

E-spirit Report on Guyana/Suriname Trip, Submitted by Steve Rizzo

On April 24, six members of the Florida-Bahamas Synod Suriname-Guyana Subcommittee departed airports in Miami and Orlando to attend the 74th annual convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana (ELCG). However, the team's first stop would be the country of Suriname, where our delegation was invited to first visit the Evangelisch Lutherse Kerk Suriname (ELKS, or Evangelical Lutheran Church in Suriname).

The team included subcommittee chair Rev. Tom Unrath, Rev. Kit Robison, Marcee Strickland, Chris Klafs, and Steve and Leandra Rizzo. It was a bittersweet trip for Rev. Unrath, who has for the past ten years served as chair of the Suriname-Guyana subcommittee. Rev. Unrath would be making his last trip to Suriname and Guyana due to health reasons, so Rev. Robison was being introduced to his new role as chair. It was the first trip to the two countries for Rev. Robison, who leads a congregation in Miami Springs and formerly served a Lutheran church in Quito, Ecuador.

We arrived late in the evening to Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, where we were picked up and whisked to the hotel by Rev. Kenneth Kross, a pastor of the ELKS. After a short rest, Rev. Kross picked us up again in the morning, bound for the headquarters of the ELKS. We were joined there by members of the ELKS church board and the remainder of the church's ministerium, including secretary Leendert Darnoud, president Rev. Marjory Slagland, Rev. Danielle Dokman, and Rev. Urwin Holband.

The morning was filled with prayer, song, and much productive discussion. Our main topic was the Memorandum of Understanding/Intent (MOU/I), a three-way agreement that had been drafted among the Florida-Bahamas Synod, the ELCG, and the ELKS. The MOU/I had its genesis in the Caribbean Consultation in Bogota, Colombia in 2014. It was signed in 2015 with a validity period of one year, with the option to extend it by mutual consent of all parties.

Much of the discussion among ELKS and the Synod delegation revolved around the language of the agreement. The basic objective of the document is "to facilitate cooperation and coordination to accomplish the common mission and vision of all parties." Our discussions led to some proposals for mutually agreeable changes. These largely concerned making it a more level agreement with shared responsibilities among all three parties, rather than discrete and individual responsibilities for each church body as in the original agreement. It also gave us an opportunity to clarify a few of the expectations and responsibilities listed.

The discussions about the MOU/I continued for several sessions throughout the week. Although the basic meat of the agreement largely remained the same, I do not think it is presumptuous to say we we all felt pleased with how the Holy Spirit led the discussion. All present seemed happy with the new language and the more egalitarian approach to the agreement.

These conversations also gave us opportunity to discuss the tools available for accomplishing our shared missions and visions. We reviewed the Project Concept Note (PCN), a tool made

available by the ELCA Office of Global Mission and in many cases adopted by the Florida-Bahamas Synod and its companion churches. We were able to discuss such important topics as project planning, sustainability, and local impact as they relate to our shared goals. ELKS also shared its current 4-year strategic plan. Finally, our delegation informed the board of the installation service for the next bishop of the Florida-Bahamas Synod, tentatively planned for January 2018, and extended an invitation to attend this

We spent much of the rest of our time in Suriname visiting the congregations and facilities of the ELKS. We took part in a memorable midweek worship service led by Rev. Holband at the historic Maarten Luther Kerk in Paramaribo. In a show of Christian unity and accompaniment, Rev. Holband invited Rev. Robison to take part in the worship service, which included music from the church's 183-year old pipe organ -- one of the oldest in the Caribbean. We also visited Rev. Kross' Bethlehemkerk, a congregation shared with a Moravian church and a Kindergarten. A visit to Rev. Dokman's church Gemeenschap van Hoop (Community of Hope) brought out enlightening conversations about roles for the church in addressing children's programs and domestic abuse. Finally, we visited Pauluskerk in the suburb of Lelydorp, which is led by young husband-and-wife lay duo Reza and Sharon Karg. Some notable ELKS-associated facilities we visited were the Hoekstra & de Vries eldercare unit, as well as the Diakonessenhuis, a hospital that features Suriname's first and only inpatient hospice unit.

In our accompaniment of each other, we shared much prayer, joy, and conversation as brothers and sisters and Christ. One thing that struck me was the commonality of our concerns: declining numbers of youth and young families; drops in Sunday school and confirmation enrollment and attendance; problems with church polity and governance; lack of opportunities for faith formation and leadership development. To these concerns, we were able to share advice, encouragement, and support, affirming our accompaniment of each other as a global and interconnected church. We had many interesting conversations about colonialism, mission, and the church in a multicultural society that were to the benefit of all.

Everywhere we went, we were treated to incredible hospitality. We certainly never went hungry, thanks to the frequent meals of various cultural stripes. For those returning to Suriname, old friendships were affirmed, while for those visiting for the first time, many new friendships were kindled.

