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Ministry in the Midst of Disaster

By Evelyn J.P. Weston
Staff Writer, The Concord

"The hand of God was working to put me here." Such is the faith of Heather Brown, Luther Seminary MDiv intern serving Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, New York. Called to serve an Arab-American population now struggling in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Brown sees her internship as God's hand at work, both for her good and the good of God's people.

Many opportunities prepared Brown for ministry at Salaam. As a junior at St. Olaf College, she spent fall semester 1987 studying in Jerusalem as the Intifada began. She returned to the Middle East after graduation, aiding refugees in Cairo during the Gulf War. Brown felt God calling her to serve Arabs. Two years of graduate study at Yale Divinity School combined instruction in Arabic and theology. Transferring to Luther Seminary's MDiv program, she hoped for an internship that would further her call to serve an Arab population.

At the same time Brown was anticipating internship, Pastor Khader El Yateem of Salaam was praying for an intern. He applied to have his six-year-old mission development congregation included in the ELCA Horizon Site program, but his funding request was turned down, "because no one would want to go there." Rod Maeker and Randy Nelson brought the two together.

Brown arrived in Brooklyn at the end of August to begin internship, moving into an apartment five blocks from New York Harbor, in a neighborhood with views of Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty, and the World Trade Center's twin towers. She began defining internship goals, including learning about pastoral care and counseling issues that are unique to the Arab community and preaching monthly in both English and Arabic. Brown is the only Anglo-American in the worshiping congregation. Worship attendance at the Arabic service is 150; the English service often draws six.

While walking to the church on the morning of September 11, Brown noticed...
1. In what ways does your teaching area impact the future of the church?

As we increasingly envision pastoral care as not being preoccupied with the one-on-one model but think more in terms of the congregation as a community of care, it's my hope—along with the mission statement of the seminary—that we are sending leaders to communities of leaders.

A part of that is that we hope to produce people who will help create climates of care.

Yet another aspect of that vision is the notion of the congregation as a place of healing. For me, that means that it's a place of holistic healing—bringing healing for the mind, body and spirit.

2. In what ways does your research outside the classroom impact the future of the church?

I have several questions that I continue to pursue. One question has to do with responding to the needs of African American males. And I suppose that as I pursue that question, the impact it would have on the church is that the church would become concerned about that as well.

It is a narrative that has not been as privileged among Lutherans as other narratives have been.

During my research, I've been fascinated by slave narratives. I'm convinced that within them, as one colleague used to say, are the primary source documents of African American spirituality.

I am also doing research in the area of grief and loss. We have a theology that really speaks to what Pauline Boss describes as "ambiguous loss." I think that we, as Lutherans, have a theology that has a high tolerance for ambiguity.

3. What do you most want students to learn under your leadership?

I want them to learn that they are called to be husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and pastors ... in that order.

And I would like to add that we're really not alone in the ministry. As Bishop Trexler in the Florida-Bahamas Synod used to say, "Make sure you leave something for God to do."

I have been increasingly thinking of the church as a significant component of a communal immune system. This means that for whatever problem—for every pathology, individual, familial or communal—the church is involved with other agencies to attend to those needs.

4. In your view, what is the most important issue presently facing North American Christians?

The most important challenge for us is to articulate a Christian witness that's not based on prosperity. I think the gospel we've been preaching to the poor is the gospel that says, "Become a Christian and be successful."

Our task is to uncouple the culture of success from the Gospel. That is the most important issue.

5. What would you suggest we do to recruit young people into ministry?

One of the most significant books I've found on that is Black & White Styles of Youth Ministry: Two Congregations in America by William Myers.

Part of what that book talks about is that youth ministry is a transmission of faith but also a transmission of vocation into the next generation. So, the question becomes, what are we transmitting to the next generation?

If it's simply that you work 70 hours a week and neglect your family, what are we really communicating?

We dare not look at a generation and write them off because this or that appears to be here, assuming that there won't be an appreciation of the theology of the cross.

