



# First Things ~ June 2024

## Looking Back and Looking Ahead

As I approach retirement, I can't help but looking back and see all the unexpected twists and turns

- that I never could have foreseen
- that have become such great blessings for me.

As Assignment Day approached in the spring of 1982, I dreamed of being called to a nice, cushy suburban congregation. When I heard that I had received a call to Central Africa, I experienced for the first time in my life my jaw dropping to the ground. I wasn't excited. I was scared! Because I couldn't think of a good reason to decline the call, I accepted – hardly the epidemic of willing service.

In those days, most missionaries only stayed in Africa for three years. But when three years were finished, we weren't ready to leave. Zambia was now home. Another five years went by. The Lord blessed us with three children, and Sue was pregnant a fourth time when we were asked to move to Malawi. We accepted that redeployment...and the very next day we found out that Sue was *infanticipating*...twins. That was the second time I felt my jaw drop to the ground. Thirteen more years went by. We started sending our kids to Luther Prep School in Watertown for high school.

As the mission field was shrinking in the aftermath of the economic downturn following 9/11, I decided it was time to return to the USA and do what I trained for – become a pastor. But, unlike today, there weren't many vacancies. Eventually we did receive a call to Immanuel in La Crosse, following in the footsteps of a legend there. Again, it was a little scary, but it all came together.

Then in 2012, I was called to serve as a missionary in India. Maybe I had learned from the past, but my jaw didn't drop to the ground at that point. We accepted that call, even through the work and the living conditions were not so great, and we pretty much figured that would be where we would serve until retirement.

That all changed in 2018 when I was told by the Indian government that I would not be allowed to return to India. Lots of things happened over the next eight months. I wasn't ready to retire, but even though there were plenty of vacancies, no calls came my way. Eventually First called. Then Covid came. Then a vacancy at St. John's, and another vacancy at St. John's.

There's no way I could have predicted all of this. And to be honest, I wouldn't have chosen all of this. But, now, as I look back on all of this, I can see the Lord's hand in it all, and all of his blessings as well.

And because of all of that, I can look forward to the future with confidence. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know who holds the future in the palm of his hand.

Those two times when I felt my jaw drop to the ground taught me something. They taught me that God can – and frequently does – turn our greatest fears into his greatest blessings. And because of that I can never forget that, come what may, the best is yet to come.

I pray that you remember that too.

## Announcements

June 9 – Retirement Celebration for Pastor Rieke  
June 23 – Pastor Rieke's Last Sunday at First  
June 30 – Pastor Lindholm will be preaching.

Our next CALL MEETING will take place on  
MONDAY, JUNE 10 at 7:30 PM.

At that time the congregation will also have the opportunity to call a LONG-TERM VACANCY PASTOR to serve our congregation starting in July.

SUMMER CHURCH OFFICE HOURS are  
Monday through Friday, Noon to 3:00 PM

MONDAY EVENING WORSHIP SERVICES will continue *at least* through the end of June. Watch for more announcements.

The only area congregation which received a pastor on Assignment Day at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was Christ our Rock in Rochester.

God Bless,

Pastor Mark

### 2024 Finances

Through April

Church Expenses	\$88,450
<u>Church Offerings/Income</u>	<u>\$80,066</u>

**CURRENT Surplus**                      **\$8,384**

The current surplus is due to:

- 1) **Debt Reductions offerings** (\$13,510 through April) – thank the Lord and thank you for those who gave
- 2) We have **underspent the budget** by \$5,500 through April

**Reminder: our GOAL for our Debt Reduction Offerings for 2024 is \$50,000.**

ELC Expenses	\$143,475
ELC Income	\$173,789
Mortgage Balance	\$279,254