



# Ascension Lutheran Church

## Annual Report

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## PASTOR CHRIS' REPORT

*And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

~ Nehemiah 8:9-12



I have always been drawn to the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. Nehemiah is relatively unknown in the world we travel through in our normal Bible readings, but the book of Nehemiah can be a deep well of hope and joy to weary hearts along this journey of faith we travel. In brief, the Jews are in exile in Babylon and the city of Jerusalem is in ruins. At an appointed time, the Jews begin to return to the city. However, the walls of the city are in ruins. Nehemiah, the cup-bearer, asks the King he serves to have leave to return to the city of Jerusalem and oversee the rebuilding of the walls. In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Nehemiah the walls are rebuilt and the people have returned. They gather to celebrate. In the midst of their grief over their exile and deep loss, Nehemiah reminds the people "the joy of the Lord is your strength." I am grateful for these words and the faithfulness of Nehemiah the cup-bearer.

In November 2015, life at Ascension was anything but dull. We have been a congregation in transition – literally a congregation in the process of changing from one state or condition to another. I am confident in times of transition because transitions often bring new life and fresh perspective. As a dear friend said the other day, "it will be okay because tomorrow the sun will still rise and God will still be on God's throne." God has invited us to journey together. The journey is not always smooth but God has never broken God's promise to not be with us through it all. Winter and Spring of 2016 brought the call of the days of Lent and the celebration of the resurrection. Confirmation and graduation came and went and the summer brought us to junior and senior high ministry. I know what you will read now will be more honest and raw than most of us are accustomed to in this journey together, but I am unable to be pastor in this congregation without my brothers and sisters sharing the journey

with me. I share with you these thoughts as they have shaped so much of my days since June of this year. The loss of a student at junior high camp called so much of who I am into question. And like the Jews in the story of the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem – I found my journey literally stopping in a foreign land – exiled from the joy of living among God's people. Anger at God, deep despair, and great sadness for a family I have grown to love broke my heart into more pieces than I thought was possible. Not simply hours or days but weeks and months went by where the color had drained from the world. Exile is an interesting place – fearful and hesitant – are not emotions I experience very often and yet for months those were the daily practices of my life. I felt guilty to experience joy in my own children for the loss of a young man I had come to hold as my own. I was angry at God. I was angry at myself. Reflecting with a therapist over the second half of the summer and into the fall has offered deep and abiding moments of God's tending in my life. So very many of you allowed me to be broken in your midst. You shared my tears. You smiled when I could not. You surrounded me with love when I felt unlovable. You praised God when I could not lift up my own head or speak words of praise. In such moments of exile – you are the people of God who reminded me of God's promises. I am humbled beyond words for your care. My kindred spirit, Nehemiah, reminded me "the joy of the Lord is your strength." In all honesty, you, my brothers and sisters at Ascension have been little Nehemiahs to me. The cup of grief I was drinking was exchanged for cups of peace; cups of love; cups of God's grace – shared with me by each of you. Although I no longer feel as if I am in exile – I am still keenly aware of the tender journey I walk which has provided me opportunity to be more attentive to so many of you who also walk a tender journey of grief or pain or challenge in days where God's promise still reigns over us. Thank you.

*Pastor Christian Marien*

## Mission Outreach

Ascension continues to be a place of life and hope and joy. This I believe with my whole heart. God's mission and ministry in this time and place continue to shape us into who God is calling us to be in this world. Our **Mission Outreach** ministries have been strengthened under the tending of Shirley Wehmeier, Wing Leader for Mission Outreach. I would be remiss if I did not mention numerous other ministry leaders walking with Shirley. I give thanks to God for the dedication and depth of commitment to God's work in the world through social justice, education, and accompaniment with our brothers and sisters throughout the world. A full year of ministry has called us to life. I am grateful for the Good Gifts campaign that provided much needed sustainable income and food security to families throughout the world. How wonderful to now celebrate the gift of education for more than 85 students in Tanzania. Words cannot express the hope these ministries provide for those who receive and, truly, for those who have helped to provide the opportunity.



## Caring Relationships

We have seen growth in our **Caring Relationships** Wing through the strengthening of the Care Ministries. Our Director of Care Ministries, Brenda Lytle, has provided incredible leadership for our spiritual wellness and the tending of physical needs through the gift of ministry leaders who walk alongside her in ministry. Our Small Group ministry fall campaign was strengthened this year through the leadership of Pastor Angela and two co-chairs. I continue to be grateful for the small group leaders and small groups that meet throughout the year to study the Bible together, read books together, serve God together, and honor the gift of relationship within the body of Christ. I am also grateful for AMEN, Supermoms, Spirit Spinners, Knit Wits and other affinity groups that meet to build fellowship and deepen relationships to the glory of God. Supermoms held a women's retreat in October for the first time in a very long time at Ascension. I am hopeful for more opportunities for people to get together to build relationship in the months and years ahead.



# PASTOR CHRIS'S REPORT



## Spiritual Growth

**Spiritual Growth** in our midst continues to take on new and ever growing possibilities for our whole church. "A church family engaging generations through faith experiences," has been our guiding mission statement for the past year. I am hopeful to see that mission statement encompass more and more of our ministry at Ascension. The gift of growing in our relationship with God takes on many forms. Bible Study, prayer, reflection, conversation, adult education, BLAST (Believing Learning And Serving Together) children's ministries, JOLT (Journey Of a Life Time) confirmation ministries, and CRASH (Christians Reaching And Sharing Hope) high school ministries are all expressions of our hunger for a deeper relationship with God. Add our prayer chain, prayer group, library, stewardship, and puppet ministries to the list of Spiritual Growth opportunities and we are deeply engaged in learning more and more about our God and God's love for us. I am also grateful to celebrate the beginning of TNT (Through the New Testament), which began in October and is averaging 42 on any given Wednesday night. We continue to wrestle with the hope and hunger for a college age/young adult ministry. I am hopeful, in January, to introduce a new young adult ministry. I covet your prayers for God's design as we continue to look to the future with hope and possibility for deepening our understanding of God's desire to be in relationship with us.

