Milestones and Stepping Stones
THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF LUTHERAN SERVICES IN AMERICA
Lutheran Services in America invites you to join a national conversation about how we are called to love and serve our neighbors. This booklet is just one in an ongoing and open series that is meant to provoke thought and generate discussion. Like conversations that one might have with one’s family, friends, professional or academic colleagues, these booklets are meant to be flexible in style, open to a wide range of subjects, limited only by imagination and interests, and ultimately available for use with multiple audiences: board or staff members, networking or external partners, synodical or congregational committees, seminary or college sessions, or anywhere that they might stimulate more conversation around a particular topic. The list is limitless. LSA only requires that in using the booklets, or parts of the booklets, that attribution is given to LSA and the original author.

Please let us know where and with whom you are having conversations and what you are learning. We would love to hear from you, and to gather your “conversation” into a booklet like this one, and then share it by way of the electronic communication vehicles of LSA. We hope for many conversations – with a sincere exchange of thoughts, perspectives and experiences – on issues and topics that will shape our future together. You may send your conversation to us as text; don’t worry about formatting or heavy editing – LSA will “publish” the conversation in a design just like this booklet. Or do you have ideas for other conversations you would like to see started? Let us know. If you would like more information about the LSA Conversations Series, including the list of the current booklets in the Series as PDFs for downloading, go to www.lutheranservices.org.

Join the conversations happening at LSA by email at conversations@lutheranservices.org or by phone 410-230-3552. We will quickly connect back to you!
The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah 61:1-4 (NRSV)

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah
Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”
Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

Psalm 82 (NRSV)

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.
Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,” and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

I Peter 2: 2-10 (NRSV)

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Luke 7:18-23 (NRSV)
Greeting

Grace to you and peace in the name of our crucified and risen Christ, Amen.

It is a great joy and privilege to join with you in giving thanks to God for the ten years of this amazing alliance of two national Lutheran church bodies and their health and human services organizations. What is truly amazing is the impact you are having in the lives of individuals, the vitality of families, and the well-being of communities. In my speaking, I always lift up the work of LSA and its affiliates.

By the authority vested in me (by myself), I do hereby declare that, from this moment onward (at least for the next 20 minutes or so), the name of this organization shall no longer be Lutheran Services in America. LSA shall stand for, “Living Stones in Action” or “Living Stones with Ability.”

Living stones

Yes, I realize the theme of this significant Tenth Anniversary gathering is “Milestones and Stepping Stones,” but if I am going to change the name of the organization, I might as well mess with the theme as well.

So the new theme for the gathering should be, “Living Stones – Stepping Stones and Milestones.” Why? Because stepping stones are what we create or discover as we serve. Milestones are what we accomplish or how we mark the passage of time. But living stones describe who we are and what God calls us to be – our identity and our vocation.

“Come to him (Christ), a living stone,” Peter invites us, “though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones,” he continues, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.”
Dr. Phyllis Anderson, president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, tells the story of when she, Herb, Joy, and Joel were backpacking in Norway. They were above the timberline and had gone off the trail to pitch their tent for the night. In the morning, they awakened to fog so dense they could not find the path. Calm gave way to anxiety. They began searching for something that would reassure them that they were not hopelessly lost, something to point the way. They finally came upon a pile of stones someone had gathered and piled up so that they formed a marker – a cairn – orienting both those who were lost and those simply needing reassurance that they are on the path.

A cairn – stones once scattered, now gathered, become like living stones. Could this be an image of LSA, an alliance of two Lutheran church bodies and our health and human service organizations? Faith-based organizations.

Living Stones in Action. LSA, a cairn of living stones. Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, pointing the way… for whom? For those society all too often abandons or shuns aside to live in isolation or shame. A cairn of living stones in action, pointing the way for those living with HIV or AIDS, struggling with dementia, or striving to get free from domestic violence. LSA is pointing the way for children with autism or ADHD, for a couple struggling with infertility longing to adopt, or for a chemically dependent adolescent bounced from one treatment program to another, with frequent arrests in between. LSA is a cairn of living stones in action for the grieving widow who feels something is wrong with her because her deep sorrow death will not heal in the three days, three weeks, or (at best) three months our culture gives us to mourn. For all I named and so many more who feel lost and abandoned, you stand as a cairn of living stones, pointing the way. You are pointing the way to healing, to wholeness, to hope, and to justice.

When disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus to enquire whether Jesus was the Messiah, to whom and to what did Jesus point? To the
blind who received their sight, to the lame who walked, to the lepers who were cleansed, to the deaf who heard, to the dead who were raised, and to the poor who had the Good News brought to them. In other words, to the very persons for whom God has gathered you and your organization into a cairn of living stones — markers — pointing the way.

Active participants and agents

Ah, but you are not passive markers only pointing the way. You are active participants. You are agents of God’s healing, reconciling love and mercy, and God’s justice and peace. Sometimes, you guide one to where the happy stones are; to affordable housing, to available in-home care, and to accessible health care. But where stepping stones seem absent or too far apart, it means joining with others to advocate in Washington or state houses for a change in policies regarding eligibility or funding so that these stepping stones might be predictable.

