

# 2024 Tanzania Mission Report

## Immanuel Lutheran Church and Yombo Lutheran Church

### I. Luanne Skrenes and Rev. Thomas Skrenes

The Gospel reading for June 9 was Mark 3:33-35.

*“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”*

In May 2024, six from Immanuel, Negunee, journeyed to Tanzania to visit and develop relationships with the people of Yombo Lutheran, Immanuel’s companion congregation. Upon arrival at the airport, a **large** group of people greeted us, most of whom were from Yombo, along with a few from the Eastern and Coastal Diocese (ECD) office. This greeting did not feel like we were there to meet and develop relationships with strangers. Immediately we felt like these people were our family. In typical Tanzanian hospitality, we were greeted with hugs (many of them), and flowers and handshakes and MANY photos! We experienced immediately that those who follow Christ and do God's will are to be like family. Our sisters and brothers in Tanzania place prayer and faith central in their lives. We have much to learn from them!

The trip was a complete success! Relationships were developed. We enjoyed the hospitality of the Tanzanians, staying in private homes. We worshiped (3+ hour worship services that seemed too short). We sang. We prayed. We laughed. We planted trees signifying the planting of and caring for our relationships. We ate delicious Tanzanian food. We planned for future companion activities. We held a joint companion committee meeting at which we agreed upon and our pastors signed a 2024 Companion Covenant promising to pray for each other and to plan for future relationship-building events. Each of the six of us are still mentally unpacking all that we experienced. Many of these experiences are difficult to put into words.



When we coordinate these trips bringing with us people who have never been to Tanzania, our hope and prayer is that this immersion experience is meaningful for our fellow travelers and that they feel that they return home a better person with a deeper faith. We also pray that relationships are developed with the people of Tanzania. These prayers were fully answered on this trip! Bwana Asifiwe! Praise the Lord!

All six of our delegation (Pastor Bre and Tom Kinnunen, Dana and Sally Echelbarger, and Bishop Emeritus Tom and Luanne Skrenes) worshiped at Yombo on Pentecost, the first Sunday we were in Tanzania. Pastor Bre preached a meaningful sermon and Bishop Emeritus Skrenes brought greetings from Bishop Katherine Finegan and the Northern Great Lakes Synod. It was a powerful service that lasted over 3 hours with many jubilant choirs, several offerings, and prayer. The pews in the sanctuary were purchased over the last few years in part with financial gifts from Immanuel. After worship, we visited their Sunday School where approximately 300 students gather in one room! A new Sunday School building is much needed!

In the afternoon, we sat in the shade of trees planted by Pastor Marcia Solberg and the 2013 Immanuel delegation and one we planted in 2017.

The second Sunday in Tanzania, the Echelbargers and Kinnunens worshiped with the people of Yombo while we worshiped at Kitunda Relini where they had a service lasting over four hours to inaugurate the yearlong youth theme of “Be the Light.” Bishop Emeritus Skrenes preached. There were many choirs and Bishop Alex Malasusa presided. Also in attendance were the ECD administrative staff. Many people commented that the sermon was excellent, but it was much too short!

Our delegation from Immanuel enjoyed an evening at Bishop Malasusa’s home. Here we were served a delicious meal by gracious hosts, and visited our dear friends, Ericha Malasusa (Bishop’s wife) along with their daughters, Miriam, her new husband, their newborn baby and our goddaughter Mercy. What a delight to visit with them!



While the Kinnunens and Echelbargers spent time developing relationships with the people of Yombo Lutheran, we tended to relationships with friends we have made over these nine trips to the ECD. Most meaningful of all was a visit to Dr. Amos Mwakilasa’s home. Dr. Amos has terminal cancer so was unable to go to the clinic with us to see the new equipment. He was obviously moved when we showed photos. Both he and Dr. Nangawe declared that none of this dental ministry would have been possible without our faith and trust in God. While visiting Dr. Amos we laughed, we reminisced, and we laid hands on him while we prayed. This was probably the last time we will see Dr. Mwakilasa until we meet in eternity.

Our hosts as in most of our trips to Tanzania were Hans and Violet Macha. The Macha’s are gracious and generous! They hosted a party for us to meet with friends including five of their six children, their spouses, and children. It was heartwarming to see the ‘children’ whom we have known since they were in grade school, now as adults.

