

# Faith & Fellowship

Vol. 92, No. 5

# Japan

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025



**CLB**

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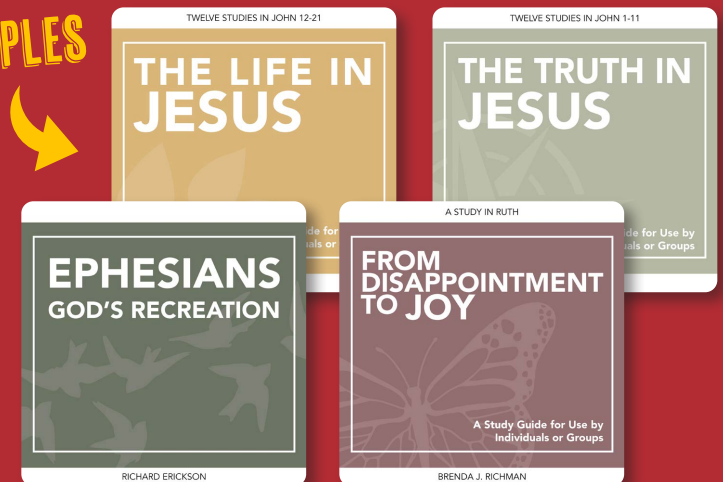
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EXAMPLES



REV. DANIEL J. BERGE, PH.D.

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# A Matter of Family

BRENT JULIOT

**“ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.**

— Revelation 7:9

”

**T**he ophthalmologist I’d never met before called me “brother” at least five times during our visit. Then when I tried to thank him, he interrupted, “No, it will be my honor to perform your cataract surgery!” This level of deference is not normal in our shared culture, so where did it come from? Early in the conversation, we had implicitly identified our common bond in our Lord Jesus Christ. From that point on, I was “brother.” This was not about culture, but a matter of family.

Over 20 years ago now, I sat with a gentleman in a living room in Ndjamena, Chad. He spoke several languages, but only a tiny bit of English, and I could muster just a tiny bit of French. We had no translation help because LBIM director Matthew Rogness was sequestered in a meeting in another room. But as we two struggled to communicate at the simplest level, I knew warm fellowship with my new friend, a Chadian pastor. We found that we had so much in common. Culture wasn’t as important. It was a matter of family.

I was still at an impressionable age when a former missionary, Morris Werdal, came to be my pastor. I heard the story many times of his calling from God to work among the people of Japan. Because of his experiences growing up, Morris could have seen the people as his enemy. But by God’s grace, he saw them as future brothers and sisters in Christ.

In seminary, I met and bonded with believers from other continents. I shared in graduation with three of my brothers: Hiroshi Suzuki from Japan, Victor Lagardy from Chad, and Silas Lapeube from Cameroon.

Nearly 20 years later I was reunited with Victor in order to encourage him at a key point in his declining health. And it was my great honor to have Silas translate for me as I preached to a large congregation in Garoua, Cameroon. But will I see Hiroshi again?

“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They

were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands” (Rev 7:9).

Why does the CLB pursue mission endeavors in places unreached with the gospel? It’s a matter of family! Not just the family in Christ many of us have been privileged to know over the years, but the brothers and sisters we don’t know yet. Especially the ones who don’t know Jesus yet. We will meet them all at that great reunion, centered on the Lamb of God, in heaven. What could be more important than the Great Commission work the Lord calls us to? It’s about family!



*Rev. Brent Juliot is Contributing Editor of Faith & Fellowship magazine and Pastor of Living Hope Church in Menomonie, WI.*

# Renewed Vision for Mission in Japan

DAN VENBERG



Dan Venberg, Director of International Mission, with Fumiya Wakamatsu, President of Japan Lutheran Brethren Church.

**T**he CLB has 76 years of mission history in Japan... and counting. It all started when the CLB mission field in China was closed due to Communist takeover. On December 1, 1948, P.M. Valder was the last LB missionary to step off China's shores, ending a long and fruitful chapter of the CLB's missionary presence in that field. Many wondered... what's next?

Enter Pastor Morris Werdal, son of former China missionaries Marius and Marie Werdal. Morris longed to return to China, the land of his youth, to continue ministry there. He had heard about the open doors for mission in Japan, but was reluctant. The Japanese had been enemies of China. Their bombs had killed little Phoebe Nyhus, daughter of LB missionary colleagues, Arthur and Ruth Nyhus. But Japan continued to invade Morris's thoughts. One evening, late in 1948, Morris heard God speaking to him, "Morris, you have prayed, 'Lord, I'll go where you want me to go.' Do you really mean that? If I choose to send you to Japan, will you go?" Morris fell to his knees and prayed, "Yes, Lord. If you want me to go to Japan I'll go."<sup>1</sup> He contacted the LB mission board, and while open to

the idea, they reported that there were not sufficient funds, but that he should attend the convention scheduled for later that year and express his sense of calling.

Enter Chaplain Harms Gunhus, an LB pastor serving as a chaplain for the US military, stationed in Japan. He penned an article in 1949, published in *Faith & Fellowship* magazine, making a plea for a missionary presence in Japan.

Enter Anton Peterson, a Minnesota farmer with a heart for mission who felt a compelling desire to support a missionary to Japan. He connected with Rev. R.S. Gjerde, of the Lutheran Brethren Finance Department, the night before the 1949 annual convention, and expressed his desire to support a missionary family in Japan. He was told that the LB had no mission work in Japan, but that they would reach out to him if someone came forward.<sup>2</sup>

These three stories were shared at the convention, upon which the entire Board fell on their knees for a time of thanksgiving. Morris and Marion were called as LB missionaries.

Thus started the Lutheran Brethren's mission in Japan. More missionaries were called, and the Church was faithful to send

them. The postwar era was incredibly fruitful. By the mid 1950s, the Japan field had 19 men and women serving as missionaries. Hundreds of Japanese had come to faith through their efforts. The Tohoku Bible School was opened. In 1959, a seminary was opened. In 1969, the Japanese Lutheran Brethren Church (JLBC) was founded. By the mid 1980s, the JLBC sent their first missionaries to Indonesia.