When our children were young, we enjoyed camping near a stream usually safe for small children, but it was always a challenge to try to cross without falling into the water. Sometimes we could ford the stream by finding stepping stones already present, but sometimes we would carry stones from the shore, throwing them down ahead of us as we passed through the waters.

That is an image I have of your vocations as social service people – not passively pointing the way, but actively joining and accompanying clients, residents, and patients as together you discover or move stepping stones into place. You provide stepping stones that lead to a life – and sometimes even a death – with greater dignity.

That is what our family experienced in December and January 2006 as we accompanied our Aunt Betty on her final baptismal vocation of dying in the faith. As she moved from her apartment at Lyngblomsten, a Lutheran SMO [social ministry organization], into the care center, she
was surrounded by the prayers and concerns of her community of friends and fellow residents and by the skilled care of nurses and therapists, housekeeping staff, and the pastoral ministry of chaplains. In that staff, we saw a microcosm of our diverse world – Christians and Muslims, immigrants from Sierra Leone and Southeast Asia, as well as third-generation descendants of Scandinavian immigrants together forming a caring community – a cairn of stepping stones that pointed Aunt Betty toward her desire for a dignified death in the promise of resurrecting to new life in Christ.

Tonight we say “thanks be to God” for the staff and volunteers of Lutheran healthcare service organizations who for the past ten years—and for generations before that—have, through their varied callings together been cairns of living stones with Christ Jesus, the cornerstone, pointing the way.

Stepping stones to a more just world

As we look to the next ten years, there is a temptation to become almost singularly preoccupied with the survival of our individual institutions, and with the separate identities of the two Lutheran church bodies. I know something of the pressures LSA officials face, but you know them better: the requirements mandated by government contracts, the expectations of donors, the differences between the two sponsoring church bodies, the desire to and challenge of paying living wages, the imperative to be good stewards of our environment, the pressure to increase pay, while keeping services affordable and staff turnaround minimal. All of these forces and factors literally can deplete the energy of leaders, leaving the cairn less a marker of living stones pointing the way than a memorial to a strong past, a precarious present, and an even less certain future.

When that becomes the case, I suspect the price we will pay is the failure to be evangelically persistent, even evangelically defiant in pointing the way and creating the way to a more just society and world.
We will reduce our vocation to serving absent our willingness to confront unjust economic systems and public policies.

Yet our readings for this evening are clear. We are scattered stones, gathered in Christ, made living stones anointed with the power, promise, and presence of the Holy Spirit for a purpose. It is a purpose that is both personal and communal. It is one that is systemic, whether familial or ecclesiastical; social or political; economic or environmental. It is as familiar and powerful a calling as the words from Isaiah that Jesus read for his inaugural address in the Temple:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities.

Isaiah 61:1-4 (NRSV)

That biblical mandate describes both our social location and a prophetic vocation: living stones amidst the poor and oppressed in the devastation of ruined cities and rural poverty, not just pointing the way to help and healing, but together creating, organizing, and discussing. You are stepping stones to a more just world, a transformed people.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

I Peter 2:10 (NRSV)

Diakonia

The Good News is that we are loved by God’s grace through faith for Jesus’ sake. In other words, God does not need our good works, but our
neighbor does. So finally, serving our neighbor is both diaconal and prophetic. The inseparability of the two is the clear vision and challenge of our global companions. Listen to their voices in “An Epistle from the LWF Global Consultation on Diakonia.” (November 2002, South Africa):

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\text{Diakonia is central to what it means to be the Church. As a core component of the Gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship. Diakonia reaches out to all persons who are created in God’s image. While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms, and transforms.}
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In diakonia, those served and those serving are both transformed. Diakonia is more than the strong serving the weak, which can lead to paternalistic assumptions and practices. As Lutheran churches, we are shaped by a theology of the cross, which compels us to identify with and for the suffering rather than the successful. A theology of the cross calls things what they really are, moving beyond politeness and pretense, breaking the silence, and taking the risk of speaking truth to power, even when this threatens the established order and results in hardship or persecution. This is at the heart of our prophetic diaconal calling.

Closing

Yes, tonight we say thanks be to God for this milestone of ten years of Lutheran Services in America being called by God to be Living Stones for Action. Christ Jesus, the cornerstone. Living stones gathered into a cairn and pointing the way to the in-breaking of God’s reign of justice, mercy, and peace. Discovering and creating stepping stones that lead us toward God’s gift of healing and hope, justice and joy, compassion and community, and courage and change. The Holy Spirit has anointed you for this holy calling. Let the celebration of Lutheran Service in America’s Tenth Anniversary begin! Amen.
The five Ends Policies approved by the LSA Board of Directors, March 2008, LSA Board Policy Manual, Section 1.2. (Called to Love and Serve Our Neighbors), and affirmed by the LSA Membership at its April 2008 Annual Meeting.