While in Tanzania, we experienced God’s creation on an animal safari on the Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Crater. Witnessing The Great Migration was unbelievable where every year, more than 2 million animals (wildebeest, zebra, and gazelle) migrate across the ecosystems of the Serengeti in Tanzania and the Masai Mara in Kenya.

We give thanks for safe travel and a successful trip. We give God the glory for our immersion experience with our sisters and brothers in Christ at Yombo. We greatly appreciate and give thanks for the prayers and financial support from our Immanuel family. Bwana Asifiwe! Praise the Lord!

# A TASTE OF TANZANIA

## II. Sally and Dana Echelbarger

When we heard of Immanuel's companion congregation trip to Yombo we knew we wanted to be a part of the experience. Previously, we had heard from family and friends of their experiences with people of Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania. We desired to personally explore the culture, customs, lifestyles, and faith of what others described as such special places.

During our stay in Tanzania, we were invited to live with our gracious host family, the Kaitaba's, who are members of Yombo.



From the outset, the moment we arrived at the airport, we were greeted by a large group of people from Yombo. Everyone hugged us in a warm welcome as if we were returning family. The love was immediate and lasting. We find it difficult to properly illustrate that feeling in words. We have shared pictures. We have shared personal interactions to try to describe the impact of meeting and sharing with our Tanzanian friends. But we believe others can't really grasp the power of what our hearts felt. It's like trying to tell someone how a new food tastes. You can show them the recipe. You can describe the flavors. You can show pictures of the dish. But if you don't taste it for yourself, you really don't know the explosion of flavors the food offers.

Being with the people of Yombo made us slow down to recognize the abundant blessings we have with the many things our culture takes for granted here in Michigan. Tanzanian Lutherans at Yombo clearly express their love and faith throughout their daily lives giving thanks to God openly. Their faith is demonstrated by their love for family, friends and church. They are joyous and cultivate that joy daily. Everyone we met were typically very soft-spoken, but the church services were a time to sing and laugh and praise proudly. Tanzanian Lutherans have such a commitment and faith in that God will provide. It was a privilege to be invited into the homes of the members of Yombo. They wanted us to have the best of what they could offer. As a result, we realized we are very goal driven. Very interested in amenities. Very interested in pursuing material possessions. That seems to be the American way. The people we met and interacted with at Yombo are faith driven. They are driven by personal relationships. They offer joy and thanks for those aspects throughout their daily lives. Giving thanks to God first throughout their daily lives despite the routine struggles of urban Tanzanian life. We as Americans can learn much from that cultural outlook. We as Americans can learn much about what is truly important in life. Of what is truly important through relationships. What is truly important in what is real faith and how that faith becomes

personally manifested daily. That is wealth. That is quality of life. That reality offers much by which we as Americans and Lutherans can learn from and seek to achieve. This interaction has been a teaching experience for us placing our current lives in a true perspective to be sure. This experience has been a gift for us and we are thankful. We feel enriched. It will be sometime before we are able to fully internalize our time at Yombo. We now have much to achieve in our life outlook and quality of faith as a result.

During our time in Tanzania, we also had the opportunity to visit the outreach represented by the Mtoni Dispensary, Mtoni Diaconal School, Mkuza Girls School, Mlandizi Vocational Training Center, Kisarawe Junior Seminary, and Yombo Disabled Children college. It was excellent to be personally exposed to the mission and support in action.

Also, during our time in Tanzania, we underwent an interim by traveling on a photo safari within the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti Savannah. That adventure was extraordinary as we saw 40+ wild animals species and got to observe a fabulous portion of The Great Migration.

Despite having been a nearly lifelong visual aspiration realized, it did pale in comparison to the significance of our time with the people of Yombo. Sort of the icing on the cake and a portion of the vital ingredients of faith building recipe for a life fulfilling dessert experience partaken of both personally and directly. We have been blessed as a result. All of these exposures have led us to feel that we have just returned from a long anticipated family reunion of high quality.





# REFLECTING ON MY TANZANIAN TRIP

## III. Tom Kinnunen

My Tanzania trip was AMAZING.

