This past week I attended the monthly meeting of the New River Conference pastors and gave my colleagues a summary of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly I had just attended.

I told them about what I had learned about the AMMPARO initiative. The word “amparo” in Spanish means the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage. The ELCA’s strategy “AMMPARO” stands for the call to Accompany Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities. Many children travel unaccompanied from Central America's Northern Triangle and Mexico, north towards the United States, tragically sent by parents who fear their children will never make it to adulthood because of the violence that is tearing apart their communities. AMMPARO works with synods and congregations on the U.S. southern border to uphold and guarantee basic human rights and safety of migrant children; to address the root causes of migration in countries from Central America’s Northern Triangle and Mexico and to advocate for migrant children and their families. At the assembly, the videos and in-person accounts of the life-saving work of AMMPARO were a compelling witness to the work of our church.

I then spoke of the address to the assembly of Bishop Medardo Gomez of El Salvador. You may have heard of the Salvadoran Catholic priest, Oscar Romero, an outspoken critic of poverty, social injustice, assassinations and torture. In 1980, Romero was assassinated while offering Mass in El Salvador. Romero was Bishop Gomez' pastor and mentor and instilled in Gomez a passion and commitment to the poor. Gomez later became Lutheran and, unlike his mentor, Gomez survived arrest and torture to outlive the civil war of the 1980's, though several times he had to be rescued by American Lutheran pastors who brought him to this country to hide him from those who were trying to kill him. Bishop Gomez always returned to El Salvador to serve the people he loves. Led by Bishop Gomez, the Lutheran Church in El Salvador ministered to the poor by building clinics, schools and refugee camps and later, a university that prepares candidates with little formal education to serve as pastors and leaders in the church. I read a lot about Bishop Gomez while I was in seminary and it was a great privilege to see the man in person and to hear of his continuing commitment to the people of El Salvador and their ongoing struggle for peace.

Then, I told my fellow pastors about hearing Leymah Gbowee speak. As I wrote in Wednesday Words, Gbowee was a single mother in Liberia, who along with other women, was incensed by two civil wars that tore Liberia apart in the 1980's and 90's. Seeing that the men in their lives were doing nothing to stop the latest war, Gbowee joined with other concerned women and came up with some brilliant ways ways to put pressure on those men. The women forced the men to meet their rivals and iron out a peaceful solution to a war in which widespread rape and murder of women and children horrified a nation. I won't give away everything that happened, but will share that one of the women's strategies involved sitting in front of and blocking the doors of a conference center where men weren't getting anywhere with their peace talks. Gbowee won a Nobel Peace Prize for her work in leading to and end to the war. Gbowee is a life-long Lutheran.

After sharing all this at my conference meeting, one of my colleagues said to me, “All of this sounds very exciting, but what does it mean to the people we work with every day?” The next day, one of our members asked me pretty much the same thing. Their excellent questions have been running through my mind all week. My first response has to do with mission support. This is straight from the ELCA website: “Mission” is a broad term used to describe all the ministries of this church, not just those involving ELCA missionaries who work with our Lutheran partners around the world. “Support” is the portion of members’ offerings that makes all ELCA ministries possible, here at home and abroad. Mission Support is the way that Lutherans experience sharing Jesus’ message of love around the world; it is the lifeblood of the work that God does through the ELCA, providing almost 80 percent of budgeted support for our ministries.” The way this works is that from the offering we put in the collection plate each Sunday, a portion goes to our Virginia Synod, to support its work, and a portion is sent on to the ELCA. In 2014, the almost 10,000 congregations in the ELCA gave $1.8 billion in regular offerings. The amount of that $1.8 billion that was given to the mission of the ELCA was $48.4 million, or about 2.8% of those congregational offerings. The ELCA also receives income from investments, bequests, trusts, grants and designated offerings for ministries such as ELCA World Hunger, the ELCA Malaria Campaign and Lutheran Disaster Response, all of which our parish has supported.

So, of every dollar you and I put in the offering plate, 2.8 cents goes to ministries that help unaccompanied migrant children, that help Lutheran efforts to stop violence and war around the world, to feed hungry families and literally hundreds of other ministries that respond to Jesus' call to love our neighbors. I don't know about you, but when I hear of these vital actions in the name of Christ, I am proud to be called a Lutheran.

“All of this sounds very exciting, but what does it mean to the people we work with every day?” My second response to the question is this: the people doing the work I mentioned early didn't do it to get recognition or prestigious prizes. They were simply following Christ's call to love their neighbor. Border congregations were and are responding to the children who turned up on their church doorsteps or who were turned away at the border. They know that children have to be fed and kept safe even if they are headed back to their homes in war zones. Bishop Gomez was a parish pastor in a small country who dedicated his life to helping casualties of civil war. Leymah Gbowee was a poor single mother who started speaking out for peace by sitting with other women in a dusty soccer field in the heat of the day, holding handmade signs that cried out for those who had no voice.

“Feed my sheep.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love one another.” These calls to action inspire us to look around us and see who needs our help. Who in our community doesn't have enough food to eat? Are there children whose only meals for the day are eaten at school? What happens during the summer when they don't have access to that food? Are there people in our community who are belittled because of how they look or their mental illness? Jesus healed a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. Who around us suffers from crippling fear or illness or loss and how are we called to be Christ to them? We don't have to go anywhere or be anyone other than who we are to be faithful to Christ's call. Then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the work of our two congregations is joined with other churches and task forces and agencies in our area and our efforts in Christ's name are joined to those in our states and regions and country and world so that together we become a mighty body of Christ, called to be voices of love and hope and change, so all in our world might be safe and free and whole through the abiding love of Jesus.

Amen.

*Pentecost 14C*

*August 21, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 13:10-17*