## Joyful Worship



Author and Pastor A. W. Tozer once wrote, "Without worship, we go about miserable." Have you known that feeling in your own life? When I am away from worship on Sunday morning for more than a Sunday, I miss the people, I miss the music, I miss hearing the Word of God read aloud, and I miss the taste of bread and wine. Most especially, I miss the sense of community as we gather together to give praise to God. Our **Joyful Worship** wing at Ascension honors our traditions while at the same time embracing the gift of new and next in our worship life. Music at Ascension provides the grounding for much of our praise. I give thanks for our Director of Music Ministries, Vicki Taylor, for her ability to shape the design of our worship life to engage so many perspectives as we gather together. I am grateful for Ben Janzow, who leads the music at our 10:45 service along with an incredible ensemble of talented musicians. What joy to hear the love of God expressed through a multitude of instruments. From organ to chanting to drums to handbells to keyboard to base to trumpet to choirs of children and adults – we are truly blessed with what God offers to us in our worship. Regardless of the week I have walked – Sunday morning calls me to new heights of praise in celebration of God's love for us. Our worship is the center of who we are as people of faith. I am grateful to belong to a community of believers where worship continues to be a cornerstone of our identity as the community of Ascension.



## How High the Ascending of Ascension?

I started posting pictures on Instagram on my iPhone. After you post a picture, you can also choose to add a hashtag description to connect with other people or to build interest. Every time I post a picture of something happening at Ascension, I add the #AscensionArise.

We look to the future with hope. I believe Ascension is preparing to leap forward in both her presence and reach into the community

around our campus and the larger community of the world in which we live. Students from our high school ministry did a “Rake and Run” a few Sundays ago. The idea is to surprise the occupant of the home – rake up the leaves and run to the next house. It was a huge success. Days later we found out that two students went back outside after the event was over and raked another 30 houses or so. Now, that act of ministry, my friends, is Ascension rising.

We are now a year into our Ascension ARISE 2025 Vision. A team of leaders continues to keep those 2025 vision goals in the forefront of ministry opportunities. A conversation was had a few weeks ago with a member who is considering the Leadership Development position in our church. I believe we are moving away from simply developing leaders for positions of ministry in the church. I am more convinced that our Leadership Development Leg Leader position is perfectly poised to be someone who helps assimilate members and friends of Ascension into the ministry and community of Ascension. I think God is doing a new thing among us. I am excited to watch the ministry unfurl its wings into a newly imagined ministry among us.

We celebrated the ordination of the Rev. Steven John Bogie in October. Thanks be to God. We are now witnessing the education and formation of our very own Director of Faith Formation, Tony Acompañado, who has begun the four-year journey of seminary. How exciting to share the journey with him. I give thanks for your support of his education and his continued ministry among us.

We are indebted to our Director of Administration, Amy Gilgenbach, for her tending of the day-to-day needs of our campus. Amy Stryker and Kate Mattson provide much needed support to the staff, wing-leaders, and membership of our community. A word of thanks seems to not speak enough of my gratitude for their willingness to serve and the ministry entrusted to them. Please take a moment to offer a prayer of thanks for their ministries. Better yet, please thank them in person for their willingness to use their gifts to the glory of God.

## A Personal Note

I am grateful for the partnership with Pastor Angela at Ascension. Pastor Angela has honored her voice of prophet among us to share the good news of Jesus while at the same time challenging us to hear the good news in a new way. I am always grateful to be shaped by the Holy Spirit in new ways by my brothers and sisters in the faith. I want to take a moment to say thank you to my wife who supports all the twists and turns of ministry. Through the heights and depths of walking alongside me as pastor, Ileen continues to encourage my faith and honor our call to be among you. Andrew, Anna, and Hadley often sacrifice “daddy” time for one more meeting. I am grateful to God for their presence and your constant reminders to not take bed time rituals and sticky hugs for granted as a father. Finally, I give thanks to God for your continued call in my life to walk beside you in ministry to the glory of God. There is great joy in this journey. “Being a pastor can be crazy good.” Those are words I used in a sermon I preached at Pastor Steve’s ordination. I am grateful to know those words to be true in my own life. You give great care to me and to my family while at the same time allowing me to learn among you and try new things in your midst. Not all congregations would be so excited or so forgiving. Thank you. It is an honor to serve as one of your pastors. Peace be with you!

# PASTOR ANGELA'S REPORT



*Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. 2016 has been an amazing year, filled to the brim with countless times for faithful fellowship, dynamic worship, and spiritual growth. As you can imagine, it would be impossible for me to list all the many and varied experiences that I have enjoyed this year serving as one of your pastors. However, I am eager to share the following highlights with you from 2016.*

*The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy (Psalm 126:3).*

*Pastor Angela E. Khabeli*

## MISSION OUTREACH

*Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world. This is the mission statement of the ELCA. As members of the ELCA, we believe that we are freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor. With our hands, we do God's work of restoring and reconciling communities in Jesus' name throughout the world. The ELCA engages the world through the theology and practice of accompaniment by walking together with our global and domestic companions. Therefore, Ascension's Mission Outreach Team embraces this ministry concept of accompaniment. We walk in partnership with Cross Lutheran Church-Milwaukee and our companion synods in El Salvador and Tanzania.*

## Cross Partnership

We are honored to accompany our partner congregation, Cross in Milwaukee, through their thriving Bread of Healing Empowerment Ministry (BOHEM). For over a decade, BOHEM, a holistic approach to building up the Milwaukee community from the inside out, has served 300 people every Wednesday with a hot meal, food pantry, and Bible study. On the first Wednesday of every month, a team from Ascension shares a scrumptious hot meal served with love. We also help to support Cross' food pantry, which distributes over 200 bags of food each week. In addition to serving meals and providing pantry supplies, Pr. Michelle Townsend de Lopez invited Ascension to lead the Bible study following the meal. This is an opportunity for me to offer spiritual support for those who have lost hope. This faithful gathering of at least 100 participants creates meaningful community for people who may be disconnected from other worshipping assemblies.