As postwar Japan settled into "normalcy," the cultural hunger for the Christian message, and for the Christian God (in contrast to emperor worship), seemed to diminish. Interest in the Church and her message faded. Missionaries became discouraged; some left the field. LBIM missionaries labored. They planted and pastored churches. They taught in the seminary. They held Bible studies. They witnessed the gospel through English teaching, Tsunami relief, and relationships. By the turn of the century, the JLBC reported 28 churches and an estimated 1,200 members.

For various reasons, LBIM presence in Japan dwindled. The JLBC communicated that they would not likely be able to provide pastors to any new church plants.



Alexa Fraser and Pastor Haruya sharing a map of Sendai city.



Minami Yoshinari Church.



Pastors praying for the Frasers.

As church planting was the focus of LBIM in Japan, more missionaries left the field. In 2012, Dean and Linda Bengtson were the only remaining LBIM missionaries in Japan, serving the House of Hope ministry in Ishinomaki, a community that they helped through recovery from the Great Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of 2011. The thought was that LBIM's missionary presence in Japan would end with the retirement of the Bengtsons... unless the Lord led otherwise.

Japan became known in mission circles as the “graveyard of missions.” Factors contributing to this sobering title included the following:

- 98% of the Japanese population are considered “unreached” (Joshua Project, 2021).
- 85% of religious adherence in Japan falls under a combination of Shinto (the indigenous religion of Japan) and Buddhism (statistica.com, 2022). Statistically, there is only one missionary serving per 260,000 Buddhists (thetravelingteam.org, 2022). That is equivalent to one missionary for all the city of Madison, WI.
- Only 0.3% of the Japanese people are evangelical Christian.
- Churches are closing. The Christian population is aging. Annual Evangelical growth rate is  $-0.4\%$ . The global average is  $+2.6$  (Joshua Project, 2021).

The Church of the Lutheran Brethren, through her international missions department, have always prioritized sending missionaries to serve in unreached places and among unreached peoples. Even considering the discouraging reality of the status of the Church and mission in Japan, it did not seem right that LBIM should shrink back from this mission, but rather should lean into it, and further invest in it. Japan may be considered the graveyard of mission, but God is all about bringing life from the deadest of contexts.

Consider Sarah's barren womb, Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, Jonah in the belly of the fish, Lazarus' tomb, or Christ's work in all of us when we were dead in our sin.

In 2020, a dialogue started between LBIM director Dan Venberg, JLBC President Wakamatsu, and other Japanese national pastors. This dialogue has evolved into a renewed mission partnership and vision in Japan. The partnership is intentional in that it is:

- Interdependent—LBIM and the JLBC will serve the mission together, each contributing gifts, resources, time, and relationship, so that together the mission can move forward better than if either partner were attempting it on their own.
- Outreach focused—Our missionaries will not pastor churches. They will intentionally partner with already established JLBC congregations, serving alongside them for the purpose of community outreach and evangelism. Church plants will be at the initiative of the local congregations, not LBIM.
- Integral—There will be an intentionality that ministry platforms will be developed that are innovative and holistic, meeting felt needs within the communities they serve, both proclaiming and displaying the message of the gospel.
- Strategic—Mission strategy will be based on community assessment, missionary giftings, partnership potential, and the efficacy of relevant and contextual gospel proclamation.

In the Fall of 2023, Paul and Alexa Fraser were sent to Japan as the first LBIM missionaries in this new venture. This has been a great encouragement to our Japanese brothers and sisters. Paul and Alexa have been focusing mostly on language learning the past two years, but we are now intentionally planning

a ministry focus that has them serving alongside Minami Yoshinari church in Sendai. The vision is to plant a second campus of that church in a different part of the city. We are excited to see how God will continue to use them in this regard.

Mark and Sarah Undseth are candidates with LBIM, pursuing a sense of call to Japan. As I write this, they are in Japan, visiting our missionaries and JLBC churches and pastors, learning about our mission in Japan. They will then transition to a ministry internship at Rock of Ages LB church in Seattle, WA, where they will engage with both congregational ministry and with Japanese Ministries alongside Roger and Sue Olson, veteran missionaries to Japan. We are praying that, if this is the Lord's will, they be affirmed in this calling by the Lord and by the Church.

As the Lord continues to raise up new laborers for his harvest fields, and as the Church remains faithful to send, may we, the disciple-making Church that is the CLB, be found faithful to our Lord's mission. May we not be overly distracted by metrics and trends. May we not be of those that fold their arms on the perimeter of the harvest fields, waiting for something to happen. May we rather be of those who, full of anticipation, roll up their sleeves and wade in, partaking in the sowing and harvesting, resting in God's promises. May we rejoice in the privilege it is to join him in the work and look forward to the day when we will gather with an uncountable and diverse, yet unified, throng in worship of our Lord.

*Dan Venberg is the Director of Lutheran Brethren International Mission in Fergus Falls, MN.*

<sup>1</sup> Levang, Joseph H. *The Church of the Lutheran Brethren 1900-1975* p.361.

<sup>2</sup> Levang, Joseph H. *The Church of the Lutheran Brethren 1900-1975* p.362.



Paul and Alexa Fraser and family.

# Partnership Prepared in Advance

PAUL & ALEXA FRASER

**S**tirring from a deep sleep, Kronk bolts upright remembering all the details from earlier that day. Clarity strikes him as he realizes how they all connect and a plan forms in his mind, culminating in a single, definitive statement, “Oh yeah, it’s all coming together.” Now, I apologize if you haven’t seen the Disney movie *The Emperor’s New Groove*, but this line from that movie constantly finds its way into my mind. And whenever I’m able in hindsight to see God’s hand working over the days, months, or even years of peoples’ lives, I find myself hearing Patrick Warburton’s voice as Kronk telling me “it’s all coming together.” Let me give you an example.

