Kuwaa Mission
By Bishop Shelley Wickstrom

The Kuwaa Mission exists to holistically help the Kuwaa people reclaim their hope and dignity as God’s redeemed people.

This year the Kuwaa Mission celebrates 10 years of ministry with the people of the Kuwaa region of Liberia. One out of four of our synod congregations support this work. The volunteer leaders include project manager and missionary Stan Olsen (Central) and Cindy Ellis Bye (formerly of Amazing Grace), who serves as CEO and project engineer. Current board members include Central’s Carol Norquist and Karen Voris, the Rev. Carol George from St. Mark, and Karen Kuhnert from Lord of Life. Registered nurse Tara Orley (Amazing Grace) traveled to the Kuwaa villages last year.

“The 16 isolated mountain villages served by the Kuwaa Mission were people forgotten during and after the civil war (over a 14-year period), which devastated Liberia about 20 years ago,” Norquist said. “We want to provide the basic things that make life sustainable and better for people—clean water, basic health care, basic education and to share God’s love with them. ... This is my connection with God’s work that happens on the other side of the world, and a chance to learn about other cultures and people who may seem to be different but really have the same concerns and desires as we do.”

Local Liberian leaders identify the needs and provide the labor for their projects. Kuwaa Mission provides the expertise and materials. Those projects have included building wells and water filtration systems, the training of water pump technicians, the construction and now expansion of a medical clinic, training of a nurse and health aides, training of evangelists and teachers, construction of a school, the provision of school supplies and hygiene kits for girls.

What the Kuwaa Mission means to me

By the Rev. Carol George

In 2010, the Rev. Dick Thompson and his wife, Doris, became members of River of Life, where I was serving. Prior to the Liberian war, they had served the Kuwaa area as missionaries. The war decimated the road system and infrastructure in much of Liberia and cut off the Kuwaa villages from vital services, including medical care and clean water. The Thomsons had been working with other Lutherans, including ELCA, who were concerned about the Kuwaa people. This group formed the nucleus of the Kuwaa Mission (kuwaamission.org).

Later that year, the Rev. Jensen Seyenkulo, a Liberian then serving with the ELCA churchwide organization, spoke to our congregation. My 10-year-old granddaughter was shocked to learn that a majority of Kuwaa children never reach their 10th birthday due to illness from drinking contaminated water. She began “Kids for Kuwaa,” raising enough through “noisy offerings” the first year to install a freshwater well ($4,200).

I later met Stan Olsen, and then Cindy Ellis Bye, who had served as missionaries, bringing their construction and engineering experience to work with the Kuwaa people. I was hooked. In 2013, I filled a vacancy on the Kuwaa Mission Board of Directors and have served as chair since 2016. It is so wonderful to see how a small, extremely committed group of volunteers can make such an incredible difference in people’s lives. I’ve learned so much about the impact that can be achieved by forming global partnerships. Much of our work is accomplished through grants from other organizations, such as Water Hope, and transportation assistance from larger groups such as Samaritan’s Purse.
I am getting excited about our upcoming synod gatherings that we will be having this year in place of a typical synod assembly. We did all the heavy lifting at last year’s assembly so that this year we can put a greater emphasis upon worship, learning and fellowship.

We will gather under the theme “Who is My Neighbor?”

It is a great theme given the reality that, for almost every one of us, the makeup of our communities has changed dramatically in the last decade. Imagine that hundreds of languages are spoken across the territory of our synod as friends are arriving from around the world.

My hope is that you will be FED by the day’s offerings. There will be three forum times in which to participate. These forums are designed not to be just talking head presentations but more along the line of TED Talks. Content matters, but it comes to life when we are able to engage in conversations about how to be God’s people in each of our unique contexts.

My hope is that you will be INSPIRED by the forums that are offered. We are already praying that the Spirit will fill the event with God’s presence and those who participate will be given a new sense of life and hope for the ministry that awaits us. It is a time for all of us to have our imaginations ignited so we can wonder about new ways of discovering God in our neighborhood and in our neighbor.

My hope is you will be SENT as disciples out into the territory of the synod, confident in being able to share the story of a loving God. The God of grace, grace, grace. The God who has a place of welcome for all our neighbors. Together we will be sent like the 70 into the harvest fields to eat what has been set before us (Luke 10).

We are intentionally designing our gatherings—one in the South at St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church in Bellevue and one in the North at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Marysville—each on a Saturday so as many laypeople as possible can join their pastors and deacons in being FED, INSPIRED & SENT.

There will be no business. No elections. No limit to the number of people who can come from any one congregation.

If you have not already done so, mark your calendars, gather a group from your congregation and get registered. More information and the registration link is available on our synod website at lutheransnw.org/2018-Synod-Gatherings. Please note, we do have a cap on our attendance numbers at each facility, so get registered soon!

Jesus asked the question, “And who is my neighbor?” Together we will live the question and explore the answers.

Your neighbor,
Bishop Kirby Unti
Invited to see and act
By the Rev. Terry Kyllo

In April 1933, four months after Adolf Hitler was installed as chancellor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in an article titled *The Church and the Jewish Question*: The “church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”

He was writing of his Jewish neighbors. Jews made up about 1 percent of the German population in the 1930s—enough to be known but not enough to be understood. Regrettably, much of the German population held biased views against their Jewish neighbors that were informed, in part, by Martin Luther’s writings. Many in the Lutheran church in Germany were in denial about what was happening, others remained bystanders and still others actively took part in the evil that took place. Bonhoeffer knew about this negative bias and sought to offer a different vision for the church and German society. He advocated for an active response to support his Jewish neighbors, not only for their well-being, but the German people as a whole.