Furthermore, Pr. Michelle, along with the youth choir from Cross, joined us for worship. Pr. Michelle shared God's Word and God's love with us and the choir was uplifting and inspirational, stirring our hearts and spirits. In turn, we had a joint worship service at Cross on their Partnership Sunday. We even took a bus to Milwaukee - complete with the Ascension Choir and Handbell Choir. What a vibrant time of worship and fellowship! It is my understanding that this is the first time we've had a joint worship service at Cross. I'm so excited to see how the Holy Spirit will continue to strengthen our partnership. To God be the glory!

## Tanzania Partnership

Decades ago, the Meru Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) became the Companion Synod of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. Over the years, this relationship has blossomed and now congregations are building direct relationships with partner parishes in the Meru Diocese. As you know, Ascension has been an active supporter of the Mount Meru Coffee project for more than 15 years. Now we continue to deepen our relationship with the Meru Diocese by exploring a partnership with the Samaria parish. As we anticipate the finalization of our official partnership, Ascension has embarked upon a back-to-school fundraiser where we exceeded our goal. We hoped to raise full tuition for 75 elementary school students. Praise God, we raised enough to fund 89 Tanzania students. We were even blessed to welcome Dennis and Diane Voit from St. Luke's in Waukesha to our adult education time. They shared their experiences with their Meru Diocese partnership. They also facilitated a discussion time and a question and answer session. God is teaching us what it means to accompany our sisters and brothers in Christ around the world. It is our hope that our international partnerships continue to grow by God's grace.

## SOPHIA

Ascension has a long and rich history with SOPHIA. However, more recently, our overall participation with SOPHIA has waned (even though we've maintained an active core of justice-minded leaders). Given the palpable tensions in our society today, it behooves the body of Christ to unite beyond faith communities and political parties in an effort to work for justice and peace. Consequently, I have been actively exploring ways to become more involved with SOPHIA. For example, Ascension has again hosted a multi-congregational film screening. We hosted a viewing and discussion of the documentary "Human Trafficking: Exploit No More." This SOPHIA event was an opportunity for multiple congregations to engage this important topic.

I also attended a SOPHIA (WISDOM) conference, N'tsoke in Pittsburgh. The English translation of N'tsoke is "she who walks with lions and carries her own things." The conference was designed to empower women and encourage community leadership through social activism. The main reason that I attended N'tsoke was to learn concrete strategies to coordinate an active support base to advocate for the Aparicio family concerning their immigration status.

## El Salvador Partnership

Ascension enjoys a thriving and fruitful ministry partnership with Iglesia Luterana el Milagro de Dios de San Jorge (Miracle of God Lutheran Church, San Jorge). Our Salvadoran family has grown with the arrival of Carlos and Jenny Aparicio and their three children. We welcomed them to Ascension, in December 2015, with open arms. But heartbreak struck our lives this summer. Fabricio Aparicio died in a tragic accident. Our congregation reinforced our support for the family through abundant prayer, caring assistance, and financial gifts. As our congregation struggled to understand this disaster, the Greater Milwaukee Synod, Healing Hearts Ministry, and the broader community came to our side to walk with us through this wilderness of sorrow. We are especially thankful to Bishop Barrow, Pastor Walter Baires, and Pastor Michelle Townsend de Lopez for their dedicated service during Fabricio's bilingual funeral ceremony. We are grateful for their kindness.

In collaboration with Melissa Minkley, Director of Healing Hearts Ministry, we designed Tree of Life - a time for healing and lament - for our junior high school students and others who were directly impacted through the tragedy. On a Sunday afternoon at Ascension, we gathered around a meal to reminisce and fellowship. After our meal, students, parents, adult leaders, and the bereaved family met in distinct groups. We are so grateful to Healing Hearts Ministry and local pastors for providing grief counselors and pastoral leadership for each group. After meeting, we all gathered together in the sanctuary for worshipful remembrance. We are exploring ways in which to continue to support the Aparicio family throughout their deep and painful grief.

# PASTOR ANGELA'S REPORT



## JOYFUL WORSHIP

Ascension is blessed to enjoy amazing worship services. We receive the Good News of the Gospel through gifted and creative preaching from Pastor Chris. We are also tremendously blessed by the gifts and talents of our Director of Music, Vicki Taylor and Praise Band Leader, Ben Janzow. Of course there are many others who give of themselves to enhance our dynamic worship services and I cannot say enough about how much I enjoy worshiping in this vibrant setting.

## Longest Night

The service is called "The Longest Night" because the Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year and the service is held on or near this date. Worshipers are invited to enter God's presence and feel safe. In this judgement free zone, all emotions are welcome; anxiety, grief, tears, and even anger are wholly acceptable. This service of prayers, readings, and thoughtful music offers a time to take a moment of holy calm in the midst of our circumstances and reflect. It is a time to pause, breathe, and lament. It is in our shared discontent, that God reminds us that we are never alone. This is what it means to be the body of Christ.



