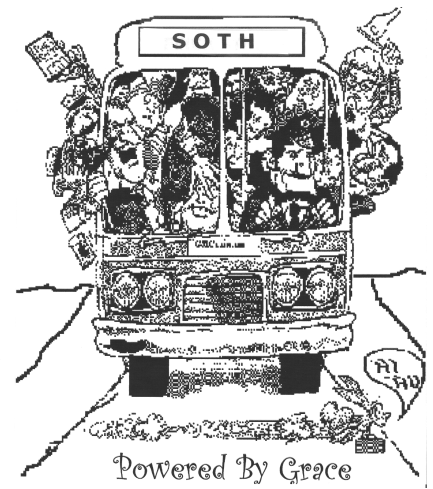


## Professing catholic

Shepherd of the Hills has decided to travel to the top of Cottonwood Pass to view the fall foliage. The leaves are just beginning to turn and the views are spectacular. Toward the middle of the bus, people were reminiscing about customs practiced in their hometown churches when they were children. "Saint Lucia Day is December 13th", Thomas Larsen said. He remembered celebrating it as a child in his Swedish Lutheran congregation in Iowa. He said, "In Sweden, Saint Lucia Day marks the beginning of the Christmas season. One of the girls in high school was selected to wear a halo around her head with candles mounted on it. What a sight she was when they lit all the candles! Other girls would each hold a candle and follow her in procession. The candles symbolize the light of Christ come into the world."



Dorothy Hanson remembered having to learn the hymn "Jeg Er Sa Glad" in Norwegian at Christmas time. "All the kids learned it in Sunday school", she said. "It was so much fun to learn a foreign language." Before we knew it, Dorothy was standing in the aisle with her hands in the air singing: *Jeg er sa glad hver julekveld, ti da blev Jesus fodt; da lyste stjernen som en sol, og engler sang sa sodt.* Her husband said, "Sit down Dorothy, you're making a fool of yourself!" She replied, "Get up here you old goat! Let's sing it in English!" Soon, they were both standing and leading the whole bus: *I am so glad each Christmas Eve, the night of Jesus' birth! Then like the sun the star shone forth, and angels sang on earth.*

Gertrude Guttenheimer could no longer contain herself. She jumped up and began singing in German her favorite song: *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht! Alles schlaft, einsam wacht nur das traute, hochheilige Paar. Holder Knabe im lokkegen Haar, scholaf in himmlischer Ruh, schlaf in himmlischer Ruh.* When she concluded, everyone continued singing in English: *Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright. Round yon virgin mother and child. Holy Infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.* The bus became silent as people were absorbed in warm thoughts of childhood memories.

Yasua ibn Yusuf al Nijjar was from Palestine. He had met people from Shepherd of the Hills when they were visiting Christmas Lutheran Church in Palestine a couple of years ago. Now he was visiting the United States and staying with Josef and Magdalena Carpenter who were serving on the Mission Team. He was taught by Christian missionaries and spoke very good English. He stood and addressed the people, "I send greetings and peace from my Arabian brothers and sisters in Palestine. Thank you for the prayers and support you have given Christmas Lutheran Church over the years. I remind you that 'Abraham is the father through faith of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Centuries later, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, gave his life for all of humanity. His followers led the movement that became universal Christianity. The arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was witnessed by Arabs and Middle Easterners along with others during the Roman Empire in multi-ethnic Palestine.' (Taken from the ELCA statement "Strategies for Arab and Middle Eastern Ministry) As I listen to your Christmas hymns sung in Norwegian and German, I am reminded that our church is universal and in every country of the world." Then, Yasua sang his favorite Christmas carol, "I Love You, Manger Child," in Arabic. What a beautiful tenor voice he had! Pastor Bob thanked him for the beautiful song and his greetings from our brothers and sisters in Palestine. When Yasua sat down, Elmer 'two-step' Inkfest, the choir director, went over and asked Yasua if he would consider joining the choir. A lengthy discussion ensued.

Suddenly, Powered By Grace's engine roared as it neared the top of Cottonwood Pass. Hubert Lautenschlager, Chairperson of the Council announced, "We are reaching the Continental Divide. You don't get much higher than this!" The view was breathtaking! Mountains were covered with colorful trees as far as the eye could see. Powered By Grace pulled over and parked. Everyone left the bus to get a better view. Some of the children began running up a path that went to the very tip of the Divide. Others followed them eager to see more of this beautiful scenery. The path was steep and the air was thin at 12,000 feet. Even youth began to lose their breath and slow down. Soon, everyone was standing at the top of the Divide.