I have a friend my age, named Kei, who regularly volunteers his time to help me study Japanese every week. He always congratulates me when I speak Japanese well at church on Sundays, but a year ago such things would not have been possible. You see, to understand Kei, you have to know how God made him. He is always generous, always kind, and has always had an interest in the world’s cultures and a heart for foreigners in Japan. But unfortunately, because of his disposition, Kei was regularly taken advantage of and

verbally abused at multiple jobs by his bosses and coworkers. Eventually, his coworkers stopped talking to him, and he was left very isolated. He quit his job, quickly became depressed, and wondered if it even mattered to anyone whether he was alive or dead. His life entered a very dark and lonely place. As a last attempt to get help, he met with a counselor—who just so happened to be a Christian. She spent time with Kei and knew his love for other cultures and religions, so she pointed him toward religion to bring him hope, suggesting he start with Christianity. So Kei Googled churches in Sendai, and the first one he found was ours, Minami Yoshinari Christian Church! He met with our pastor, became a believer, began attending Sunday services, and decided that he was going to become a Japanese language teacher for foreigners in Japan. And wouldn’t you know it, a new foreign family from the United States, who could use some help learning Japanese, had just joined Minami Yoshinari Church a year prior. “Oh yeah, it’s all coming together!”

We have another friend, Mrs. Ōishi, who became connected to our church through a friend who suggested that she check it out. Mrs. Ōishi and her family moved to

Sendai from central Japan because her husband had taken a job promotion. So she was new in town looking for a church and a place to help at just the time we were also coming to Sendai. And wouldn’t you know it, her job used to be onboarding foreign workers at her company, and now she was a stay-at-home mom looking for something to do. God had prepared another unexpected (to us) partnership and friendship! But, we should not have been surprised.

Nearly three years ago, a new agreement was made between LBIM and the JLBC to enter into a partnership and work together to further reach Japanese people with the gospel. This agreement was made through much prayer and faith that God is calling this partnership to exist and will see to any fruits that may come from it. And so, before this agreement was even made, Mrs. Ōishi’s husband was working his way toward a promotion that would ultimately lead his family to Sendai, exactly where God was bringing new missionaries. And Kei was finishing university and enduring a horrible work environment, abusive bosses, and apathetic coworkers, so that when prayers arose for assistance in Japanese language study for a new



Paul talking to Pastor Kouki Zeniya.



Paul & Alexa presenting to Japanese pastors.



Paul and Alexa with their friend Kei.

missionary in Sendai, God’s mighty hand raised up one of his children out from the darkness and into his light at our church with a place to belong perfectly suited for him.

So far, we have mostly been the recipients of much of God’s planning, but now we are beginning to be the participants with God in his plans for others. This summer (in August) our church planned its first Vacation Bible School since Covid in 2020. Our pastor and elders were very excited about it, but it has been a while, and the Sunday School group (and Elder Board) look very different now than it used to, so everyone wasn’t quite sure what to expect. But because of years of training received from our CLB camp, Inspiration Point, Alexa and I felt equipped and ready to answer the call to help plan a VBS. Our first real attempt at planned ministry in partnership with the Japanese church was something we had been prepared (years) in advance to do.

Now we look forward to what else God has prepared in advance. We look forward to partnering with Minami Yoshinari Church to plant a second campus further in the heart of Sendai in

order to reach more of the million people living in our city. There have been eight baptisms at our church since we arrived (none so far really due to our efforts), and we look forward to hopefully being a part of many more to come in the future. A new family just started attending our church with young children the age of ours. There is a place prepared for them to belong. There is a Christian Art Group in Sendai that regularly puts on art shows; perhaps there is room for partnership there. In Seattle, we learned about and helped out in Rock of Ages Church’s Coffee Cart ministry. We’re hopeful such a ministry could have a place in Sendai.

All of this is to say, who knows what wonderful things God has prepared that when we look back at what God has done, and trace the stories of those around us, we can look in hope toward the future and confidently say, “Oh yeah, it’s all coming together.”

*Paul and Alexa Fraser serve as missionaries to the unreached people of Japan.*

## Recommended Resources by Dr. Gaylan Mathiesen

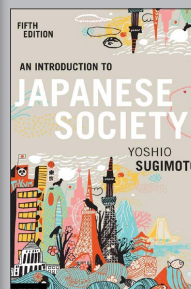


### Further Reading & Resources

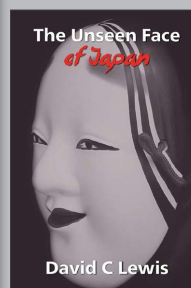


**Japan Prayer Guide**  
*An online resource*  
This website was created based on the *Beneath the Surface* prayer guide to take you deeper into 30 priority prayer topics for God’s work in Japan.

Visit the website at [japanprayerguide.com](http://japanprayerguide.com)



**Yoshio Sugimoto**  
*An Introduction to Japanese Society*  
This book provides a highly readable introduction to Japanese society with chapters covering class, geographical and generational variation, work, education, gender, ethnicity, religion, and popular culture.



**David C. Lewis**  
*The Unseen Face of Japan*  
This book explores the motivations behind why Japanese people act in a ‘religious’ way, based on what ordinary people say about their attitudes and experiences. In the process it also uncovers core values within Japanese culture.

Links to these resources and more at [clbforge.org/recommend](http://clbforge.org/recommend)

### Glimpse Project: Japan

This video series will help you explore what God is doing through our missionaries and local congregations in Japan.



FREE!



See Page 9



# Interdependence

FUMIYUKI WAKAMATSU

**T**hank you for your prayers for us at the Japan Lutheran Brethren Church. I offer this greeting on behalf of 26 churches and 20 pastors.

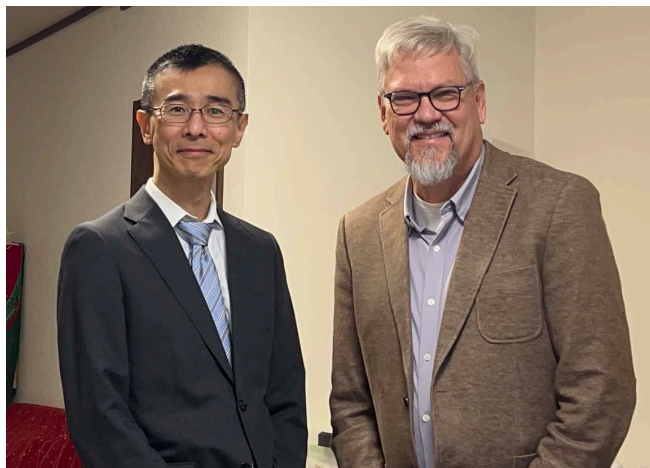
You, LBIM/CLB, sent Paul and Alexa Fraser and their family to Japan in 2023. For God chose, called, and sent the Frasers. Praise be to the name of our Lord.