## CARING RELATIONSHIPS

### GriefShare

This fall was our fourth GriefShare session. The GriefShare support group is for people who are grieving the death of a loved one. The actual GriefShare program is centered on a non-denominational video series. Participants gather weekly for 12 sessions and follow a journal style curriculum. We've even had new members join Ascension through GriefShare. Our GriefShare outreach ministry has been

extremely successful. In fact, GriefShare has become so successful that many who have completed the official GriefShare program still desire another ministry experience. Our participants wanted to continue meeting each month. We created HOPE (Healing Our Pain...*Eventually*) ministry. The HOPE ministry offers monthly opportunities for fellowship and outreach. We gather around various outings or projects, for example bowling, picnics, movie night, a school supply fund raiser, and holiday meal ministry. The Spirit blows where God chooses.

## Small Groups

I love Small Group Ministry. Small Groups are an awesome way to build relationships in a large congregation. Now, we have exciting news. I am thrilled to share that Carolyn Inglefield and Arlene Kelsey have volunteered to lead our Small Group Ministry Team. We are grateful for this dynamic duo and look forward to their continued leadership!

In 2016, during Lent, we engaged a fabulous resource from Luther Seminary, "Experiencing God." Our Lenten journey with the "Experiencing God" video series provided participants an intimate glimpse into the heart of God, encouraging a mature image of the Trinity. During our Fall Campaign, we engaged Pastor John Ortberg's video series, "God is Closer than You Think." This six week series helped participants discover God's presence that is waiting to be discovered in our everyday lives. We had 10 groups and approximately 170 participants. I also enjoyed starting a kid-friendly Sunday night small group for this campaign. We are extremely thankful for Nick and Jeana Wagner who kindly opened their home to us and for Lia Jablonski who served as our fearless babysitter. It was a wonderful experience and I look forward to our family friendly small group Lenten Journey.

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH

During the Adult Education time, I've led abbreviated sessions of "Experiencing God" during Lent and "God is Closer than You Think" in the Fall. During our time between services, we enjoyed segments of the videos followed by lively discussions.

## SYNOD COUNCIL

I have enjoyed serving on the Greater Milwaukee Synod Council. I also attended Synod Assembly and led the prayer around the cross. This year we elected a new bishop. I look forward to building a strong ministry relationship with Bishop Paul Erickson.



## CONTINUING EDUCATION

Thankfully, I've been able to embark on a number of continuing education activities. For example, Pastor Michelle Townsend de Lopez and I attended Trinity Institute's 45th National Theological Conference, "Listen for a Change: Sacred Conversations for Racial Justice" (TI2016). The conference addressed life-giving conversations about the racial issues of our time, including structural racism, mass incarceration, and policy change. The conference brought together action-oriented theologians and thought leaders to provide better understanding, inspiration, and ideas to make a positive impact in communities throughout the nation.

I also experienced Dr. Ysaye Barnwell's "Building a Vocal Community" workshop at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Dr. Barnwell (formerly of Sweet Honey in the Rock) presented a lesson in music, African and African American diaspora history, and activist history, delving into the breadth of the African and African American singing tradition. Participants learned various ways in which group singing can build, strengthen, and fortify communities especially in times of crises.

Out of all of my continuing education experiences, the Festival of Homiletics was probably one of the most rewarding. This week-long conference brought together a wide variety of outstanding preachers and professors of homiletics to inspire a theological discourse about preaching, worship, and culture in the 21st century.

I've also enjoyed invitations to preach at events in other congregations as well as publish online and print articles. I'm also very proud that my husband, Benhi Khabeb, represented the Greater Milwaukee Synod at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans - "Freed and Renewed in Christ."



# CHURCH COUNCIL

## President's Report

**A**s a member of Ascension for 42 years, I have had the privilege of meeting, worshipping, and working with many fine Christian men and women. This year's council is no exception. The council is composed of 18 members and the pastors. We have laughed together, prayed together, talked together, and made difficult decisions together. We thank Alan Gilgenbach and Jeremy Poling for their two years of service as at-large council members. Marcy Schaefer is finishing her term as secretary of the council. During her tenure, she has worked hard on making the secretary function as an officer of the council. Their service has been a great asset to the church council.

This year the council signed a five-year mortgage. The previous mortgage, which was for three years, expired this spring. Peter Laper, the Director of Operations, found several competitive offers. The council voted to go to a five-year note because of the excellent rate.

Kelly Hoeg, the Director of Ministries, has worked hard on having the Wing Leaders form a well functioning work group that meets together regularly. Craig Greenwood met

with the Wing Leaders and Kelly several times to further the work on Vision Arise 2015.

The council is finishing its work on reviewing and revising Policies and Procedures to assure the congregation of the integrity of volunteers who serve our children, elderly members, shut-ins, and members with disabilities. Similar work is being completed for the volunteers who handle the church's financial matters.

Throughout the year, as I listened and discussed concerns with you, I have frequently asked you to pray for the work of the council. The council thanks you for all of your prayers.

*Paul Wehmeier*  
Council President



## By the Numbers

**T**he following is a brief and, as yet incomplete, snapshot of our membership and other statistics for 2016. Complete will appear in our February 2017 newsletter. For Care Ministries and Mission Outreach information, see those ministry pages.

*Amy Gilgenbach*  
Director of Administration

Membership	2015	2016
Baptized Membership	1124	1104
Confirmed Membership	879	874
New members, including baptisms	48	61
Number of households	NR	467
Releases/transfers	237	84
Member deaths	9	4
Confirmation	7	13

Wings/Ministries	2014	2015	2016
Average weekly worship	524	444	416*
Baptisms	26	18	16
Marriages	8	4	8
Funerals	10	9	9
Children's/BLAST	123	87	79
JOLT (gr. 6-9)	60	37	41
CRASH (gr. 9-12)	40	38	45
Small Groups (Fall)	—	—	170

\* Projected

## A Word about the Wings

**T**he Joyful Worship, Spiritual Growth, Caring Relationships, and Mission Outreach wings all offer several rewarding ministries to become involved with and certainly welcome the opportunity to do more. Part of the ability to offer the many ministries provided within the four wings stems from a strong vision. The wing leaders having been working hard this past year to accomplish the many goals that they established as a part of Vision 2025. While each wing has their own unique set of goals, the wing leaders have also been working collaboratively over the past year on a common goal: to increase wing volunteer engagement. We would look forward to more participation by our congregation to help achieve this goal while building relationships that help us to grow through our new faith experiences.

