

Dying with grace

CHRISTINE LAZAR (right) walks with her daughters, Rosanna (left) and Tricia, at Camp Getaway. Christine is HIV-positive.

THIS PROGRAM OCCURRED FOR TWO YEARS AT
LOME, OREGON, IL.

Grass-roots groups seek signatures

A document circulating among ELCA members for signatures asks for a commitment to daily ministry in the world. Another document asks members to join forces in registering concern about the church's confession of faith. And a third asks for suspension of the development of social statements.

Expressing concern for "confessional and pastoral integrity in our parishes," six pastors in New York and New Jersey distributed 9.5 theses for ELCA pastors to sign.

The document, signed by 700 pastors and almost 300 lay people, will be presented to the new bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the ELCA Conference of Bishops.

'We felt alienated'

"We felt isolated and alienated in the church, and we had a suspicion that others were in the same boat," said Louis Smith, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Collingswood, N.J., and one of the pastors who helped develop the document.

The document was sent to all ELCA parish pastors as well as bishops and former bishops. The title calls to mind the 95 theses of Martin Luther, which led to the Reformation and the start of the Lutheran church in the 16th century.

The ELCA is in a crisis of faith, the statement says. The real struggle is not conservative vs. liberal but "for faithful adherence to the Scriptures, creeds and confession over against their subordination to these social or religious ideologies."

Among the signers of the 9.5 theses are Bishop Donald J. McCoid of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod, Bishop Kenneth H. Sauer of the Southern Ohio Synod, former Metro-

politan New York Synod Bishop William H. Lazareth, former North Carolina Synod Bishop Michael C.D. McDaniel and former Lutheran Church in America Bishop James R. Crumley Jr.

Another document, "A Call to the Center," was adopted by the Minneapolis Area Synod and will come before the Churchwide Assembly this month. It was drafted by a group described as "centrist theologians" that includes former American Lutheran Church Bishop David Preus.

The document suggests the ELCA not develop social statements for a time because they divide rather than unite the church. And it encourages renewed learning among all members, focusing on the ELCA's scriptural heritage and confessional base.

Nelvin Vos of Maxatawny, Pa., helped develop "A Call to Action" on the ministry of all the baptized.

The document says, "We are committed to the centrality of the ministry

of God's people where they work, learn and play daily. We are troubled that in many of its structures and priorities, this church has placed more emphasis on what happens inside the church than on the nurture of people who are agents of God's love through Christ in the world."

Vos and four others serve on an ad hoc committee invited by the ELCA Division for Ministry to formulate a response to the Study of Ministry approved by the 1993 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. A report to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly (see page 35 for more on the assembly) will include reports and recommendations.

About 500 people had signed the call as of June 15. The drafting committee includes Vos, Melvin George, Plymouth, Minn.; the Rev. Harold Hoekstra, Dearborn Heights, Mich.; Carol Schickel, Jacksonville, Fla.; and Shirley Teig, Plymouth, Minn. Signatures will be collected through Aug. 15. ■