In fact, there's openness among young people to the theology of the cross.

The problem is not that we've done a good job communicating it and they are consciously rejecting it but has to do with our Christianity being so wrapped up with success that we are obscuring the message.

6. What is the greatest area of possibility for the future of this denomination?

We need to trust that God will use us and trust our
From The Editor's Desk

No Prayer for Jabez

For a long time now, the concept of "prayer" has given me the willies (or the heebie-jeebies or whatever your grandmother called them). I know that by admitting that I'm opening myself up to all sorts of speculation regarding the status of my spiritual health. Oh well.

Maybe one reason I've had so much trouble with prayer throughout my Christian walk comes from the fact I wasn't reared as a Lutheran.

For most of my church-going life, I've attended Evangelical Fundamentalist-type churches. Gimme that old-time [20th Century, American, cultural] religion! In the church of my childhood, prayer was basically a form of magic through which all of us tried to make God do what we wanted him to do. It was like we were all medicine men trying to get through on a direct line to God.

In the youth group, we regularly prayed for all sorts of important things like new cars and name-brand clothing that wouldn't embarrass us in front of our church friends. But I was suspicious. If, like the preacher said, all we had to do was believe hard enough to get what we were praying for, why weren't we praying for more than just new cars?

My suspicions eventually got the best of me and, for a period of time, I refused to call myself a Christian. Christianity was nothing more than a delusional, self-centered approach to reality. It's been a hard walk back.

Unfortunately, my suspicions are confirmed every now and again. Take, for instance, the preacher I saw the other night during a TBN "Praise-a-Thon" yelling repeatedly into his microphone, "I want my STUFF!" (I swear I didn't make that up.) Apparently he was concerned to offer his devotees at least one clear alternative to Luther's comparatively boring view of good works. Let that Old Adam swing, baby! Yeah! But at least he was being honest.

The same can't be said for the latest marketing trend in American cultural religion, The Prayer of Jabez. This diminutive book by Atlanta evangelist Bruce Wilkinson has sold over 7 million copies and has spun off paraphernalia ranging from coffee mugs to wall plaques to, of course, T-shirts (they shall know we are Christians by our accessories). The prayer—"Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!"—is found at 1 Chronicles 4:10 and is rendered marketable because the verse's second half states "And God granted what he asked." Jabez isn't mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

In his book, Wilkinson claims that saying the prayer daily for 30 years has resulted in "abundant blessings". Others give it credit for new homes and cars.

Repeatedly, Wilkinson has stated that material wealth is not at all the primary goal of his favored mantra. To me, the prayer seems like a request for a non-strenuous land-grab, but I could be wrong.

For all its superficial clarity, the verse may be more difficult to interpret than I presume. In fact, it's quite simple to take out of context because, given its placement in a genealogy, there is no specific context. All the better to manipulate you with, my dear! (Can anyone say eisegesis?)

Even as I come from a background of manipulative, magical prayer, I wonder at the appeal surrounding such spurious, idolatrous and disrespectful approaches to God.

In a recent story on The Prayer of Jabez and its challengers in U.S. News & World Report, Lynn Garrett, religious editor at Publishers Weekly, offered an explanation. "To have a model of prayer," she said, "and by saying it properly and consistently, you can shape what happens to you—that's a notion many people find attractive."

Perhaps it was an unintentional irony that the cover story for that week's U.S. News was titled, "How To Make Yourself Happy!" Attractive, indeed.

Luther Productions: Exporting the Seminary

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Jansen said. There are possibilities that the Christian History Tutor could be used as an on-line teaching tool here at Luther.

Several items are available from Luther Productions. The two Bible Series video sets are:

• Retheim Explores Genesis, hosted by Terence Retheim, Professor of Old Testament
• When You Pray ... the Lord's Prayer with Dr. James Nestingen

The Faith Discovery Series from Luther Productions provides resources for people seeking to deepen their faith by studying their Christian heritage and tradition. Two items are currently offered in this series:

• Linda Sandell: The Story of Her Hymns, a video documentary of the troubled life and profound work of this Swedish hymn writer presented by Gracia Grindal, Professor of Rhetoric
• Architecture for Worship, a video set hosted by Mons Teig, Professor of Worship, that explores the groundbreaking work of architect Ed Sovik.