Today, Muslims make up about 1 percent of the U.S. population—enough to be known but not enough to be understood. Fifty-two percent of the U.S. population has a negative view of our Muslim neighbors. We speak a national narrative that emphasizes the faith and violence of those who self-identify as Muslims but don’t do so for those who are Christian. Convicted mass murderer Dylann Roof was connected to a Lutheran church. We know that over $30 million a year is given to hate groups to bear false witness about our Muslim neighbors. Today we are learning about this negative bias and have a chance to lift up a different vision for our society.

I’m not saying that history is repeating itself. But as Mark Twain said, “History rhymes.” One of the key elements of a living faith community is remembering how history has rhymed in the past and learning to recognize the patterns. As part of the Lutheran-Christian community, we’re invited to learn from history to see how Lutherans have responded in the past to the brutish rhyming of history. We are invited not just to see, but to act differently. Lutherans recognize that our freedom to see and act comes from God’s justifying love that embodied itself in Jesus and, through the Spirit, in us.

In this age of deep change and increasing anxiety, people are dehumanizing one another. We are being dismembered from one another and, therefore, have lost touch with our humanity. Jesus lived in such a time. He touched a leper, had table fellowship with the dehumanized “sinners” of his day, honored a Roman centurion, admitted a woman to his rabbinical school, and recognized a Samaritan’s humanity within a culture that would see a “good Samaritan” as a contradiction. These and other acts of public leadership were expressions of his call to repent and believe that the reign of God was near.

I am happy to report that this time we are acting differently. Lutherans, as well as others, hear the rhyming of history playing out in our own day and have determined not to repeat our mistakes.

Lutherans are taking public stands with all those impacted by the various dehumanizations that are taking place and creating spaces where they can speak and be heard. We are engaging the public in conversation about what human rights really mean. We are unleashing the power of the potluck and creating spaces where people can see each other remembered as part of the human family again.

By the power of the Wild Wind of God, we are repenting how we have rhymed with evil in the past and responding to the nearness of God’s reign of love.

Kyllo is available for conversation and presentations. For more info, go to neighborsinfaith.org or facebook.com/neighborsinfaith.

Terry Kyllo is director of Neighbors in Faith and the Treacy Levine Center. A graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he has been a pastor since 1991 and has served in partnership between Episcopalians and Lutherans since 2004. He is the author of *Being Human and Apprenticeship*. 
Our Lutheran connection with Russia

By Eva Mader

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of European Russia (ELCER) is a companion of the Northwest Washington Synod. Several of our synod congregations are partners with congregations in European Russia. Efforts have been made over the past 17 years to have personal contact with our Lutheran brothers and sisters there, including visits and some financial assistance.

During a 2017 trip to Russia, Bishop Kirby Unti visited the Lutheran congregation in Togliatti whose pastor, Tatjana Zhivodjorova, established a program to help youth and kids with developmental and physical disabilities, known as KIT (the Russian acronym; in English, the Klub of the Togliatti Initiative).

Of all the venues Unti visited on this trip, he found this to be one of the most meaningful, valuing the congregational outreach with its clear mission to serve the entire community. They are “overcoming all the things that normally divide us, here’s a church where all belong together,” he said.

Almost the entire social environment in Russia is not equipped to deal with such disabilities, Zhivodjorova said. Such children are often deemed “unteachable.” Limited state education and a meager monthly stipend from the state creates stress for the families of these kids, often single parents.

KIT’s focus is challenging and supporting these youth as their abilities permit so they can experience as much of an independent lifestyle as is possible. It is not always easy to transmit modern, Western educational methods in Russia. A lack of familiarity and preconceptions create skepticism. Through continuing education, it has been possible to reduce this attitude, giving this church’s project a positive reputation in the region. The result is that KIT is growing and flourishing. With aid from German partners, KIT purchased a house, which also serves as the church. Professional support and staff training has come primarily from people experienced in work with the disabled in Germany. KIT day care provides a workshop, daily life skills, a positive social environment, and art, drama and music activities.

KIT’s open manner of outreach, of helping people regardless of religious or other differences, helps reduce prejudice among the people. From time to time Zhivodjorova’s work is recognized by local TV newscasts, which draws attention to the congregation and the lived gospel.

New training continues with sewing and knitting machines, financed through a two-year grant from Germany. Zhivodjorova said it is important for KIT to become as financially self-sufficient as possible, which it is doing by selling the handcrafted and sewn items made by the kids.

The goal is to raise $30,000 for the purchase of a plot of land with a dacha (cabin), where they can raise produce to be sold at the local market, making the kids more self-sufficient, integrating them more into the community, and making KIT less dependent on donations. Due to our companion relationship, we are making an appeal to all synod congregations and members to donate to this project. Send donations to: NWWA Synod Russia Fund; Account # 02-341-04272, marked KIT; NWWA Synod Office; 5519 Phinney Ave North; Seattle, WA 98103.

To learn more about the KIT kids, go to lutheransnw.org/Global-Mission-Team-Russia.

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