*Kelly Hoeg*  
Director of Ministries



***Music is a fair and glorious gift of God.***

Martin Luther

## Music Ministry

**A**scension's Music Ministry flourished throughout 2016. The annual Advent Concerts in December 2015 included choirs, handbells, Praise Band, Folk Choir, and a string ensemble drawn from Ascension friends and members. December also brought the children's pageant with our Sunday School students sharing the precious story of Jesus' birth during morning worship.

Hymn Festivals took place in February and in August, praising God through song and the instrumental gifts of Ascension friends and members.

With spring came the St. Olaf Norsemen Band in concert at Ascension. Members of Ascension opened their homes to host members of the band overnight and were rewarded with a beautiful and thrilling concert.

Joyful Worship at Ascension continues to lift up well-known settings of the liturgy at the 8:30 a.m. service. Settings used are from our hymnal, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, along with "Now the Feast and Celebration" and the "Feast of Life" liturgy. We were blessed in worship by the sounds of brass from several of our members, as well as from The Nordic Brass at various times throughout 2016. In August, we gave thanks for the musical gifts of Ray Kinney as he brought his tenure with the Folk Choir to a close. Ben Janzow and the Ascension Praise Band continue to provide excellent musical leadership at our 10:45 a.m. service.

New as of September 2016 is the Youth Handbell Choir for grades 4-8. The Youth Handbell rang in worship for the first time in October. The Angel Choir (grades K-3) and Joyful Sounds (grades 4-8) add their voices to worship approximately once each month, and music continues to be a part of the Children's Ministry BLAST program for grades PK-5.

The Ascension Choir and Ascension Ringers provide anthems and musical leadership in worship on a regular basis. Both ensembles traveled to Cross Lutheran Church, Milwaukee in October to participate in worship and celebrate our partnership after Cross musicians joined us at Ascension in the spring.

It continues to be a source of great joy and satisfaction to serve as Director of Music Ministries at Ascension as together we offer praise and thanks to our great God!

*Vicki Taylor*  
Director of Music Ministries

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH

**T**he Spiritual Growth Wing encompasses Faith Formation (Nursery, Stepping Stones, BLAST, JOLT, CRASH), adult education, stewardship, prayer ministry (prayer group and prayer chain), and puppet ministry. We are continuing to work toward our 2025 goal, which is: “A church family engaging generations through faith experiences. Children’s ministries are experiential, relevant and multi-generational. JOLT (Journey Of a Life Time) and CRASH (Christians Reaching And Sharing Hope) ministries extend far beyond the walls of our church due to rampant outreach and enjoy extensive investment by the congregation. Faith formation empowers our entire community, regardless of where people may be in their faith journey, to claim their identity as disciples of Jesus. Our stewardship ministries teach the power of God’s presence and work among us and invite all to dream about the next step in our journey as Ascension. To achieve this goal we are continually looking for the congregation to connect and participate in activities that will grow our faith beyond attending Sunday service.

*Sheri Greger*

*Spiritual Growth Wing Leader*



## BLAST

Ascension’s dynamic children’s ministry focuses on the faith enrichment of elementary age students and their families. This past year BLAST was filled with many wonderful and transformative moments as we continued to seek ways to better serve God’s mission at Ascension and in the world. BLAST – **B**elieving, **L**earning, **A**nd **S**erving **T**ogether is one such improvement – this new name for children’s ministry connects to a deeper identity that reflects the core values of faith, relationship, and service to God and others. BLAST is not a ministry fixated on curriculum per se, rather it is centered on helping students and families recognize and respond to what God is already doing and will continue to do in their lives and throughout the world. Blast focuses on supporting students and families in their journey of faith and providing them opportunities to dive deeper into God’s Word and respond to God’s love by serving the world around them. Family focused faith formation events like our Faith Stepping Stones, Road to Bethlehem, Road to the Cross, and service learning projects are just some of the opportunities designed to help them live vibrant faith lives that pass faith across the generations.

## JOLT

Ascension's high-energy, relational focused confirmation program for Jr. High students in 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades continues to be led by Pastor Chris, with the support of adult volunteers. JOLT meets Thursday evenings from Oct. – Apr. and then culminates with the highly anticipated Adventure Camp in June.

Thursday evening JOLT gatherings are filled with fun, fellowship, and small groups that explore how our lives intersect God's love story for the world. This journey of faith formation is designed to excite students about their faith, involve them in the life of the church and engage in service to the communities around them, but the most important goal of JOLT is to remind students of the great love God has for them and the world.

## CRASH

Ascension's relational high school ministry focuses on students in 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Considerable effort has gone into developing opportunities that honor relationships across multiple generations and help students engage the diverse world around them. The faith development of students is encouraged through Sunday morning worship, youth group, mission and adventure trips, retreats, and service learning opportunities to help students connect to God's ongoing mission in the world. Every precious opportunity is designed to help students identify and connect to who they are and whose they are.

Reflecting on the amazing ways God has blessed the faith formation journey for Ascension's children, youth and their families, we look ahead with hope and excitement for the countless ways the Holy Spirit will stir up a curious passion to discover God's amazing story of love for their lives and the world. And so it is with great joy, deep appreciation, and a humble heart that I say thank you for entrusting these ministries to me.