“Wow!” Hubert said, “You can see forever up here! I feel so close to God!” Jokingly, he quoted the Mount of Transfiguration passage, ‘Let’s build three booths, one for Jesus, Moses and Elijah!’ <sup>Matthew 17:4</sup> “It would be nice if we could stay on the mountain tops,” he said, “but, eventually we must descend into the unknown challenges in the valleys of life.”

“Stretching our boundaries and having a broad vision like this are important to the church’s spiritual life too.” Pastor said. “That’s why we profess faith in ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church’ when we proclaim the Nicene Creed.” Ole spoke up and said, “But Pastor, ve are Luterans. I don’t tink much of sayin dat ve believe in da catolik church.” Ole wasn’t sure about much, but one thing he knew was his commitment to his Lutheran faith. Once, when he and Lena traveled from Fargo to Winnipeg, they stopped in a bank to exchange some U.S. dollars into Canadian currency. The bank clerk looked at the currency Ole passed through the window and asked, “What denomination?” Ole said, “Lutheran, of course.” He went on to tell the clerk, “Years ago, during da depression ve didn’t have much money and da soles of our shoes ver so thin dat ven ve stepped on a dime ve could tell vhedder it vas heads or tails.”

Gertrude Guttenheimer suggested rather than saying “catholic”, we should say “Christian”. Pastor pointed out that ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ are important characteristics of our Christian faith, which is why they were included when the Nicene Creed was formulated in 325 AD and embraced by Luther and his associates in the sixteenth century. Pastor reminded Gertrude that *catholic* had a small ‘c’ and was a Greek word meaning *universal*. To emphasize his point, he asked Gertrude, “Who founded our Lutheran faith?” She replied, “Martin Luther”. Pastor responded, “Martin Luther reformed our faith. Jesus Christ founded it. We profess ‘apostolic’ because we trace our origins from Christ to the Apostles (33 —120 AD) and then to the Apostolic Fathers (120 —250 AD). We profess ‘catholic’, because the Good News of the Gospel is for all, not just a select few.”

Pastor continued, “Yasua reminds us just how big our church is. The term ‘catholic’ is much larger than German, Norwegian, or Swedish Lutheran. It is also much larger than the Roman Catholic Church. Recently, the Pope issued a statement indicating that only the Roman Catholic Church can claim to be a Church in the true sense of the term. This narrow understanding indicates that what the Pope considers to be a “proper Church” is much more Roman, than it is universal. The catholic church does not exist in any one Christian body. Rather, together we all make up the catholic (universal) church.” (see: The Lutheran, Sept. 2007, [www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org))

Hubert said, “Religion seems to be involved in lots of problems these days. It seems that Arabs and Jews have been fighting each other forever. And, on September 11, 2001, religious-inspired violence reached the shores of the United States. What about radical Islam? When we confess in a universal church, does that mean the God we believe in is the same one true God over everyone?” “Yes”, Pastor said, “But the Inquisition, Crusades and radical Christian fundamentalism remind us that Christianity has it’s problems too. Religion can contribute to tribalism, animosity, and, under the right circumstances, violence. Whenever a religious group says, ‘We have **all** of God’s truth’, it begins to cast an ugly shadow and risks becoming more of a hindrance than a help to society. To say, ‘We have all of God’s truth’ is not far from saying, ‘We are God’. The people who incited Jesus’ crucifixion believed they had all of God’s truth and refused to allow their understanding to be expanded. Believing the church to be catholic or universal reminds us to remove our blinders and see the vastness of what God has done in Christ.”

Pastor continued, “The ELCA (see [elca web site: www.elca.org/questions](http://www.elca.org/questions)) challenges us to expand our thinking about the universal scope of salvation in Christ. Quoting Lutheran theologian Carl Bratten, the ELCA states, ‘What God has done for you and me in Christ, he has done for all.’ While acknowledging who is saved is hidden in the mind of God, the ELCA goes on to state, ‘There is a universalist thrust in the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s theology. How else can we read passages such as ‘for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ?’ (1 Cor 15:22; see also Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:28.) To those who argue that salvation comes only through making a decision for Jesus, the ELCA says we must be careful not to make our decision into a ‘work’ we do to earn heaven. (Ephesians 2:8-9) Throughout Luther’s writings, he had little confidence in the power of the human will. He would say, ‘God has grasped us,’ rather than we have grasped God. Our peace is in knowing that His grip is stronger than ours.”

Hubert said, “Isn’t our understanding of God’s Grace similar to our understanding of catholic?” “Amen,” Pastor replied. “We should never place a period, where God has put a comma.”

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