

If We Settle on the Far Side of the Sea



How was this winter in Minnesota, where I have been a pastor since 2015? Long. Is that why some of us are moving to Africa, and the others hope to visit? No. Above is our family by the Gulf of Mexico. It was January 1. We were in Sarasota, Florida, where we used to live. From left to right: Dan; Donovan, 14; Drew, 12; Danae, 22; Deb; Deanna 25; Daria, 18; and David, 21. Three of us — Dan, Deb and Drew — are getting ready to head across an even bigger body of water than the Gulf. I've been called as theological educator for the One Africa Team.

We will be based in Lusaka, Zambia, but my main work will not be at the seminary there. I am to teach and coordinate others' teaching of African undergraduates and graduates. Where? WELS walks hand in hand with confessional Lutheran church bodies in Cameroon, Nigeria, Malawi, Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia. Opportunities

are emerging in Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda.

Can you picture our ascended Lord putting his right hand on John on Patmos, after John fell before him, as though dead? John was surrounded by the Aegean Sea on that island, as he fainted. He was far from home, exiled due to his testimony about Jesus. Jesus touched him and told him, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18).

Jesus’ nail-pierced right hand has been on my family and me for longer than I can remember. For instance, my mother’s father, Heinrich Vogel, used to teach at our seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin. Once he was asked to teach in Japan for a year. My grandmother did not want to go. Flying made her uneasy. Finally, she objected to my grandfather, “I want dirt beneath my feet.” He offered to bring along a bucket of dirt onto the plane, so she could keep her feet on dirt. She still refused.

That was that. He declined. Little did he know that some of his interest in teaching the gospel in a faraway place — even his interest in Hebrew — would get passed down to one of his grandsons. My wife’s mother, likewise, would tell you that when she was a young WELS teacher, she wondered about teaching in Africa. She was one of the first teachers at St. Philip’s Lutheran School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I first got the chance to teach in Africa in 2012, when Pastor Joel Jaeger and I were asked to teach for three weeks at Christ the King Lutheran Seminary in Uruk Uso, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria. The next October Pastor Dan Voigt and I taught there again.



I remember when Solomon, our driver, first drove Joel and me to the mission house in Uruk Uso. Michael Egar, now a pastor in Cross River State, Nigeria, took one look at me and joked, with a big smile, “You must be Akpakpan’s son. You look just like Akpakpan!”

I admit, I share a similar face shape and eyes with Akpakpan, a veteran Nigerian pastor now in heaven. I am taller; his face was darker than mine. He was such a help to me, sitting in the back of the classroom, chiming in at just the right moment, here and there. I can still hear him saying to the students, “Yes. That is right. That is what God’s Word teaches.” Such experiences helped shape me. What a joy. What grace: Having a small part in training others for ministry in places so different from where I have been a pastor on this side of the ocean (Illinois, Florida and Minnesota).

Now our family looks back at ministry in cities, suburbs and a small town. We remember the ways we had to adjust when we all pitched in to start a new church in Florida, a spot with different weather and customs than where we had been, which after some years became home. We are surprised at how God has prepared us all in various ways — even when we left one son in Florida when the rest of us moved north in 2015, or how God led us to doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester,

Minnesota who have been so helpful to two of our children with difficult diseases.

Since 2014 I have served with others on the Psalmody Committee for our synod's new hymnal. Have the psalms given you comfort and direction, in Christ? I hope they will do so more and more. David sings to God in Psalm 139,

"Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast" (139:7-10).

Now our family sings that 3,000 year old song in a new light. As I write this, one of our daughters is flying over the Arctic Ocean, on her way to a short-term mission trip in China. She will soon fly over the Pacific Ocean, too.

Join our family in song, won't you?

Missionary Dan Witte will be moving to Lusaka, Zambia this summer