



Giving, receiving support makes Bethlehem a home for Abiah George

By Heidi Marttila-Losure

In April 2025, Abiah George, then a junior at Northern State University, traveled to Sioux Falls to tell her story on the TEDx stage. But another part of her story—a part connecting her to Aberdeen and to Bethlehem Lutheran Church—was captured in a photo taken afterward.



"I think about it all the time," Abiah said. "Whenever I've doubted God's impact in my life, I look at that picture."

A future in limbo

Abiah's presentation at TEDx (a locally organized program of short, idea-focused talks) described her frustration with an immigration system that has no clear place for her.

In 2016, at the age of 10, Abiah, her mother, and her younger sister left Kerala, India, to move to the United States as her mother pursued a doctorate in North Carolina.

Standing in the passport control line at JFK Airport, she saw the word "alien" on her mother's paperwork. "I knew that the word 'alien' meant different, someone who didn't belong," she said in her talk.

Her mother entered the United States on a student visa, and then, after being hired as an assistant professor of counseling at Northern, she was granted an H-1B visa tied to her job. As a dependent of a visa holder, Abiah was expected to self-deport on her 21st birthday. Her acceptance into Drake University Law School, where she started in August, pushed back the deadline, but upon graduation, she will again have limited options. Her best hope is to get an H-1B visa through an eligible job, which isn't easy. The default option is to return to India—a place that no longer feels like home to her.

Finding and serving a community

For Abiah, "home" is clearly in Aberdeen. "This is the place that truly made me into who I am," she said. "With speech and debate especially, that's where I found my community. ... All my people are in Aberdeen."

The Aberdeen community, including at Northern and at Bethlehem, is very supportive of all Abiah's efforts. "Our community is so invested in helping you be the best version of yourself and achieve all you want to do," she said.

She specifically felt this in high school. "Pastor Jeff and Pastor Matt would always ask me how things were going. (Sami Hegge, Dustin Hermansen and I) would come back from (speech) tournaments, and they would always be the first to ask, 'How did the tournament go?'" Abiah said. "It was really powerful to know you have such a beautiful community of people always praying for you and rooting for you."

Abiah first connected with Bethlehem because her friend Dustin asked her to teach Sunday school with him. She has also helped with confirmation, Vacation Bible School, and served on the Youth and Young Adult Team.

Teaching kids has been very meaningful for Abiah. "(Faith) can be hard, and that's when you need the support of people who emulate Christ in your life. I thought it was really interesting that I could be that person for a lot of young kids."

As a child, watching her father serve as an Indian Orthodox priest and being very involved in church activities, she wanted to be a priest when she grew up. She later realized many other paths could achieve the same goal. "I just got done with an internship (at an immigration law firm), and there were people who would tell me, 'Thank you. I'm grateful that I met you and that you helped me with this,'" Abiah said. "I think you can be the image of God in someone's life in many ways. ... In every profession you go into, you can be, as I like to say, a hand of God. You can be the hand of God."

Her supportive community

In hard moments, she reminds herself of the community that has her back. The photo that was taken after her TEDx talk provides a visual reminder of that support. In it, Abiah is at the center, surrounded by a group of 28 people—including members of Bethlehem—who had traveled to Sioux Falls to cheer her on.

"They drove three hours to listen to me speak for 10 minutes," Abiah said. "I thought, 'How blessed am I?' I wasn't born here. I wasn't baptized in this church and didn't get confirmed in this church, yet so many people made that effort to come and watch me. The TEDx license holder who put on the event came up to me and said, 'Abiah, never in my history of running this have I had that big of a group come for someone. It's so incredibly impressive that you've been able to build a home like that.'"

She knows that Bethlehem will continue to be a home for her and for others.

"Having a place where you can go where they're always going to fill you up and you never feel drained is hard to find," Abiah said. "Especially at my age, a lot of the other things we do are always taking away from us. We're constantly being drained. This is a place where you come, and your cup gets full."

Watch Abiah's TEDx talk here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21FwKtdTmcM>



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