This marks the first time in 34 years that the JLBC has welcomed new long-term missionaries (since Dean and Linda Bengtson in 1989). In preparation for this, LBIM and JLBC entered into a new partnership agreement in 2023. In the previous agreement (1979), we agreed to work together as one Church in Christ and as one umbrella religious corporation. The new agreement takes a more ambitious and strategic view of our shared purpose and relationship as partners working together. Yes, we at JLBC are pleased to have you as our mission partners.

Since LBIM began its mission in Japan in 1949, we at JLBC have received the blessing of the gospel through many missionaries. Together with these missionaries, the Japanese Church has

built its foundation. Behind the Church's remarkable growth, missionaries have always been present. We recognize the immense charm and contributions of missionaries. Therefore, we may have

the CLB, much like a child becoming independent from their parents. The Japanese people tend to have a mentality that considers it shameful to depend on others.



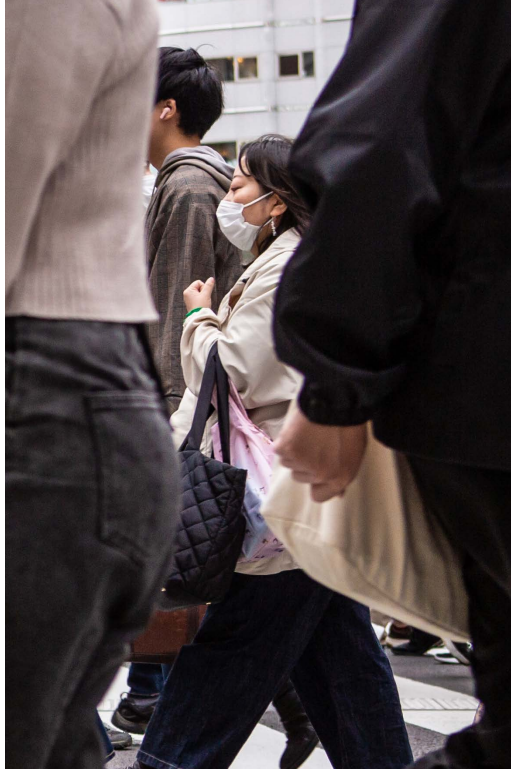
*President FumiYuki Wakamatsu and Director Dan Venberg.*

become somewhat dependent on them.

On the other hand, Japanese pastors may have felt the need for, and sought, independence in their missionary strategies. They may have felt that breaking away from missionary dependence was the next step in growth. They may have thought that doing so would be a way of “repaying the favor” they received from

However, in entering into this partnership agreement, we have returned to the biblical order of mission. It was not a shift from dependence to independence. Rather, it was an order of mutual interdependence. It was not a relationship that fades through independence, but one that deepens through interdependence. It is a relationship in which we complement, influence, and transform each other. I believe the Lord of Mission works among us as we are interdependent. I believe our Triune God allows us to look forward to mission and its fruit amid the blessing of abundant fellowship.

I believe that through JLBC's partnership with missionaries, Japanese churches can step out of the comfortable environments they have built and enter unreached areas. We will preach the gospel to unreached people. I hope that churches will take on challenges, embrace



Micah & Cari Nordtvedt - Micah Joel Productions

# The Glimpse Project Videos

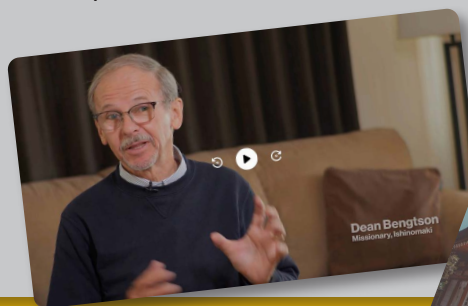
# CLB FORGE



**The Glimpse Project: Japan** explores what God is doing through our missionaries and local congregations in Japan. Hear from veteran missionaries Dean & Linda Bengtson and brand-new missionaries Paul & Alexa Fraser, along with some of the Japanese pastors and ministry partners.

### Seven videos with a downloadable study guide:

- |                           |                  |                       |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Entering a New Culture | 4. Tsunami       | 6. Haruya and Fumi    |
| 2. Japan and Christianity | 5. House of Hope | 7. Investing in Japan |
| 3. Partnership            |                  |                       |



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**VIDEOS and PRINTABLES**

change and enjoy it. We will become new disciples of the Lord Jesus. We will not fear failure or blame others, but will encourage believers and inspire them in our missionary mandate.

Naturally, there are language and cultural barriers between us. At times, it can be difficult. We may, at times, wonder whether certain cultural practices are biblically problematic. But I am hopeful. The Spirit of wisdom will reveal Christ to us. At that moment, we will experience that this work is the Lord's work, God's mission.

In the blessings of such mutually beneficial partnerships, may Christ be witnessed in the unreached areas of Japan, may his kingdom expand, and may God be glorified.

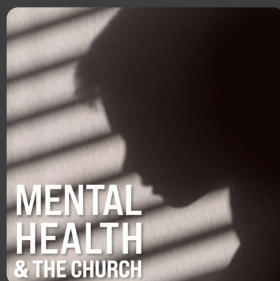


*Fumiyki Wakamatsu is the President of Japan Lutheran Brethren Church.*

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# Dear CLB Friends...

PAUL LARSON

I have decided in consideration of my tenure, to not offer my name to stand as nominee for the office of president at the upcoming biennial convention in June of 2026. It has been the humble privilege of my life to serve and to lead in this role for these past eleven years. I have never presumed myself qualified for this role, but I do trust that I have been called by the Lord and his church. Thank you so immensely for the honor of being your president and pastor. I seek to finish strong and well.

I believe so greatly at my core in the distinct calling and mission of the CLB. You likely have heard me say that I believe we are entrusted as stewards of a gift which intersects biblical truth and calling—we are indeed a people restful in grace, and restless in mission. I believe the CLB is, and is becoming, renewed again, in our identity and calling as a Disciple-Making Church.

May this reality and aspiration continue to shape the CLB and bear the fruit of generations of disciples who make disciples.

I am so very grateful for the team of leaders we have in departmental directors, associates and staff. They will continue to ably fulfill their leadership callings moving forward. And, I am confident that our Council of Directors and our BC26 convention will raise up and unleash the next CLB president with the needed gifts and vision to lead and serve into the future.