I came back better than I was when I left. My relationships with the other travelers, my wife and my new friends in Tanzania all improved. Thank you.

I would have never thought I would ever visit Africa. How could I say no?

LOVE is the most powerful thing I experienced on my Tanzania adventure.

Tanzanians went all in. There was no awkward or silent time getting to know us. We were greeted at the airport by over twelve Tanzanians with gifts and wide open arms. I think Dana said it was like being greeted by family we haven't seen in years. I agree.

Our host family was LOVING and treated us like family with home cooked meals and unadulterated interest, curiosity, and honesty.

I got to dance, sing, converse, watch and learn under the Africa sun and moon and in the car rides in between with my new Tanzania friends.

I was influenced by the Tanzanians. I didn't see as many distractions in Tanzania as we have in Michigan. It was a simpler place but not necessarily easier. I was influenced to focus more on the basics including quality time with family and relationships. Some of our host family had long working days with long, crowded and dangerous commutes. Despite their long days they found time and energy to talk to us.

My impression of the Tanzanian Lutheran community is the same as ours but stronger. Maybe it was because they had a bigger church but it was powerful and beautiful to hear their choirs and church services. Maybe it was because their services were more than double our church service length. The Tanzanian Lutheran faith is strong and it was amazing to come together to celebrate and honor the same God.

The experience has shaped me as a Christian. It was hard to see the living conditions in Tanzania as they were lower than where I'm from. I don't remember seeing a lot of people with white hair in church or in public. I want to help Tanzanians but am challenged by the system. Some of the Tanzanians want to visit Michigan but I can't house them long term and may not be able to get time off of work to accommodate it.

The safari was a big experience because it was a safari. I don't have many friends that have gone on a safari. I never thought I'd sleep in a tent in the 'bush' with lions, ever.

I also enjoyed exchanging contact information with Tanzanian schools in hopes to start a pen pal program with Michigan students. I do have multiple lines out currently attempting to set it up.

Lastly, I want to say recognize and thank the Skrenes'. What an amazing journey to have pioneered. I can only imagine their first trip to Tanzania and all of the subsequent trips in between. I feel blessed to have crossed paths with them and to have this opportunity to have this wonderful, amazing, beautiful, fun, and exciting Tanzania experience. Good job.



# REFLECTIONS ON OUR TANZANIAN VISIT

MAY 2024

## IV. Pastor Bre Kinnunen

It's hard to condense the kind of learning and spiritual growth that I experienced in Tanzania into a paper format, but I will give it my best shot. This week as we went for an evening stroll in our neighborhood, we stopped to visit with a family a few doors down from us. As we were talking about our time in Tanzania, our friend Alison asked me, "Did you have any Divine appointments on the trip?" (In other words, did God show up in any special ways on the trip?). My answer to her was, "Yes, every day! Several times a day!"

Every day was filled with Divine appointments, times when I could feel the presence of the Spirit, times when I met Christ in relationship with another. I will share with you now a reflection that I wrote on the plane ride coming home. Hopefully that will give you a sense of the many ways that God made appointments with us and blessed while we were with our siblings in Christ in Tanzania. Here goes!



+Mama Angela (our host Mom) taught me how to pray often. Before we left for a trip, when we got home, before meals,... Always she would say, "Let us pray." and then either she would pray in Swahili or ask someone else to pray. She taught me how to publicly acknowledge God more often and to bring God (an awareness of God's presence and a need for God) into the now.

+I had the opportunity to preach at two worships at Yombo Lutheran Church (our companion congregation) where 600 or 700 Christians gathered. God faithfully provided the words for me to preach and helped me preach with the help of a translator. I was grateful for Bishop Emeritus Skrenes' help with the style of this kind of preaching and for telling me what was going on the first Sunday when we worshipped.

+The music and dancing in worship lifted my spirits! That is God at work! Can we use more music to lift our spirits and share the Gospel here at Immanuel? God, show us!

+Our Tanzanian friends in Christ taught me how to be more open and vulnerable. One example was at the closing of the farewell dinner where their council president invited each person to stand and share with the group what they wanted to say to us before we left for the airport. Then we were invited to share what we wanted to say to our new friends. We said what we needed to say, including things like, "I love you. I will miss you. This is not goodbye, only so long." They were very intentional about this goodbye. & then around 20-30 Tanzanians dropped us off at the airport and helped us with luggage and said goodbye right up until we couldn't see each other anymore. (& it was inconveniently late at night.)

