

A note from LCMS Missionaries, James & Christel Neuendorf

Empty Rooms

Lately I've been doing a lot of speaking into empty rooms. On social media, a running joke among pastors has been to print out cardboard cutouts of their church members and put them in the pews. It's been a strange time. After a while the empty rooms start to get to you. I never wanted to be the pastor who spends most of his time at his desk in his office, yet now all of my ministry must be done from a distance.

The picture that goes with this article is of an empty room reserved for me by the Hotel Caribe in order to provide spiritual care for the victims of the most recent violent earthquake this month in Ponce. Hundreds of additional people lost their homes and many are being housed in hotels, we prepared relief supplies and offered spiritual care as soon as possible, but up to this point, the scheduled time for spiritual care at the hotel has been met with no response. So I sit, in an empty room with an offer to listen and share the Word. I sit in an empty room to preach, to teach, and to comfort, it has come to characterize my ministry lately.

I won't lie, it annoys me a bit. After all, everyone is in a big hurry to receive the other things we give, so why when we offer the "one thing needful" does no one come? I know that people need spiritual care now more than ever. If we offer some hot pizza, everyone will come, but when we offer the bread of life, everyone stays in their rooms.

Alone in my thoughts, it struck me that this is precisely what we do with our own heavenly Father. When Jesus walked the lands of chosen Israel, he offered and invited, yet many ignored Him. Our Father in Heaven invites us to pray, He inclines His ear as the Psalms say, yet how often do we remain silent? Does our Father in Heaven sit in a silent conference room just down the hall while we do not come to Him? Is my own lack of prayerfulness the same thing that I am annoyed about in others?

The short answer is yes! That is the very nature of our sinfulness. We confess in the words of the small catechism

Prayers:

- William Torres and his family as they mourn the passing of his father, William.
- Safe delivery of baby DiLiberto
- The Rivera family who mourn the passing of their aunt and uncle in New York due to COVID-19.
- Those who lost their home in the latest earthquake and are currently sheltering-in-place at a local hotel.

that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Him or come to Him. He must call, gather, and enlighten His church, or there will be no church at all. God comes to us, because we cannot and will not come to Him, even as He invites us. It is only by God's power that anyone comes at all.

As I waited in an empty conference room for victims of the earthquake to come to me, thinking of the theological implications of my day, a hotel staff person came into the room. "I have someone I think you should visit" they said. How appropriate. They brought me to a hotel room on the second floor, where three young women sat together, surrounded by all they had left, a small child bouncing on the lap of the woman whose room this was, the others pregnant with their own. One of these women was due to give birth at any moment, and the hotel staff member asked me if I could pray with them. I conversed with the women, said a prayer and a blessing (keeping my distance because of pandemic protocols) and prepared to leave the room. That's when I noticed it.

Hanging on the wall was the red relief bag we had assembled at church to give to families, together with the material for the kids, and on the nightstand next to the bed; the bible and devotional we had placed into each bag. The Lord wasn't waiting for them to come to Him.

You see the Lord is more in the business of empty tombs than empty rooms. He does not wait around for us to come to Him, because He knows that we won't. Just because our churches are unable to gather in person does not mean the Lord is idle, in fact, on the contrary He is actively seeking the lost, as we who follow behind intend to do.

As we try to keep up with our Lord who leads us, we are casting the seed of the Gospel far and wide, a few of those activities you can read about in the rest of our newsletter, pray that we will also be blessed to see the harvest.

Soli Deo Gloria. Amen.



Every Friday morning, Ruth and I continue to offer an arts and crafts time on Facebook. We have been working with several LWML societies and women's groups who have offered to help us with supply kits. We go between offering classes that require a minimal amount of supplies or recycled items around the house to offering crafts kits via FB to the first 15 responders. It's been a way that we can offer our communities activities while everyone still remains at home.



A big thank you to our moms who sent us masks for our team and members. Here in Puerto Rico it's mandated that you wear a mask whenever you are out in public.



"Encerrados Con Jesus" (Closed in with Jesus) is a six week kid's program led by Pastor Anthony DiLiberto to take kids through the Six Chief Parts of the catechism while sheltering in place. We advertised this on both of our church's facebook pages and sent out craft packs to all of those who responded.

Every week, Anthony shares a song on Wednesday then on a craft on Saturday with the kids via FB. It's been a fun learning experience all around.

Because of COVID our work as a team has come together even more as we share ministry activities and opportunities over the web. Ruth, Stephanie, William, and I (Christel) collaborated with Anthony to get the crafts and other elements together. From there we encourage our fellow Sunday School attenders to share their efforts on FB while we continue to invite those who are apart of our community but not our congregation.

Everything we are doing has a learning curve as I am sure all of you are experiencing during this time. I often sit back and think, "Why is this taking SO long for me to do?" and I realized that everything we are doing are on one hand regular activities that we do as a church all the time, yet on the other hand in formats we have not used before. For example we are all familiar with Facebook, but can you create a "group" within a "page" that you manage? No - at least not with a non-business page. Small things like that affect how we approach each program we introduce, how we promote it, etc. BUT we are learning and grace abounds!

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