Perhaps it is a test or at least an evidence of a person being blessed to serve in a role like mine, and to be surrounded by a host of people who



made that serving so rich, that I can so readily say that I love the Church more now than when I began.

Grace & Peace,

Rev. Paul Larson

*President, Church of the Lutheran Brethren*



President Larson with all four international presidents at the 2024 Convention.



Visiting Pastor Randy & Betsy Mortenson.



Devotions at a Council of Directors meeting.



Leading business at the 2024 Convention.



Visiting Japan in 2023.



## Passion: What I learned from you

KOUKI ZENIYA



*Kouki, with wife Keiko, at seminary graduation in 2008 with Dr. Eugene Boe (L) and Dr. Gaylan Mathiesen (R).*



*The Zeniyas on their children's confirmation day. Rintarou (15 yrs) and Meiko (13 yrs).*



*Minami Yoshinari Church on Christmas Eve.*

**M**y name is Kouki and my wife's name is Keiko. Our Japanese names seemed difficult for our new American friends to remember. Our next door neighbor gave us the nicknames Cookie and Cake, making it easier for him to remember our names. The first winter after moving to Minnesota was the coldest winter in the last ten years. I was newly married, so I was introduced on the local news as "a brave Japanese pastor who brought a new bride to frigid Minnesota." But for me, Minnesota was the warmest place in the world. The Lutheran Brethren was full of love, genuinely happy for our presence, and gave us the best.

For me, it was you, the Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America who was "brave." Japan is said to be the most difficult country for missionary work. Many missionaries have come to Japan, but few people have been baptized, so many missionaries return home disappointed. Japan is sometimes called the "graveyard of missionaries," however, there is one story we will always remember.

In 1949, the CLB sent Missionaries Morris and Marion Werdal to Japan. The Werdals chose North East Japan, which had the fewest churches and was the most difficult place to evangelize. As I spent time at Lutheran Brethren Seminary, I was able to feel your passion firsthand.

Don't give up because it's difficult, but go *because* it's difficult. I think this

passion is part of the CLB's identity.

Japan continues to be a difficult country for missions. It is even more difficult now. There are 8,000 Christian churches in Japan, but half of them may close soon. 80% of churches in Japan have had zero baptisms per year. The average number of members in a church in the Tohoku region of Japan is 30, and the number of attendees of Sunday worship is 15.

Our Sendai Minami Yoshinari Church is located in the city of Sendai. Sendai is the largest city in the Tohoku region and has a population of over a million. The number of church members at Minami Yoshinari Church is 160, and the attendance of Sunday worship services is 100. It happens to be one of the largest churches in the Tohoku region. The simple sermons of the law and the gospel, and simply preaching about Jesus Christ, has attracted many people. Our church began with the mission of spreading the gospel to the entire city of Sendai. Although it has grown, it is still not enough.

But the Lord has spoken to us once again in these uncertain times. Revelation 3:7 gave us a new challenge. Our church plans to build a new sanctuary on the current location. At the same time, our church has been preparing to start a second campus, hoping that it will become a church that covers Sendai. We were planning to start a second campus after building the new sanctuary. However, when LBIM

Director Dan Venberg visited us, we were challenged to see if we could proceed with the two plans at the same time. With Paul and Alexa Fraser, the newest missionaries to Japan, I am understanding God's plans for Sendai!

Since I studied at Lutheran Brethren Seminary, I have never forgotten the love we received. If it weren't for your love, I might have burned out along the way. But when I thought about your prayers, I was able to stand up again and again. Now, after all this time, I am grateful that, once again, I have the opportunity to work directly with the CLB.

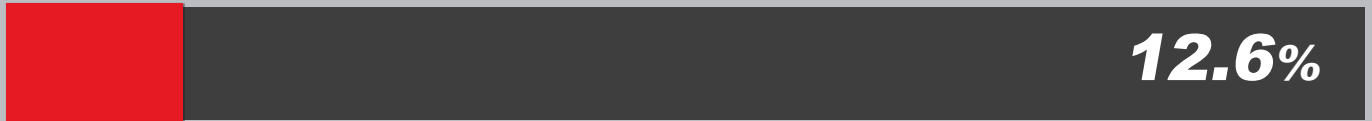
"Because it is the most difficult place, we go there." I learned this passion from you, the CLB. I am grateful for your sacrifices for the Japanese and the churches in Japan. I sincerely respect you who love Jesus more than anyone else and have a passion for preaching the gospel of Jesus. And I am grateful for the joy of being able to serve Jesus together.



*Rev. Kouki Zeniya is the pastor of Minami Yoshinari Church in Sendai, Japan.*

## CLB Shared Ministry Contribution Report

**\$3,400,000**  
2025-26 Fiscal Year Goal



**\$429,715**

Received Through 7/31/25

The CLB Fiscal Year ends April 30, 2026.

View the latest contribution report at  
[www.CLBA.org/give-online](http://www.CLBA.org/give-online)

## Moving Together in Mission

As of July 31, 2025, we have received **\$429,715** toward our goal of **\$3,400,000**. We are deeply thankful for the generosity we've already seen and rejoice in God's faithful provision. At the same time, we are about **\$80,105 behind our projected target** and hope to gain momentum this Fall to catch up to our goal. Your continued support is vital as we work together to advance our mission of planting churches, sending

missionaries, and preparing pastors and missionaries for ministry.

As we call, partner, unleash, and multiply as a Disciple-Making Church, the CLB relies on the generosity of people like you to move us forward in mission. We pray that the Lord will continue to provide and that the generosity of the CLB will remain steadfast as we work together to reach our goal and carry out this mission.



*LaWayne Rogness is the Director of Finance and Personnel for the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.*



Church of the Lutheran Brethren  
**CORNERSTONE**  
NETWORK

*Thank you!*

The **Cornerstone Network** is named after Jesus, who is the Cornerstone of our faith, our salvation, and the ministry of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. This network is made up of each of you, the people to which God has cultivated a desire to create a foundation of financial support for our shared ministries. The Cornerstone Network members are those who give \$1,000 or more to the Church of the Lutheran Brethren within our current or previous fiscal year. Thank you for your continued generosity!