+Tanzanians take time for worship. It's a big event on Sundays. Each week worship lasted from 7-10:30a. I got the sense that it was the pinnacle of the week for the family that we stayed with. And you dress up for worship. It was made clear to my husband Tom that he needed to wear a

shirt and tie with polished shoes. I appreciated the respect they had for worship and for God. Worship and their faith were top priorities in their life.

+The fellow Christians we spent time with seemed to know how to fellowship very well. We spent a lot of time together, and it was FUN! We danced, we sang, we laughed, we ate! They were very generous with their time. Many of the elders (council members) accompanied us several days while we were there. Their faith and love for one another seem to be what guides their lives rather than to “get ahead.”



+Offering was a big deal in worship. They took several offerings during worship in the style of walking it up to the baskets. They embody generosity in so many ways. They shared their homes, their hearts, their faith, their time, their gifts with us!

+Hubert Kiata (our host Father) taught me how to ask for forgiveness when leaving an experience like this. Publicly in worship, he asked that we forgive them for any ways they may have made us feel uncomfortable. This was powerful. Before I left, I also asked for forgiveness from them for any way that I may have hurt them. How freeing! This is freedom in Christ!

+In general, the Tanzanians I met wanted to talk about God. Even young adults! They are natural witnesses of the faith. I have A LOT to learn from them in this regard.

+When we visited various schools and the medical clinic, one of the rituals that was very important was to take time to introduce ourselves. This was so intentional and so much love was shared in this exchange. It really helped to build the relationships that we made. They honored the dignity of each person present reflecting that we are all created in the image of God.

+We communed together often through wonderful, fresh cooked Tanzanian food. Food was abundant and delicious and guests were always the first to eat.

+Have I mentioned yet how generous, kind, loving and hospitable our Tanzanian siblings in Christ are?!? I heard more than once, “When you are happy. I am happy.” They went above and beyond to welcome us and to provide for us.

In closing, I’ll say that it was a true blessing to get to make new friends in Christ in Tanzania and it was equally a blessing to get to know our fellow Immanuel travelers better through this experience. The love that we shared among us and that was fueled by God was real and life-changing. I felt so much of Christ’s love while we were there, that at times, it was hard to receive it all. I guess that means there was a lot left to share with others.

Thank you, friends in Christ at Immanuel, for this opportunity. Thank you for allowing me to leave the parish two weeks for it to happen, for financially supporting this trip, and for making our relationship with our siblings in Christ at Yombo a priority for us. It was a faith deepening and life changing experience. Thank you! Thanks be to God!



## OUR SYNOD WORK IN TANZANIA

### V. Luanne and Rev. Thomas Skrenes

During our time in the Eastern and Coastal Diocese this May we also visited schools, clinics, and institutions with whom the Northern Great Lakes Synod has had a relationship with and supported for over 30+ years.

#### 1. Mtoni Dispensary

- a. It was especially moving for us to visit the Mtoni Dispensary and see first-hand the progress of the dental clinic. This project began in 2010 with conversations between Dr. Amos Mwakilasa, the chair of the ECD medical board and Luanne. In 2012, the NGLS sent portable dental chairs and equipment to the ECD and the first dentists, Dr. Jim Hayward and Dr. Mike Orhanen. Dr. Brian Anderson conducted clinics in 2015 (along with Dr. Bruce Anderson), 2017 and 2019. Dr. Brian and his wife Dr. Danielle Anderson are now administering this project. Dr. Danielle along with Stephanie Wright visited the dental clinic to assist in setting up the fixed chair and assess the needs since there was a lack of visits due to Covid 19. Luanne was filled with emotion to see the progress reflecting on from where we started. It was especially meaningful to spend time with Dr. Nangawe with whom she worked to coordinate clinics after Dr. Amos retired.
- b. Seeing Dr. Mwakilasa, Dr. Nangawe and the progress of the clinic, was a powerful reminder that God puts the right people in place at the right times to make things happen. Had it not been for these people of faith the dental project would have never happened.