*Tony Acompanado*  
Director of Faith Formation



# CARING RELATIONSHIPS

## Care Ministries

As I and ministry leaders reflect on the past year in Care Ministries, we are filled with gratitude for our ministries and the volunteers that help to bring them to life. We have seen so much growth in our ministries as they are changing the lives of many people in our congregation and community. Not only have we focused on the growth of each of our ministries, but we have provided Health and Wellness programs and education. Some of these include:



**Babysitting Clinic  
2016**



**Jo & Lloyd Buth**

- A yoga class that meets weekly for six-week sessions. In our May class, we had a total of 28 participants, which included members and participants from our community. We provide this excellent class for stress reduction, relaxation, and to increase flexibility for our bodies.
- We had a Christian Line dancing class hosted by Linda Elder this fall that had 22 participants, young and old were able to learn aerobic dance moves make themselves physically fit over five weeks. This class will be offered again in the spring.
- We introduced a summer walking group. Christine Parent was the leader. A few members participated, walking after church services during the summer months.
- We provided monthly blood pressure services to our congregation throughout the year with a break over the summer.
- Ascension donated 31 units of blood this winter for the Blood Center, saving up to 81 local community lives. We had ten units that were drawn at our Blood Drive in October - such a great community service for those in need.
- We hosted health education on Alzheimer's, our AED equipment, Anxiety and Depression between services with our Grapevine Ministry..
- This was the third summer of Red Cross Babysitting classes. We have certified a total of 28 teens in CPR, first-aid, and childcare.
- We also have sponsored 3 AARP Safe Driving Classes at Ascension. Participants included members and non-members in our community.
- We have hosted six GriefShare Program session. GriefShare is a ministry for those that have suffered the loss of a loved one. We have had 76 participants within our congregation and within our community whom we have helped during their difficult grief journeys. DivorceCare and DivorceCare for Kids are also programs that we hosted last fall. For all of these groups, we have provided meals donated from our church groups to provide a sense of fellowship for these groups.
- Out of this Grief Share program we have established a new ministry called **HOPE (Healing Our Pain...Eventually) Ministry**. This ministry is for those that have suffered loss and are trying to put their lives back together by becoming involved with social events and service work. This group has approximately 12 participants and has offered picnics, movies, bowling, and a service project for a family in our congregation to help with backpacks and school supplies. The group is planning on helping a family from Cross Lutheran Church for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

*Brenda Lytle, RN*  
Director of Care Ministries



## Touch A Heart Ministries

**The Meal Ministry** leader is Iva Richards and this ministry has kept 13 volunteers busy providing 41 meals to families and individuals in need this year.

**The Prayer Shawl Ministry** leader is Joan Birner. This group makes beautiful shawls that provide comfort for our medically needy members. Thirty-nine shawls were given to participants in our GriefShare groups, who find comfort with them in their suffering.

**The Baby Blanket Ministry** leader is Sue Mathews. These volunteers provide baby afghans for all of the baptisms at Ascension. 13 blankets have been made this year.

**1000 Crosses For Christ** were made for our Easter Sunday service this year. The leader is Joan Birner

**The Spiritual Care Ministry** leader is Kay Stone. 32 bags were distributed this year to our hospitalized and homebound members that included devotionals and inspirational materials.

**SOS Angel Ministry** is our newest ministry. Nada Draeger is the leader. This ministry is designed to help those in need. Nada will coordinate transportation, errands, and any help needed by members who are recently out of the hospital. We will be implementing an electronic way of running this ministry in 2017.

**The New Life Ministry** leader is Kay Stone. 14 baby baskets were filled with a Bible, handmade hat and booties, small baby items, and baptismal information. These baskets are handed out to the new tiniest members of Ascension.

**The Military Ministry** leader is Sheri Greger. This ministry spends time helping our church's military servicemen and women and does outreach activities with other ministries to help veterans and military families. They have provided lapghans to the VA hospital and items for the USO. They are involved in Honor Flights and putting out flags on Memorial Day and Veterans Day. They sent out ten care packages for our six deployed military members this fall. Each member received a care package and one to share with a friend.

*Respect, care, and love must be shared, for it's only through sharing that friendships are born.*



**Our Special Friends Ministry** leader is Marge Schroeder. This group provides activity and fellowship to those in our congregation who have physical or mental challenges. It has members of all ages who come together and learn that "respect, care, and love must be shared, for it's only through sharing that friendships are born." Special

Friends keeps active with activities such as the Tim Tebow Prom "A Night to Shine", Touch of Glaze, Country Springs Waterpark, bowling, miniature golf, Boo at the Zoo, and several service projects throughout the year.

**Young at Heart Ministry** is led by Arlene Davis, Celeste Defenbaugh, and Beth Hoffman. This group is for

people ages 55 years and older who like to get together once a month for potlucks, entertainment activities, speakers, and card/board games. They take bus trips and provide service work for the community.

**The Living Letters Ministry** leader is Linda Hansen. This ministry hand- makes beautiful cards and sends them to members for many different occasions. They also send cards to uplift the spirits of our military servicemen and women.

**The Sunshine Ministry** leader is Lin Wollschlager. This ministry uplifts the spirits of our Ascension families and supports our members with beautiful cards.

**Our College Care Ministry** leader is Becky Klotz. These volunteers sent out 16 care packages to Ascension's college students before exam time December 2015.

**Our Bereavement Ministry** leader is Nada Draeger. This ministry sends support and care materials to families that have suffered loss.

**The Pastoral Assistants** are six lay congregation members that visit members in hospitals and rehabilitation centers and visit our homebound members. Our Pastoral Assistants are Paul Wehmeier, Jim Hahn, Arlene Davis, Sally Wagner, Iva Richards and Bonnie Theisenhusen. This important ministry assists our pastors with visitation. They provide members with prayer, communion, and comfort.