### JOIN THE CORNERSTONE NETWORK!

When your giving to the Church of the Lutheran Brethren exceeds \$1,000 within the fiscal year, you are considered a member of the Cornerstone Network. **That amounts to only \$84 a month!** As a *Thank You*, Cornerstone members receive quarterly greetings from our missionaries, church planters, and seminary students, along with an invitation to special events in their regions and during the Biennial Convention. The faithful generosity of this network has a big impact on the ministries of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren.

To learn more, contact **Steve Tonneson** at [advancement@clba.org](mailto:advancement@clba.org) / 218-739-3336



The **House of Hope** in Ishinomaki, Japan where Dean & Linda Bengtson are working with Pastor Haruya and Fumi Ito to plant a church.

# God Is at Work in Red Deer

SHAWN ROGERS

**G**od is at work in Red Deer, Alberta. Many of you may already be familiar with how God has worked through Harold and Joyce Rust to establish a church in Red Deer. The intention was to plant a church like any other LB church, with familiar faces, and a common language, and perhaps that is exactly what God did. The faces are from cultures that would be familiar to our Lutheran Brethren missionaries. And the common language is that of worship, but now in a new context. It isn't overseas missions; it is right here in North America. God is at work.

We had heard about how God was at work in Red Deer, and we wanted to see it for ourselves. We also wanted to be part of what God is doing, but we did not know how that might happen. As a youth pastor, I believe it is important to give students the opportunity to serve others. My wife Liv and I had been looking for ways to do just that when Pastor Harold Rust met us at a picnic for LBIM. Harold told us about the unique opportunity The River had for cross-cultural ministry, and that we should consider visiting. We were in. Although we were not sure how we would pull together an international mission trip for the following summer, by God's grace and his work through Liv's planning skills, 6 students, 4 adults, and 3 young kids made it to Red Deer fourteen months later.

Our goals for this trip were to be learners, love our neighbors, and be ready to share the gospel. We did this through participating in The River's worship service, visiting members of the church in their homes, and in running a VBS. The VBS was located in a green space right in the middle of the neighborhood of quadruplexes where the government had placed many who came to Canada under refugee status. We were able to welcome anywhere from 30 to 50 kids from many different nations in Africa and the Middle East. There were a good number from a Muslim background, so who knows how many heard the gospel for the very first time.

If I could sum up what we learned with one word, it would be "hospitality." Not only were our host families and Harold and Joyce very welcoming, but the culture of the many people we met was to rejoice at the coming of a stranger. As Americans, we were foreigners, and it was those who were foreigners in Canada who welcomed us into their homes.

We went to Red Deer to serve others, but we were so often served. As we were preparing to promote the VBS in the neighborhood, we were invited into many houses for coffee, tea, and even dinner. There was a boy from Syria, that we did not know, who told us we should visit his house. We felt a little strange following

him in our white van as he led us to his house on his bike, but when he introduced us to his family, they welcomed us in without hesitation. We later learned that the mother and children were planning to leave the next day on an extended visit to their native country, yet they saw our presence as an honor.

The Scriptures reveal God's attitude toward the foreigner through his instructions to his chosen people. Israel was to welcome in foreigners, treating them as if they were native born citizens, because they too were once foreigners (Lev 19:33-4). If Israel failed to do this then God would curse them (Deut 27:19). But God's attitude to the foreigner was not only a reminder to Israel, it revealed his heart for the nations. God's redemptive plan is offered for all human beings from all the nations (Is 56:1-8). The Church consists of those who are born of God by faith in Christ; there is no Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ (Gal 3:28). Jesus teaches us to show hospitality to the foreigner as if we were serving Christ himself (Matt 25:35). The Apostles gave specific instructions to earnestly seek to show hospitality (Rom 12:13), reminding the Church how God had visited Abraham (Heb 13:2, Gen 18:1-4). In all this, Christians are reminded that they were once alienated from God, so they are called to show hospitality to

*Some of the team with Harold and Joyce and some friends in Red Deer.*



*Shawn Rogers with a new friend.*



## Church Planting & Childlike Faith

KATIE HOLZNER

their neighbor. It also reminds us that we are foreigners in a fallen world, eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of Christ's Kingdom.

Our team saw this in Red Deer. We were there to learn, serve, and spread the gospel. Yet unexpectedly, God served us through those we sought to serve. Each of us were challenged to see the foreigner through God's eyes, and to see serving the stranger as a great honor, as if serving Christ himself. We live in a world that is yearning for true community. Jesus offers himself as not only the model for the Church to follow, but the solution to our alienation from God and each other. God is at work in Red Deer, and indeed in the world.

*Shawn and Liv Rogers are co-directors of Senior High Youth Ministry at Good Shepherd Lutheran Brethren Church in Fergus Falls, MN.*

*Church Planter Harold Rust leading worship.*



Jesus told the disciples, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:14, ESV). As an introvert without any younger siblings, I haven't spent much time with little kids. For this reason, I have always been left wondering what it looks like to follow the example of children in my walk with Jesus. I discovered this past summer that a good place to start is by getting up close and personal with those tiny beings called kids. This past July, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit a church plant, The River, in Red Deer, Alberta, with a group of people from my home church, Good Shepherd, in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Our group of mostly introverts put on a courageous face, organizing a VBS including outdoor games and Bible skits for neighborhood kids—many of whom are from immigrant and refugee families. God softened my heart through these children and opened my eyes to see what childlike faith looks like.

With new sight, I was able to see how such faith is being played out in The River as God works through those who actively trust and obey him like little children. As I enjoyed time with kids, I discovered some things they appreciate: they love to play; they want someone to sit with them; they want to be seen and heard; and because they trust someone, they will come back again and again for these good things. They seem to be ready for anything, even ready to obey. The Afghan, Syrian, Ethiopian, and Congolese children I had the privilege of interacting with come from cultures that value respect. They come when they are called and willingly obey. These attributes of joyful readiness, trust, and obedience struck me as I saw the members of The River living in a childlike way before God.

Pastor Harold and Joyce Rust were called to Red Deer to plant a church, so they went! Upon arrival they were



*Katie with a new friend in Red Deer.*

invited to a welcome gathering for newcomers where they discovered a church, made up of people of all nations, waiting to be planted. In joyful obedience, The River was formed. Trusting their Father to daily provide, God showed up in unexpected ways when his people willingly said “yes.”