Soon it was time to cross the border into Guyana, accompanied by Rev. Urwin Holband and secretary Leendert Darnoud of ELKS. We took a ferry across the border river Corantijn, arriving in Guyana on April 30. We encountered a hiccup at the border checkpoint, as most of our team had not brought Yellow Fever Vaccination cards. Instead of getting turned around to Suriname, we were shown some pretty generous grace by the public health officer who was, appropriately, a member of a Guyanese Lutheran congregation. A reminder for next time, to be sure! Rev. Leonard Peters of the Emmanuel Parish of the ELCG picked us up from the ferry and took us on a short tour of his parish in Skeldon before dropping us off at our hotel in New Amsterdam.

After a day's rest, we took part in a lively Sunday worship service at Ebenezer church in New Amsterdam. Services included music from musicians of the Guyana Lutheran Music Academy, a full choir, a processional through the streets of New Amsterdam accompanied by a drumline, and a passionate sermon by ELCG president Rev. Leroy Nicholson on the theme of the convention, "Liberated by God's Grace." We paid witness to the installation of four new deacons, then the convention was officially opened.

After service, our team split up into two groups. Marcee Strickland, who is a member of both the Women of the ELCA board and Synod Global Mission Committee, led a workshop on women's ministry and was accompanied by Chris Klafs and Leandra Rizzo. Rev. Unrath, Rev. Robison and seminarian Steve Rizzo met with the ELCG board. Also represented at the latter meeting were representatives of the ELKS (Rev. Holband and Mr. Darnoud) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (Keith Myra).

[Marcee's report on Women's Workshop]

In the meeting with the ELCG board, the Guyanese church discussed its hopes, expectations, and priorities for working with its companion churches. Their board, which included president Rev. Nicholson, vice president Sandra Kurtzious, secretary Elocia Smith, and treasurer Michael Davy Ram, laid out three main objectives for working with companion churches: addressing communications concerns, revising the MOU/I, and development of the Lay Academy and Guyana Lutheran Music Academy.

Communications concerns were voiced by all four church bodies present. Some concerns revolved around the fact that there is not always a clear communication structure. However, all churches expressed commitments to focus on improving communication by using the technologies available. A regular, possibly monthly, Skype or phone call was suggested as a way to anchor communications. There was also discussion about trying to use the same clearly defined points of contact and keeping in touch by email.

The Florida-Bahamas Synod and ELKS delegates were pleased to hear that revising the MOU/I was a priority of the ELCG. We discussed some of the changes we had discussed in Paramaribo, and the general spirit of the changes were welcomed by the ELCG board. They did not have time to review these changes in detail, but promised to review them at its regular meeting in the third week of June and communicate input with ELCG and the synod. We again briefly discussed the PCN, but ELCG said it wanted to take time to develop its strategic plan before beginning any sort of project that would require it.

The ELCG Lay Academy was formed in response to problems developing local leadership in the Guyanas. Supported by Rev. Dr. Winston Persaud, a Guyanese native who teaches at Wartburg seminary in Iowa, the academy is used not only by the ELCG for developing ministerial leadership, but the ELKS as well. Typically learning is done in weekend-long "intensives" on various topics, often in New Amsterdam. The academy had been dormant over the past year, so there was much interest from ELCG and ELKS in getting it running again.

ELCG also was interested in adding courses for church auxiliaries such as finance officers, in addition to courses for lay leaders, deacons, and pastors. There are plans to open it again in July 2017 with an intensive course.

The Guyana Music Lutheran Academy (GMLA) was created to train worship leaders in music. Although a lot of instruments have been donated to the ELCG and its congregations, there are few musicians to play them or lead worship music. Currently, GMLA has three visiting American teachers doing a “gap year” after earning degrees in music education. However, they are finding it difficult to recruit new teachers. In addition, there are financial difficulties with the organization as well as an upcoming restructuring of the board. The academy may not run in 2017-2018. Some suggestions were made to seek teachers for shorter terms, as finding teachers to move overseas for upwards of a year can be difficult. There were also suggestions to focus on sustainability, especially training Guyanese music teachers who can have a more lasting impact on local music talent.

Finally, we invited leadership to attend the Bishop’s installation in January. There was also talk of beginning to plan for another Caribbean Consultation in June 2018.

Much of the rest of the convention was quite similar to a plenary session of a synod assembly. Various ministry and officers’ reports were reviewed, and a number of motions were considered. Youth shared their plan for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. All throughout, we were treated to spirit-filled music, devotions, prayers, and opportunities for conversation and accompaniment. At the end of the convention, many of the participants celebrated around a big bonfire with praise music led by Rev. Nicholson.

Once again, we were treated to incredible hospitality and accompaniment. Rev. Unrath was recognized for his years of friendship and service, and Rev. Robison was welcomed as the new chair. “Sister Chris” affirmed many old and close friendships, Marcee affirmed many friends she had met through women’s ministry events, and newcomers Steve and Leandra made many new friends.

We spent a final few days resting and sightseeing in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, before bidding adieu to South America on May 5. If I may speak for the whole Florida-Bahamas Synod delegation, I know that we all went home feeling very close as a team and very blessed to have travelled together. We felt blessed to have made so many wonderful friends and to have taken these steps in a positive, vibrant walk of accompaniment with our companion churches. We are all excited to continue working with our companion churches in Guyana and Suriname, and with each other. I pray that God continues to bless us and guide us as we continue our work in the name of Christ.