- c. The government has yet to file their final report on the recent inspection, which will allow the dental clinic to begin functioning with Josephine as the dental therapist. They hope to begin offering dental services in June. A few NGLS congregations and individuals have agreed to pay the dental therapist's salary.
- d. The clinic staff was grateful for the two fifty pound duffel bags of dental supplies accompanied us on the trip.
- e. Dr. Samwel Kiwanga, the ECD medical director, was our driver for several days. It was good to get to know him. We are grateful for his partnership and leadership.
- f. The Tanzanian's have a vision! The long-range plan for this clinic is to focus on dental and orthodontia care; moving all other clinic services to a new site!



## 2. Kisarawe Lutheran Junior Seminary

- a. Kisarawe has 187 students, of which only 131 pay school fees. There are 26 staff.
- b. Cash flow is a continuing problem.
- c. The new headmaster, Maxon Wilson Bindoneni, appears to be a good administrator.
- d. Godfrey Ntekaniwa, who participated in a teacher exchange in the NGLS, is the head teacher.
- e. The school is in need of upkeep and maintenance.



## 3. Mkuza Girls School

- a. Currently there are 169 students with 14 teachers. Of these students, 32 are orphans. This school can accommodate 250 students.
- b. The head mistress, Mercy Nkya, thanked the NGLS for their financial support used to upgrade to a solar power system. In the past, the NGLS has financially supported Mkuza in:
  - i. Building two laboratories
  - ii. Building a dormitory
  - iii. Building a barn for pigs
  - iv. A donation of an electronic microscope
  - v. A donation for the purchase of bunk beds for the first dormitory built by the Church of Finland
  - vi. The purchase of a van to transport girls
  - vii. In drilling a water well with central faucets.
- c. Because of the recent dormitory and administration office fires, girls are now crowded into the current dorms.
- d. The school is struggling and has many needs. One priority is the need of a nutrition class building, enhancement of programing and classrooms for home economics classes.
- e. After the construction of these classrooms, new dormitories are the next priority.

## 4. Mtoni Diaconal Center/School

- a. Mtoni is one of only a few schools in the country for special needs children and is as a model for others across Tanzania.
- b. Due to the recent flooding, the school closed for several weeks. Students have now returned.
- c. The government pays the salaries of the 26 staff members
- d. The plan for this school is to build in a new location with updated facilities and play areas.

5. Mlandizi Vocational Training Center

- a. This was another emotional visit! When we first visited this site in 2017 there was only one building (the chaplain's office). They described the vision for this school for special needs adults, which was to be the first of its kind in Tanzania.



Carolyn Shedafa showed us a layout of the building plan, all which seemed to be a far reach from being able to come to realization. The ECD collaborates with the United Evangelical Mission of Germany on this project. Now, in May 2024, we were meeting with the first group of students! When Luanne spoke, she only had tears at first, seeing this place that we have supported financially and with our prayers now housing, and giving opportunities for these vulnerable students.

- b. There are 28 students (12 girls and 16 boys) with 13 staff. They could accept more students
- c. It was also emotional because our friend, Anna, who we have known since she was a little girl, is the administrator of the project. They have plans to build more dormitories! God is good!
- d. Students attend Mlandizi for four years learning general studies and basic activities of daily living while learning skills in the service industry to equip them for long-term inclusion into the labor market

6. Kinondoni Lutheran Congregation

- a. We delivered a letter of greeting from the pastor and a gift of prayer squares from the women of Bethel, Ishpeming to Kinondoni Lutheran Church.
- b. We heard a presentation about this congregation, exchanged gifts between Bethel and Kinondoni, and enjoyed a delicious Tanzanian meal.
- c. Both congregations are hoping to renew their companion relationship.

The roads to these institutions were long and difficult due to the recent rainy season. However, a benefit of this challenging travel is that we became more acquainted with Anania Ndongole, the ECD companion coordinator, Agnes Lema, the ECD administrator of education, and Dr. Samwel Kiwanga. These people are important in the future relationships between the ECD and the NGLS.

The work and cooperation continues as we walk 'Bega Kwa Bega,' shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in Christ of the Eastern and Coastal Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.



Mkuza Girls School



Kinondoni Lutheran Church