God is showing up in Red Deer through open homes, attentive ears, and generous hands. This family of believers is steadily growing as they daily listen to their Father's direction. It is simple and beautiful, full of playful worship, good food, and stories of God's faithfulness. As they come back again and again to their gracious Father, God is using them to spread his good gifts, both physical and spiritual, to people of all nations. The children of Red Deer taught me this July that being Christ's “witness in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is simple; all it takes is joyful trust to daily run to my Father's arms, listen to his good voice, accept his good gifts, and run to share his good news with those I encounter.

*Katie Holzner is a young adult from Good Shepherd Lutheran Brethren Church in Fergus Falls, MN.*

# Regional Conventions



*Western Region Convention.*

## **Canada / March 28-30, 2025**

### ***Peace Lutheran Church, Calgary, AB***

Pastors and spouses met together the evening before the convention in the Rockies at Canmore, Alberta, where they enjoyed good fellowship and heard encouraging words from Pastor Roger Olson, the CLB Associate for Ministry Support. The convention began with Dr. Joel Christenson teaching on leadership. The Annual Meeting was held on Saturday afternoon with 24 delegates and pastors in attendance. Updates were heard from our church plants: Pastor Bob Schultz reporting on steady growth at Isaiah Fellowship in Regina, Saskatchewan, and Pastor Harold Rust reporting on cross-cultural ministry at The River in Red Deer, Alberta. Dr. Troy Tysdal also shared about the ministry of Lutheran Brethren Seminary.

Next, the thorough work of the Financial Advisory Committee of the CLB Canada Board of Directors was received. It was reported that King of Glory Lutheran in northeast Calgary had sold their building and, in following their constitution, the net proceeds of the sale

were given for the ongoing work of the CLBC. A task force was established to assist in determining the future use of those funds. Finally, elections were held with the following results: Harold Rust—President; Anthony Heiraas—Vice President; Greg Rokos—Secretary; Ron Berg—Interim Treasurer; Bob Schultz, Doug Njaa, and Lorraine MacArthur—Board members. Rock of Ages Church in Saskatoon, SK, gave an invitation for next year's convention, and with gratitude to God, the meeting was adjourned.

## **Pacific North / May 31, 2025**

### ***Rock of Ages Church, Seattle, WA***

The regional convention was well-attended, with representatives from most of the churches. During our morning business meeting, we received ministry updates from: Youth, Young Adults, Women's Ministry, Bible Camp, and Men's Retreat. We passed a 2025-2026 budget, elected officers to our regional executive committees, and nominated representatives to serve on our Council of Directors—to be elected at our CLB Biennial Convention in June 2026. We

approved constitutional edits that bring our regional constitution up to date.

In the afternoon, the convention was joined by the Pacific Region South delegates via Zoom, and we heard presentations from our four synodical representatives, followed by a round table discussion with those representatives. CLB's Associate for Advancement, Steve Tonneson, concluded the afternoon with an Advancement Ministry update via Zoom from our Pacific Region South convention in California. The convention concluded with an evening worship service, where Luke Fiskness, the new Hillcrest Lutheran Academy President, brought us God's Word.

## **Pacific South / May 31, 2025**

### ***Immanuel Lutheran Brethren Church, Pasadena, CA***

Representatives from Calvary Community Church in Fullerton and Immanuel LBC in Pasadena met at Immanuel for the Pacific-South Regional Convention. Our meeting in the morning included a discussion of the amendment to the CLB Constitution that will be brought



CLB Canada Convention.

forward at the Biennial Convention in 2026. Everyone who was there left with a better understanding of the reason for the change.

We also had Steve Tonneson, Associate for Advancement Ministry, as our morning speaker. He shared what we're doing synodically and the plans for the future. In the afternoon, we joined together on Zoom with the Pacific-North Regional Convention to hear presentations from our synodical leaders who shared in the Pacific-North. Each leader was able to share what was happening in their particular ministry and then participated in a round-table discussion.

**Western / June 20-22, 2025**

***Grace Lutheran Brethren Church, Bismarck, ND***

The delegates joined together in worship, food, and times of fellowship in the Lord. Perhaps the greatest highlight of this year's convention was worshiping in the newly purchased and renovated space for Lincoln Church & Community Center (Lincoln, ND) on Saturday evening. The Convention recommended that the congregation in Lincoln be received as a member congregation by the CLB earlier that morning.

Elections were also held for the region: Mike Hussey—Vice Chairman; Roger Solberg—Treasurer; Council of Directors: Doug Bounds—Lay Member; and Mike Hussey—Theological Council.

**Central / June 6-8, 2025**

***Inspiration Point Christian Camp & Retreat Center, Vining, MN***

The convention delegates enjoyed the beautiful facilities at Inspiration Point and were filled with gratitude and amazement at how the Lord uses this place and its staff to impact our world for the gospel. We love our partnership with

Inspiration Point! The convention was encouraged by the many updates that we received from our synodical and regional ministry leaders and partners, proving how God is working in and through us as a Disciple-Making

Church. One particular highlight was hearing from the new Hillcrest Lutheran Academy President, Luke Fiskness, as he shared a compelling and exciting vision about the future of Hillcrest, desiring to see Hillcrest prepare, shape, and transform hearts for the gospel and for future ministry.

The Business Meeting included a ministry update from Greg Anderson (President of Inspiration Point), the affirmation of two Inspiration Point Board Members (Mike Swenson and Ryan Hanson), the approval of the 2025-2027 Central Region budget (highlighted by a reminder of the importance of our Central Region Pastoral Benevolence Fund which is funded through the Pastors Masters Golf Event), and the allocation of funds to support students from the Central Region who attend Rooted over the next two years.

The final portion of the Business Meeting centered around the election of various Regional Officers and Synodical Representatives: Mark Johannesen—Chairman, Darren Shaw—Secretary, Beka Nadgwick—Youth Coordinator, and Carissa Stauss—Representative to the CLB Council of Directors.