# MISSION OUTREACH



*During 2016, Mission Outreach used the Vision 2025 as the guide to planning and carrying out our mission activities. We continue to use accompaniment and empowerment as our emphasis. Our goal is to be sure that the outreach we provide is truly helping people and not doing what makes us feel good but may actually be harming those who need us. Our mission work is divided into three areas: ELCA/Synod Support, Partnerships, and In Our Own Backyard.*

*Shirley Wehmeier*

Mission Outreach Wing Leader

## ELCA/Synod

**A**s a part of our budget, we support the greater church through our contributions to the ELCA and Greater Milwaukee Synod. When we work together with the national church body, we can be a part of a great mission with proven results. Our contributions have assisted in helping world hunger, disaster relief, education, and poverty. As members of the ELCA, we are called to respond to the fact that one in eight people in our world do not have adequate food. Working with and through our congregations, **ELCA World Hunger** is uniquely positioned to reach communities in need. From health clinics to microloans, water wells to animal husbandry, community meals to advocacy, gifts to ELCA World Hunger make it possible for the ELCA to respond, supporting sustainable solutions that get at the root causes of hunger and poverty. **Lutheran Disaster Response** brings God's hope, healing and renewal to people whose lives have been disrupted by disasters in the United States and around the world. In partnership with Lutheran congregations and Lutheran social ministry organizations, **Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service** has welcomed more than 379,000 refugees to the United States since 1939. This ongoing partnership and work is driven by God's love for all people and a vision for congregations to be welcoming and generous centers for mission and ministry.

## Outreach for Hope

OFH supports life-giving ministries with the poor in communities of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. These ministries not only provide help with daily necessities, but most importantly, they are centers in the heart of their communities for providing transformation and hope. Ascension has been integral in the success of the Outreach for Hope Bike Ride since its beginning. Ascension also had a strong participation in the Outreach for Hope Lenten Devotions, a Dollar a Day for Poverty.

## Refugee Resettlement

Mission Outreach continues to support the refugees who have come to our area. There are 104 Burmese refugees in 20 families in the Waukesha area. Jo Buth continues to guide so many of these refugee families whether or not they are sponsored by Ascension. So much assistance is needed for new arrivals as they adjust to a new culture, language, and life. We are always looking for volunteers to assist with this ministry. This year we also welcomed the Aparicio family from El Salvador. Ascension members have welcomed them into the congregation and have walked with them through their darkest days through prayers, love, visits, meals, monetary donations, and donations to furnish their new home.

One of the areas that has been identified as the greatest need for new immigrants/refugees is learning English and having assistance in learning the new culture. They often face barriers such as transportation, scheduling conflicts with ELL classes, and a hesitancy to be part of a larger group learning experience. Mission Outreach is working with the Literacy Council of Waukesha to develop a tutoring program at Ascension for people who face those barriers in the neighborhood area. Barb Nordberg is leading this endeavor. We have identified several families who live nearby who would benefit from this service.

## Partnerships

**A**scension practices the accompaniment model with our partnerships. Our partnerships are based on the ELCA Companion Synod recommendations. “When companions engage one another in authentic relationships, everyone’s lives are changed.” We are a church that believes God is calling us into the world — together. Companion church relationships enrich and deepen our ministries by exposing us to global challenges and perspectives as we seek to work with one another to build up the body of Christ and the world (from ELCA). Ascension members serve on the synod committees for all of our partners. Ascension works within the Greater Milwaukee Synod companion synods in the Meru Diocese of Tanzania and the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. One of our Vision 2025 goals is to help the entire congregation have a greater understanding of our partners and to see the global partners as an integral part of our ministry.

### El Salvador

The agroferreteria (hardware store) is very successful. They have made enough money to be able to give money to El Buen Pastor congregation, over and above paying salaries. They were also able to start three other stores in neighboring areas, including in San Jorge where we have a congregational partnership. What a blessing to see the little store that Ascension helped build now providing jobs for the young men who work there, providing affordable supplies to the community, giving contributions to the local congregation, and now expanding so more people can benefit! The project continues to meet both of their goals: providing funding for local churches and providing employment for men and young boys, keeping them safe from the reaches of the gangs and allowing them to provide for their families. This project shows the blessings of accompaniment in mission and the positive impact it has on those we partner with.

Edwin Aparicio has been leading communication to and receiving messages from Pr. Blanca at the Church of the Miracle of God in San Jorge, our congregational partner. It has been great to share photos and emails with each other as we continue to grow in partnership. Just as we pray for the members of San Jorge’s congregation, they pray regularly for Ascension and our members. The congregation at San Jorge is going to be using the books *La Historia (The Story)* that we used for a small group study a couple of years ago. This will be their first time they do a congregation-wide Bible study. They are grateful for Ascension’s donation of the books in Spanish.

Sarah Aparicio is the co-chair for the synod El Salvador committee. This committee meets monthly to coordinate and assist congregations in their ministries with El Salvador. Mission Outreach is hoping to organize a delegation to visit El Salvador over spring break 2017. We will be making every effort for a safe and meaningful trip. One of the aspects of partnerships is to also have visits from the global partner. Ascension is collaborating with Lake Park Lutheran Church and Grace Lutheran Church to host a delegation from our partnership ministries in El Salvador in the summer of 2017.



## MISSION OUTREACH



### Tanzania

A highlight of this year was the decision to go forward with a congregational partnership in Tanzania. After meeting Pr. Lema late last year, there was a desire to have a deeper relationship with the ministries in Tanzania. A group from Ascension has met regularly with St. Luke's members to develop this partnership. We will actually work with three of the parishes that Pr. Lema told us about: Maroroni, Samaria, and Kilima Moja parishes in the Meru Diocese. The diocese in Tanzania is making structural changes and each of the parishes will become more independent. At that time, Ascension will focus on one parish, most likely Samaria. We appreciate the experience of St. Luke's guiding us on this new ministry.

