



Rev. Alex LaChapelle ELCA Missionary Newsletter

Just Now?

In South Africa "just now" means soon, later, in a short while, or a short time ago. This newsletter aims to cover just that. Reaching out with happenings from the past and hopes for the future to better understand the role the Young Adults in Global Mission program plays in Southern Africa.

Winter Greetings

Greetings in the name of Christ! I pray this finds you well as many of you enter the best part of the year. More sunlight, summer festivals, mission trips and hopefully a National Youth Gathering for some, but here in Southern Africa... Winter is upon us! All the complaints of miserable heat are forgotten for cold nights and extra blankets. But let's be honest, a Southern African winter is still better than the coldest day of a Wisconsin summer. We are in the last few months of my first year as country coordinator and it is hard to believe I have been in country for a year now, and these volunteers are going home in less than a month.

Washing Feet, Washing Cars

YAGM has been blessed with amazing hosts in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. Our host families and communities create a place for our volunteers to learn the culture of the countries in which they live. March was a chance to travel. Visiting sites, getting a little taste of the volunteer life, staying with some host families and visiting volunteer opportunities. One of our volunteers lives in rural Makanyane, in Swaziland. Makanyane, like many of our sites, does not quickly conjure up images in one's mind. Yet it is here with their host family, that I experience the hospitality of these visits and the challenge to love others and go the extra mile. March visits were wrapping up and I found myself in Makanyane for Sunday service. Accommodations can sometimes be difficult in rural areas, but our host family gave me room and board for the weekend. Sunday morning I woke up for church, knowing I would be heading back to South Africa following the service. I went out to get something from the car, and to my embarrassment my host was washing my car. I felt foolish and quickly said "thank you," while explaining he didn't need to wash my car. He responded joyfully, "I just wanted to see what color it was... It's white!" It's embarrassing when people do things we don't expect, and when we are caught off guard by hospitality. I couldn't help but instantly be reminded of Peter interacting with Jesus as he washed his feet. I probably looked as incredulous and thought the same thing, "I should be washing your..." And there, the last Sunday before Holy Week I was being reminded of the hospitality Jesus calls us to in real life on that Thursday so long ago.

I don't think my host was trying to be Christ, but for him, a dirty car needs washing. Yet Jesus' question continues to validate his actions, "Do you know what I have done to you?" If Jesus washes feet, what then are the expectations of disciples? In Southern Africa, cars and buses are the feet which we use to travel around. We ask our volunteers, along with myself, to be disciples of what God incarnate is doing in these people, communities and the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. It looked different, but I was being sent that Sunday. When my host washes my car, am I not supposed to also carry this with me and look for other "cars" to wash? My host sent me away from his home better than he

found me – washing my car, wiping off the dirt and grime of my travels, giving me a real example to carry in my heart and mind of what extraordinary hospitality can be. A retired man living in rural Swaziland brought me closer to Maundy Thursday and the true mandate from Christ, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."



Long drives mean dirty cars.



2018-2019 YAGM Southern Africa



Happy Birthday Grandma and Grandpa

April Showers Bring DIP Flowers

April was a busy month as I returned to the U.S. for some time with family including my grandparents' birthdays, who are 88 and 89. But of main importance was to be part of DIP, Discernment, Interview and Placement. I had the chance to interview 16 amazing young people, many of them finishing their last year of university. Together we were able to discuss Southern Africa and whether our program would be a good fit, or whether another country would be a better fit. Many programs are based on merit, "Are you good enough?" or "Do we want you?" Yet YAGM asks, "What are we able to do together?" The volunteers need to be as invested in the process as the program is, the country coordinator, and the inviting country. This creates the best opportunities for us to have a meaningful year on all accounts. We left with eight names, which turned into eight confirmations, and we look forward to having them in Southern Africa for the year.



May Mountains

I landed April 30 in Johannesburg, stayed overnight, grabbed three of my volunteers and headed for Pietermaritzburg (PMB) for our second retreat. Our other five came by taxi. We spent a week together starting in PMB, and made our way back to Jo'burg after a stop in the Drakensberg Mountains. We have a group keen to hike and so we made space to go out to the highest waterfall in Africa in Royal Natal National Park. A long hike with some real challenges and opportunities to shine and persevere, we made a day of it. Some of us swam in ice cold pools near the edge of a cliff, we had amazing views, and perhaps most important of all, we were together. For this group, connecting and sharing stories remains important. They lean on each other and create an example of what happens when people provide trust amidst challenges. No site is created equal, and everyone has challenges, but in these times together, people can feel safe to drop their guards and debrief what the last year has been. It was quite amazing to hear the struggles and triumphs as we walk alongside each other in a year of YAGM – loss both back home and in their communities, transitioning in and now starting to think about the transition out, living in a new family system and trying to accommodate expectations and hopes for a year. All of this is the challenge of YAGM. So the mountains start to make sense.

Hiking for me is a challenge, for some easier than others. This hike had moments where we climbed straight up and were rewarded with amazing views, and climbed down steep ladders to experiences that surprised and scared us. Yet like any hike with challenges, when you are done, no one can take it away from you. The same applies to this year. Whatever this journey has been for each of these volunteers, when all this is over and they are flying back home, no one can take away what they did. And like anyone who has climbed a mountain, it becomes harder to say, “I can't,” to whatever comes next. And even more, to those who would say to these young people, “you can't,” it's laughable in the face of this year.



Alums Josh and Ashley after an amazing DIP

Until Next Time

Can't wait to introduce more of the group coming to Southern Africa and tell you about our closing retreat. This last month will be an emotional time of goodbyes to the country and continuing to debrief everything which has taken place. It will also be a time of reuniting with the country they left almost a year ago, the family and friends they have missed, and the next steps which are being formed in their experience.

Peace,

Rev. Alex LaChapelle