**Eastern / April 26, 2025**

***Tuscarora Inn & Conference Center, Mount Bethel, PA***

Our theme for 2025 was "Friends" from John 15:15-16a. We had a full schedule with two plenary sessions in

the morning. The first was focused on synodical updates and information, with CLB President Paul Larson and LBS President Troy Tysdal interviewed by chairman Aage Larsen, with questions being posed by our delegates. Topics ranged from updates to our joint ministries to upcoming constitutional changes. Our second plenary session focused on local updates from Tuscarora, Women's Ministry, Chaplaincy Ministry (presented by Chaplain (Col) Michael Heuer, USAF [Retired]), the inaugural class of Rooted Gap-Year, and our church plant (Grace Hill Community Church, in Boston, MA).

An extended lunch period and breaks allowed delegates to engage with one another and discuss and share not only



Central Region Convention.

what was presented that morning, but what was happening in their local churches. Delegates enjoyed the time spent together, being reminded of the friendship we foster together as congregations of the CLB Eastern Region.

In the afternoon, along with the usual business, delegates discussed and voted on goals for our churches to share and changes to our regional constitution, which reflected the overall theme of joint ownership of our shared missions and ministries. Specifics included updating language left from the time of regional pastors, which placed those responsibilities back on our congregations with the Eastern Region executive board encouraging and reminding congregations of opportunities for them to be in ministry together... because that's what friends are for.

# Fall Conference

2025

Thursday, October 9th–10th



**A.A. Pedersen Lectureship**  
Thursday, October 9th

Speaker:  
*Dr. Ryan Tinetti*



## **Preaching** *by Heart*

Many pastors would like to be able to preach without notes, but are unsure whether they could ever do it—or how. Ryan Tinetti will provide an overview of what it means to “preach by heart,” why it matters, and how to do it.

**Continuing Education**  
Thursday, October 9th – Friday, October 10th

Speaker:  
*Pastor Jim Davis*



## **The Great Dechurching:** The State of the Church in 2025

These presentations by Jim Davis will help us understand the reasons why so many people are no longer attending church and, more importantly, why there is still tremendous hope in the midst of this crisis.



Learn more: [www.LBS.edu/fallconference2025](http://www.LBS.edu/fallconference2025)

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LBDI equips members of the Body of Christ to be disciples, carrying out his Great Commission. Learn how to apply Scripture to everyday life, develop skills to do ministry, and grow spiritually through personal discipleship.

  
**Discipleship**  
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### **NEW!** Lord, Teach Us to Pray



What is prayer? What's happening when we pray? Why can't I seem to do it more consistently? In Luke 11:1, the disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” In this study we look at the Lord's Prayer and what it teaches us about the nature and power of prayer. The disciples didn't ask what we should pray, but how we should pray. We can do no better than to sit under the teaching of Jesus with the same request.

**ALSO, CHECK OUT THE Biblical Knowledge Package:**

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- Old Testament Survey
- New Testament Survey

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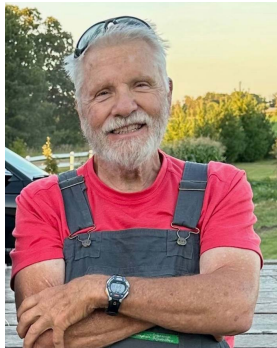


Interested in helping fund this ministry? Click on “DONATE.”

## Gary Koljonen Passed Away

Gary Wesly Koljonen went to be with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on June 6, 2025.

Gary graduated from Inter-Lutheran Theological Seminary (MI). He married Janet Keskitalo on June 30, 1973. He pastored churches in Negaunee, MI and Hyannis, MA. He later served many years as pastor and later as an elder of Triumph Lutheran Brethren Church in Great Falls, MT. He was also a general contractor in the region. No matter what kind of work he did, it was always a means to glorify God and share the good news of Jesus his Savior.



## Rollin Rogness Passed Away

Rollin Rogness passed away on July 12, 2025 at the age of 92.

Rollin married his sweetheart Mary Lou on June 5, 1955. They built a life rooted in ministry, family, and a deep commitment to serving others.

Rollin served Lutheran Brethren congregations across multiple states, serving Our Redeemer's in Minot, ND, twice in his 60+ years of pastoring. In his retirement, he pastored three Velva, ND community country churches for 16 years. He leaves a legacy of pastoral care, encouragement, and spiritual leadership. Rollin loved God's Word as the gospel permeated his preaching and fueled his compassion and love for people.



## Brad Hoganson Installed



*Pictured (L-R): Elders Andrew Spotts, Christopher Monaghan, Rev. Brad Hoganson, Traci Hoganson, Elders Scott Dunsmore, and Kevin Verbeke.*

On June 22, 2025, Rev. Brad Hoganson was installed as pastor at Hillside Lutheran Brethren Church in Succasunna, NJ. Elder Board Chairman Andrew Spotts officiated.

## Hillside Celebrating 75 Years

Hillside Lutheran Brethren Church, Succasunna NJ, invites you to join them on Sunday, October 19, 2025, as they celebrate their 75th Anniversary with worship, lunch, and a special program.

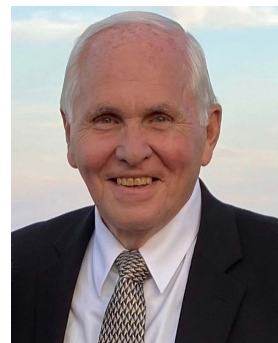
**RSVP is required before October 5th. Call (973) 584-7410**

## Thor Foss Passed Away

Edwin Thor Foss, 87, of Fergus Falls, MN, was welcomed into the presence of his Savior on Friday, August 8, 2025, at home, surrounded by his family.

Thor attended Taylor University in Upland, IN, graduating in 1962, and went on to earn his Bachelor of Divinity from the Reformed Episcopal Seminary in Philadelphia in 1966, followed by a Master of Divinity from Lutheran Brethren Seminary in Fergus Falls, MN, in 1967. He faithfully served Lutheran Brethren congregations in Great Falls, MT; Huntington Station, NY; Cranston, RI; Bohemia, NY; Succasunna, NJ; Paramus, NJ; and Nanuet, NY.

On June 16, 1962, Thor married the love of his life, Lillian Tjornhom. For 63 years, they shared a marriage marked by deep love, steadfast faith, and a shared passion for people.



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**GROW TOGETHER**

- We will enjoy a dinner together on Tuesday evening and spend plenty of time connecting in the evenings to process together what we learned.



*Join North American Mission and other CLB leaders in Florida to grow as disciple makers.*

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