CAROLYN LEWIS

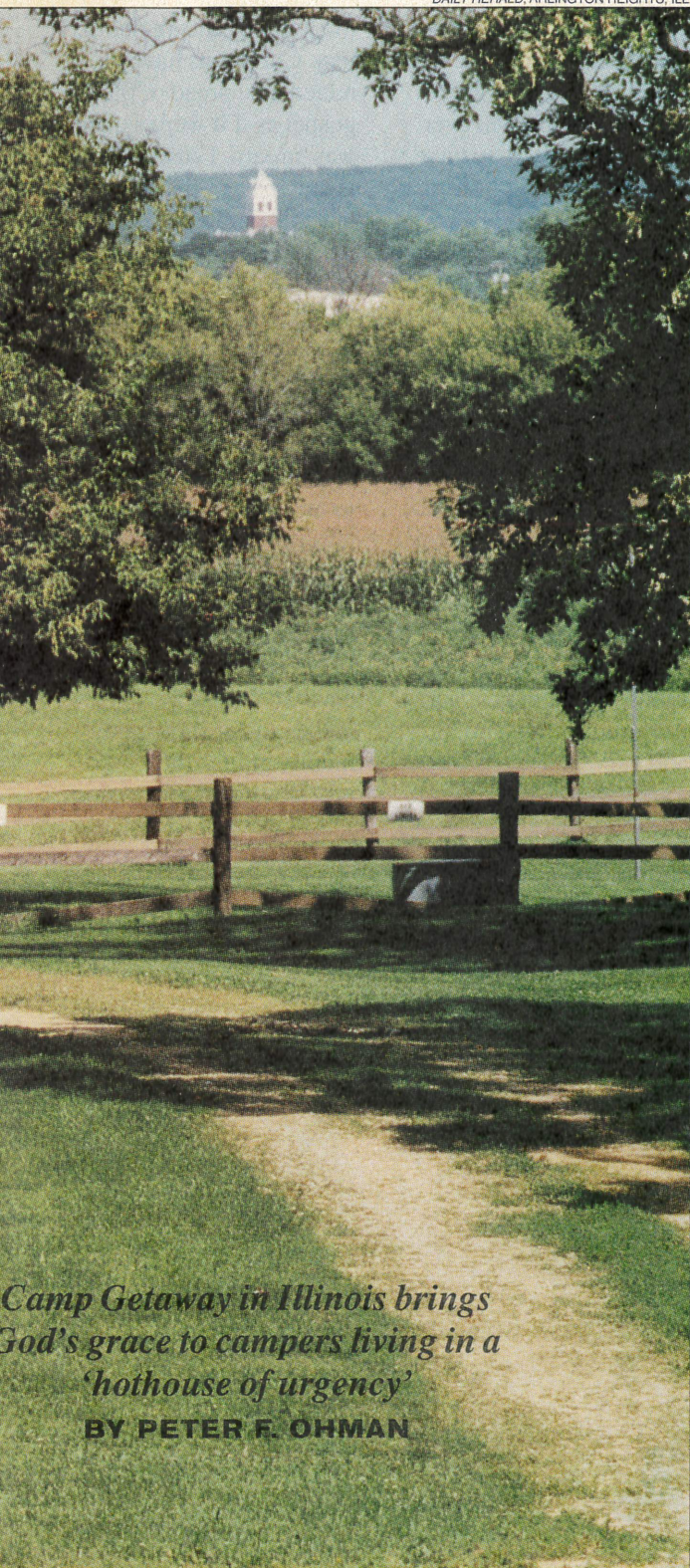
A win-win situation



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ANDREA DEGROOT-NESDAHL, newly elected bishop of the South Dakota Synod, has reason to smile. She became bishop—and took the consolation prize as well. During the synod assembly, her husband promised that if she did not become bishop, he would buy her a freezer—something she badly wanted. So after assembly-goers elected her bishop, they took a collection, bought her a freezer and had it delivered at the assembly on the final day. Degroot-Nesdahl is the second woman bishop to head an ELCA synod.

DAILY HERALD, ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, ILL.



Camp Getaway in Illinois brings God's grace to campers living in a 'hothouse of urgency'

BY PETER F. OHMAN

Ohman, a candidate for ELCA ordained ministry with a dual degree in theology and social work, is a member of Faith Lutheran Church, Moline, Ill.

Francis is celebrating his first year of sobriety in some while.

"Peter," he says, "I'm so glad I've had all the terrible experiences I've had because I am now able to relate to so many of the problems people have."

Francis is cheery and earnest: a witness to the true faith, to God's grace—which is especially graceful in a guy who is dying.

Francis isn't the only one who's dying on this pleasant August evening at a camp in the woodlands of northern Illinois. We listen to the children being put to bed. Some of these children—and most of the adults—are dying as well. They're dying of AIDS.

Camp Getaway is a once-a-year, five-day retreat for families affected by HIV. Lutheran Social Services of Illinois and 14 other agencies and hospitals cooperate with the program.

Open acceptance

A typical family for us is a single infected mother, two uninfected children and an infected child. We minister to these folks in a variety of ways: Bible study, hiking, meditation, canoeing, storytelling and teaching parenting skills ... all in an atmosphere of uncompromising and open acceptance of them as they are.

These people often feel as if they have played the prodigal in their lives. As vessels of God's grace, we remind them that they are as

acceptable in God's eyes as the prodigal to his father.

Paradoxically, dying may be what saved their lives. "I'd still be turning tricks if I hadn't found out," says 34-year-old Jean. This is also my age, so I listen with an eerie sense of camaraderie. Jean chortles as she describes her life, which includes more nightmares than anyone should have in a lifetime.

Yet these nightmares and the words to describe them—incest, rape and alcoholism—are the threads that, together with more benign ones, form the tapestry of her life.

Telling the story

If she is to tell her story, she must say these words. Over and over she must be allowed to tell her tales, sifting, editing, fitting in her story with the story Jesus told.

She laughs as she speaks, but it is not the laughter of innocent mirth. No, it is less than that because Jean's life makes such laughter difficult. But it is also more than that. It is the laughter of raw life celebrating yet another, unexpected day of living.

Most of these families have had a difficult time of it. Up until about three years ago, Marie prostituted herself to feed her drug habit. She slept in the doorways on wintry Chicago streets.

Other parents at camp have similar stories. Look at these legs, says Suzy. They are a sight—for her scarred legs are a trophy

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won at the expense of years of heroin addiction. Her faith journey has given her the signs of suffering that are also signs of hope.

A time for renewal

Did I say faith journey? Camp Getaway offers these brothers and sisters a getaway from some of life's troubles. They have time to renew themselves and revive their flagging spirits from the bottomless well of the Holy Spirit. They've got limited time and resources—and more to do than many of us. They find themselves now in a hothouse of urgency. While they're still relatively healthy, they've got to make up for all the years wasted. Or were they

wasted? I think of Francis again, and I ponder.

Another mission operates at Camp Getaway. This vision of ministry, I'm convinced, is a glimpse of the way of which Jesus speaks. For while we are witnessing to our campers, we staff are also receiving a sort of holy wisdom in return. The Apostle Paul may have written of just this in his first letter to the Corinthians: "... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ... what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

As a Christian, I am strengthened in my faith in God's promises by the living testimony of what these brothers and sisters have

endured—dare I say it—on my behalf. They have ventured to the very edge of civilization without ever leaving home. They have returned alive with stories to tell.

I'm praising the mystery of God as revealed in the faces, words and lives of these priestly people I call campers. For to see their faces is to peer into the face of the living God. Just as Jacob saw that in the strangest, most unexpected place—in the face of his enemy, his brother Esau—I see the face of God in these campers.

In some places we can glimpse a bit more clearly the holiness that undergirds and pervades our lives. At

too many points in our history, Christians have directed the spread of the gospel as if it were a one-way stream. I suspect this is only part of the story, one that denies us adequate irrigation from the living waters.

The full gospel unfolds as we respond compassionately to the less-fortunate. But we also must be open to the possibility—indeed the probability—that God put us all together for a good reason. Part of that reason just might be for the poor, the weak, the infirm, the unfortunate and the foolish to minister to those of us who claim to be less well-versed in these tales of our community of faith. ■



ASHLEY, 5, CLINGS to her mother, Kim, who is HIV-positive. Camp Getaway offers a program ranging from Bible study to hiking and parenting skills classes for families affected by HIV.