congregation*, was an abbreviated and updated version of Miller's workshop to more than 400 people in September 2003. (See *Blessed to be a Blessing*, October 2003 issue of *Partners in the Spirit*.) Several of these workshops have been or will be held across the synod.

The "stewardship as root canal" problem, in part, is that we have confused stewardship with fund-raising. Stewardship is not fund-raising. Faith-based stewardship is a ministry that helps us grow in faith, discover the generosity of God, and respond with trust and love.

While the world around us teaches us to fear scarcity, God calls us to trust in God's abundance. "It's not just 'giving to meet a budget,'" said one participant. "Stewardship is thanking God for God's abundant gifts."

"I am even more convinced this [New Consecration Sunday] is the way to go," said another participant, who had also attended the workshop with Miller in September. "We're planning on using it this year."

Attendance at these workshops has been excellent and evaluations have been positive. More workshops are planned. If you would like more information, email Jim Wolford ([Jim.Wolford@Ecunet.org](mailto:Jim.Wolford@Ecunet.org)) or Gene Handwerk ([Gene](mailto:Gene)).



Handwerk@Ecunet.org).

As one participant said on the evaluation sheet, “The most important thing I learned is that the synod can be practically helpful and has excellent resources.”

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Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Resource Center

Photo by Dave Wartluft

Did you know that our synod resource center, located in the Wescosville synod office building, is one of more than 70 resource centers in the ELCA?

These centers are located in synod offices and multisynod centers, on college and seminary campuses, and in ecumenical and specialized centers.

Personnel in ELCA resource centers communicate with each other in an online meeting hosted by the ELCA on Ecunet, a not-for-profit, online network of Christian organizations. In the resource center meeting, people review new resources, answer questions, and share resources.

The network of resource centers also makes available self-published and parish-generated resources on a shared Web site, [www.synodresourcecenter.org](http://www.synodresourcecenter.org). Hosted by the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin (our ELCA partner synod, by the way), this Web site provides a large number of resources from a variety of sources via links to 10 ministry areas.

You can take a virtual tour of six ELCA resource centers at [www.elca.org/alrc/index.html](http://www.elca.org/alrc/index.html). The Association of Lutheran Resource Centers was formed in 1996 to support and articulate resource center ministry across the ELCA. Currently there are 44 member centers. The synod Resource Center is a member of the ALRC.

For more information on ELCA resource centers, check the ELCA Web site at [www.elca.org/co/centers.html](http://www.elca.org/co/centers.html). This site includes links to individual resource center Web sites, photos of centers across the country, online catalogs, and collections of resources on specific topics.

Staff of ELCA resource centers meet monthly with Augsburg Fortress and ELCA churchwide staff in a telephone conference call hosted by Augsburg Fortress Publishers. Topics covered in the hour-long call include requests for



information about AF publications that have come from synod consumers and updates from AF about products that will soon be released and/or resources that are being planned and developed.

Read about our synod resource center in the [January 2004](#) issue of [Synod News](#). You can access this issue at [www.godslove.org/pdf/snjan04.pdf](http://www.godslove.org/pdf/snjan04.pdf).