For more information about Luther Productions and its products, visit their website, www.lutherproductions.com
Wallace Gives the Answers

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confessional theology.
I think we're scared that a Lutheran understanding of the Gospel can't make it in the real world. The tendency, then, is to form Lutheran ghettos so that we're just talking to ourselves.

But we don't have to be fearful that our theology can't bear up to the questions asked by the world. It can be out there in the midst of the world.

What people need today is a message that allows them to live in the midst of all these ambiguities. And I'm convinced, more than ever, that it's a particular way that we live in dialectical tension that the world needs to hear. Our denomination has to stop being scared.

Continued from page 1

a huge dark cloud over Manhattan. Accus- tomed to the clouds of her native Iowa, she assumed a thunderstorm was brewing. The pastor was waiting in his car when she arrived and told her what was unfolding in the city. He said they would not open the church that day and told Brown to go home. She learned the rest of the story from television.

Later Brown walked to the harbor shore. A sight uncommon in the United States greeted her: military police. "I felt like I was in the West Bank," she said. Smoke blowing over Brooklyn brought a horrible smell and the horrible feeling of people incinerated in the tragedy.

Salaam's Bay Ridge Brooklyn neighbor- hood is a microcosm of the Middle East, with Jews, Arab Muslims, and Christians living in close proximity. Salaam's parishioners include Christians from Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, as well as a few converts from Islam. As a Christian and an Arab, Pastor El Yateem is in a position to be trusted by all sides. He was instrumental in forming Bay Ridge's Unity Task Force just one year ago in response to violence arising from Mideast tensions, to build bridges amid the diversity.

In the wake of September 11, the minis- try of the Unity Task Force has taken on new significance. Incidents of prejudice and violence against Arabs have affected the community. Muslims in the area have been particularly concerned about reprisals. The Unity Task Force is one way these Americans have found to stand together and support each another.

As for Brown, she has learned much by accompanying Pastor El Yateem to his meetings, speaking engagements, marches, vigils, and healing services. On the Sunday following the attack, she read one of the scripture lessons in Arabic during worship, drawing applause from her parishioners for this sign of identification, Christian unity, and support.

Brown has assisted the congregation in responding to immediate needs. This currently includes helping those whose English is not fluent navigate the complex network developed to attend to people's many new needs. An Arabic-speaking social worker has been hired, paid for with funds from Lutheran Disaster Response.

There is no doubt that Brown's internship will be radically different than planned. Currently many church programs are not working, in part because many parishioners are afraid to venture out from their homes. There seems to be no safe refuge for Arab Christians—not in their native Middle East, and now, evidently, not in the U.S.

But Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church is committed to faithfully witnessing to the safety all people have in God. With them, Heather Brown is devoted to proclaiming the unconditional love of Jesus.

Luther Intern Ministers in Crisis

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A Recommendation

An essay contest sponsored by "The Concord"

What theologian has influenced your Christian thought more than any other? Here's your opportunity to share your favorite with others! Luther to Mennon, Ruethe to Ratzinger, we're open to all corners. Perhaps you're taken with John Hick or Wolfhart Pannenberg. And hey, here's your chance to do some writing yet public posterior smoothing: maybe Gerhard Forde's your man, or how about Martin Marty? Even though it'll be difficult for some of you, please limit your essays to one subject and to 650 words. Two winners will be awarded a $50 gift certificate to the Lutheran Seminary bookstore.

Deadlines: Here's the tricky part. Winners will be chosen from among the essays published in The Concord throughout each semester (with a maximum of one per issue). This means that each issue of the paper represents a different deadline for entry in the semester-long contest. Hint: submit early while others are still engaged in rumination in preparation for their postifica-

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