



SERMON

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

~ Romans 12:4-5

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for having a Praise Appeal service this year. It is a way to remember the work of the wider church and to connect in common purpose with congregations across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

This year's Praise Appeal theme, *Members of One Body*, is based on Romans 12:4–5. Our emphasis this year is on the support of the ELCIC's Bi-lateral Partner Church Relationships with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), the Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Unida (IELU), and the Iglesia Luterana del Perú (IL-P).

So what does it mean to be members of one body? When we are baptized the community welcomes us with these words: We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world. Each of us is a member of the body of Christ, striving to live our lives as "little Christs" (as Martin Luther would say). Until Christ comes again, we are part of the physical body of Christ on earth, designed to share God's love and mercy in our words and deeds.

Not any one of us is the body of Christ. We are only members of the body. Parts of the body. The body of Christ can only be expressed as a collective. Within the ELCIC we are parts of several collectives. We are members of a congregation or synodically-recognized ministry. We are members of a synod. We are members of a national church. We are members of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. We are members of the holy catholic church which is comprised of all the faithful including those who have gone before us and now are at rest, and those who are still yet to come. It's a little mind-blowing!

Do you remember the Transformers? The toys? The autobots were robots that transformed into vehicles and vice-versa. But several of them together could combine into a super robot. It's kind of like that. We are always totally separately ourselves, but it is in working with other parts of the body of Christ that we are more fully able to accomplish the mission to which God calls us.

It's impossible to be fully engaged in all parts of the body of Christ at the same time. We need each other, each working in different areas of the body to keep the whole body working.

The Lutheran World Federation is made up of 75.5 million people organized into 148 member churches in 99 countries around the world. That is far too many churches for us to maintain relationships with! So, the ELCIC focuses on partnerships with three of the member churches in the Holy Land, Peru and Argentina.

These partnerships are built on an understanding of ongoing relationship and accompaniment that has been built over many years. In the case of Peru and Argentina these relationships were strengthened at the beginning by



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ELCIC missionaries who worked within our partner churches. In the case of the Holy Land, our relationship grew through a commitment to support Christian presence in the Holy Land and a relationship that began between two former bishops, Bishop Munib Younan from the ELCJHL and Bishop Telmor Sartison from the ELCIC.

Let me share something about each of these partner churches.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land has 3000 members in six congregations spread over Israel, Jordan and Palestine. Their new bishop, Bishop Ibrahim Azar, was consecrated in January.

The ELCJHL has a school board that oversees four K-12 schools in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala and Ramallah. The ELCIC supports the ministry of the schools by providing scholarships for students with financial need. This was one of our focuses in the Reformation Challenge. Due to the poor economic situation of the majority of Palestinian people, at least four out of five students require some kind of financial assistance.

The schools are top-notch. They are some of the few schools that are co-ed. They have a mix of Christian and Muslim students, dependent on the mix of the city they draw from. They place a high emphasis on tolerance and peace education as well as holistic education for the whole child.

The school board also oversees the work of the Environmental Education Centre. The EEC focuses on raising awareness of environmental issues, protecting biodiversity, and sustainable development. They have a program of bird ringing and monitoring, where they track the patterns of migratory birds. They plant olive trees to help Palestinian farmers especially when their trees have been uprooted. This also was one of the projects of the Reformation challenge.

The Iglesia Evangelical Lutherana Unida has 11,000 members, in 29 congregations and five missions, served by 20 pastors. Rev. Gustavo Gomez is the President-Pastor. Here we support the ministry of Pastor Andrea Baez in the Patagonia Region where she serves two congregations that are 575 km apart!

In Comodoro Rivadavia, she serves San Juan bautista (St. John the Baptist) a vital congregation with lots and lots of children. Typical congregational activities include Bible study, worship, and children's programming. The region is experiencing an oil and gas boom which has brought a transient population. Kind of like the Fort McMurray of the south.

Esperanza del sur (hope of the south) in Esquel is the second congregation Pastor Andrea serves. It is where she lives in the parsonage. Very different character in the congregation, but still lots of children! In addition to the two congregations, Pastora Andrea has occasional services in Los Antiguos, which is a small preaching point, centred around a large extended family that has ties to Comodoro. She also keeps contact with an indigenous community in Cushamen.

In a message I received from Pastora Andrea after Easter she wrote: They are difficult times in Argentina, every time there is more poverty. There is no work, a lot of inflation, economic crisis and our governors only look at their own



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interests. In the midst of this context, we preach the Risen Christ, of liberation to bring hope and peace. Insistently we are thinking in what way to help from the community of faith to the most needy. We are generating small spaces for reflection, help and training.

Iglesia Luterana del Peru, The Lutheran Church of Peru, is a small church with around 500 members spread over a handful of congregations and missions. Pastor Pedro Bullon serves as president of the church. They are striving to address the overwhelming issues of poverty and violence that are the daily bread of their members and their communities. None of their pastors receives more than a half-time salary. They are also working hard in the area of reconciliation as they are recovering from a schismatic divide in the church that has left many people feeling wounded and vulnerable.

While I was there last December, I spent time with the mission we support in Iquitos, where Pastora Yoli has been working in Congregacion Fiel es Dios for 10 years.

The major focus of the ministry is on children and youth. They offer tutoring on Wednesdays and Fridays. They have a lunch program on Wednesdays and Sundays, with the latter being for children who attend Sunday school.

Pastora Yoli explained that there is not a lot of education for children and youth, mostly due to the cost of schooling. Many children must work to supplement family income. There are not adequate wages in the community (about \$100 per month.) Many children are being raised by their grandmothers as their mothers have left the community to find work. Everything is more expensive in Iquitos as things must be imported in by plane or on the river. For example, the cost of a chicken is four times higher than what it would cost in Lima.

We had discussions about the pervading issues of poverty and domestic violence that also need to be addressed. But in the midst of such challenges is a community filled with hope and joy, doing all they can, despite their lack of resources, to reach out to their community.

There are many differences between these three partner churches and our church and yet we strive to live out an understanding that we are all members of one body, each with different gifts to share. We are a much larger church and are, especially in comparison, blessed with more resources from which we can share. The gifts we share are partnership, accompaniment, financial support, and prayer. The gifts we receive are prayer, accompaniment, the example of deep faith facing challenging circumstances, and a reminder that there are different ways to organize and still be church. It is in these many ways that we are members of one another.

What can you do? How can you get involved?

Pray for our partners, follow them on social media, check out their websites, look for stories about our partners in the *Canada Lutheran* magazine or on our website, and give generously to benevolence and to the Praise Appeal. The financial gifts that you give enables us to make our commitments to the support of our partners and allows us to be able to give them extra-mile giving for their mission and ministry.

God bless you and strengthen you as you continue to serve as part of Christ's body. *Amen.*