One of our first projects with our new partners was the fall campaign to Fill the School House. Our goal was initially to raise enough money to support 50 students for a full school year. This meant raising money for maize and

beans (which serve as their tuition), books and supplies, and required uniforms. We decided to make this our *God's Work. Our Hands.* project this year and to extend it to the end of the small group study. We raised our goal to 75. At the end of the campaign, we raised enough money to support 89 students! Praise God for Ascension's generosity!

In addition to our congregational partnership, our Meru Coffee project continues to be an integral part of our partnership with Tanzania. The coffee we serve at church is part of our synod project to support coffee farmers by purchasing the coffee they grow at fair trade prices. Coffee is available by the cup or by the bag at the coffee cart every Sunday. Dave Hammer is on the synod coffee committee. Dave and Barb are the leaders for us in this project.

The Greater Milwaukee Synod also has monthly committee meetings to coordinate and encourage congregations in their partnership ministries. Special focus on the needs include the need for working wells, hospital and medical care, and the food crisis throughout the country. Sarah Aparicio is our representative on this committee.

### Cross Lutheran Church Partnership

Ascension's partnership with Cross in Milwaukee goes back more than 40 years. It actually pre-dates the formation of the ELCA. Throughout the years, we have grown in relationships and shared ministries. Ascension supports several of Cross's ongoing ministries. The first Wednesday of every month, Ascension has a group of volunteers that prepare and serve a meal at the neighborhood outreach ministry: Bread of Healing Empowerment Ministry. Cross is doing work in their own community that we are blessed to be a part of. We walk alongside them doing God's work with our hands. People who attend the meal are also able to pick up food from the Food Pantry, receive counseling and job assistance and participate in a Bible study.

In addition to the regular ministries, 2016 brought other opportunities to grow our partnership. In January, Cross hosted a racism workshop for all of their partners. Twelve Ascension members participated in the workshop. The Friday before Ash Wednesday, we also attended the Cross Mardi Gras Ball, a celebration of ministry and a fundraiser. During the ball, we heard from Pr. Joe Ellwanger talk about the history of Cross and the challenge of accepting decisive moments that can change the history of the church. We also enjoyed delicious food and celebrated our long history of partnership with Cross. We shared in worship experiences three times with Cross this year. Pr. Chris preached at Cross and Pr. Michelle shared in the funeral service for Fabricio Aparicio. In May, we celebrated Cross Sunday at

Ascension with Pr. Michelle preaching and the Cross Choir and Easter sharing their music. During the education hour, Cross shared more information about the Bread of Healing Empowerment Ministry. In October, 65 Ascension members worshipped at Cross with Pr Chris preaching, Tony leading the children's message, Pr. Angela sharing communion, and our Choir and Bell Choir enhancing the worship with their music. What a joy to worship and commune together as brothers and sisters!

As a part of our commitment to support the Cross Food Pantry, Mission Outreach has several ways to encourage more participation. During the Souper Bowl Challenge, we collected 254 cans of soup. We also filled 50 bags of groceries during the Fill the Bag effort. Cross distributes 200 bags of food each week and we, as their partners, are encouraged to do our part in helping fill the bags.

On Sunday, Aug. 21, a group of Ascension members joined with other Cross partners and Cross members in providing and serving a picnic for the Cross neighborhood. This was truly a day where we could stand side-by-side with our partners to serve those who are most in need in the area around their church. This is true accompaniment.

Our partnership with Cross is healthy and continues to grow and cannot happen without the dedicated leadership of Dave Hammer who serves on the Cross Partnership committee and is Ascension's Cross ministry leader.



## In Our Own Backyard

**R**eaching out to our own community is a valuable part of Mission Outreach. We recognize the important work that is being done by local agencies and we support them through financial contributions, in-kind donations, and volunteer service. During 2016, the Mission Outreach budget was decreased so we were not able to provide the same level of financial support as in the past. This did not reflect the value of these community partners. We take seriously our commitment to them. We promoted opportunities for service through volunteering and specific donation items. Several small groups stepped up to the call and provided volunteer hours and did donation drives in the name of Ascension. Agencies that benefit from are Hope Center, Hebron House, Backpack Coalition, NAMI, the Food Pantry, and Habitat for Humanity.

As a part of Vision 2015, one of the goals of Mission Outreach is to truly do ministry in our neighborhood. Kathy Williams stepped forward with the idea of a Little Free Library. Dick Williams built and installed the library box and members help keep it filled. Bookmarks with information about Ascension are available in the library box. It has been a great success. Kathy also hosted Community Coffee Hours during the month of September. We will continue to explore new ways to develop our neighborhood outreach.

Ascension works through SOPHIA on social justice issues. SOPHIA is a faith based organization whose primary goal is to bring about changes that provide justice and dignity to all through education, listening sessions, and specific community tasks. Ascension has served as the host church for two sessions on human trafficking and a county-wide forum on transportation. Iva Richards stepped down from many years of Ascension leadership in SOPHIA and Bob Stoll has now been our leader and representative.

The Mission Outreach Facebook page has become a great way to highlight Mission Outreach wing activities and ELCA/ Greater Milwaukee Synod mission activities. We are able to post announcements and photos of our ministries and we are seeing an increase in those who view the page. In addition to the people named who lead a specific ministry, the Mission Outreach committee includes Beth Hoffman, Peggy Thrasher, and Iva Richards who are our involved in every aspect of planning and carrying out our mission activities. We especially are grateful for Arlene Davis and Cheryl Dewy for their commitment to organizing and purchasing the food for the meals and for all the cooks, bakers, and volunteers. Many others have contributed volunteer hours to help our ministries be a success. Mission Outreach is led by a committee but it is the calling of all believers to respond to their faith by living out the Gospel in word and deed.





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