



May 2020 update from:

Dr. Stephen & Jodi Swanson

ELCA Global Personnel

**Dear Augustus Lutheran Church,**

### **Stepping into the Rain**

On March 17<sup>th</sup>, our organization, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), recalled all its global personnel back to USA.

My response to ELCA Global Missions explained why we were requesting to stay in Tanzania. It was not an easy letter to write:

*“As a physician, I have taken a vow to care for the sick and hurting, in all situations and every season. Over the past 20 years, I have directly cared for patients with every manner of life-threatening viral, bacterial, parasitic and fungal diseases, including meningococemia, measles, rabies, tuberculosis, etc. It is a physician’s calling to be there for their patients, in health and disease.*”

*As I spoke with my Tanzanian doctors about the potential of my being recalled back to USA, I could see the anxiety on their faces. We have developed a deep relationship of trust over the years, and I have been there alongside them at 3 am to care for unstable patients. Now, when uncertainty and forthcoming challenges exist, they see me leaving?*

*As such, I do believe that this moment in time is a once-in-a-generation event, that none of us will ever forget. As healthcare providers, Jodi and I feel it is our place to be here, where we are called to serve. For myself, it’s in the hospital, with my Tanzanian doctors. Caring for the smallest, and most vulnerable of all— children.”*

Since late March, coronavirus has entered Arusha. Over the past 6 weeks, we have been busy making face masks for Arusha-area hospitals, partnering with local tailors and workshops to produce over thousands of cloth face masks at \$1.50/each. N95s and protective gowns are largely non-existent in every hospital. Glove costs are rapidly outpacing the hospital’s ability to purchase. We are making washable PPE gowns, foot covers, plastic face shields to provide at no-cost to faith-based hospitals. Soon we will be providing them to Lutheran Hospitals across Tanzania. We have located a local brewery

that was making 80% ethanol-based sanitizer and have obtained it for all hospital staff. We've reduced our hospital visitors, screened patients outside, and adopted a face mask requirement for all healthcare workers (HCWs). Our pediatric and NICU team led the way, being the first to adopt a face mask requirement— all the masks were provided by NICU Fund ([www.tanzanianchildren.com](http://www.tanzanianchildren.com)). All spare moments, when not seeing patients, are engaged in raising funds and getting PPE to hospitals.

The extent of COVID-19s impact in Tanzania is unknown. PPE needs are great. Testing and reporting follows different guidelines than we are accustomed to in the United States. All laboratory testing is exclusively conducted through the National Reference Laboratory in Dar es Salaam. The Ministry of Health is responsible for all reporting and hospitals and individual HCWs may not discuss in a public forum their experiences, to avoid public panic. Among many Tanzanians, the use of local boiled plants (mango and guava leaves, etc) is believed to prevent or treat COVID-19. The president dispatched a plane to Madagascar to obtain a herbal tonic solution from the artemisia plant, which has been touted as a [dubious] cure for coronavirus. Local social media is afire with claims of lemon, ginger, aspirin, and various plants all touted as cures for coronavirus.

In this time, core measures around widespread mass testing, accessible information, and scientifically-validated treatment regimens are not always embraced by public figures. I do not always understand why. Over the past weeks, reports of nighttime burials and increasing numbers of unexplained community deaths exist. Most Tanzanians are largely afraid to get tested, to avoid the label of "COVID infection". Testing is also difficult to obtain. Many hospitals are in a difficult place, and care for suspected COVID patients is difficult because of a lack of finances, supplies, and fears on the part of both patient and HCWs. And here we are. The situation is full of unknowns, flights out of the country are mostly nonexistent.

In the midst of all of this, I deeply admire the fortitude and bravery of our Tanzanian doctors and nurses. They still go to work every day and care for patients. The NICU babies continue to arrive, unaware of the pandemic that the world is staring down. It is for these doctors, nurses and children and babies that we stay—they are our family. And I have stepped into the rain without an umbrella, so that I can be with them... perhaps more afraid than I have ever been, and more in love than I could imagine.



There are so many examples of local initiatives and collaboration. In the photos above you will see our locally made face masks, a hand washing stations at the entrance of Selian Lutheran Hospital and the roadside. Government and private hospitals are working together to create safe places for COVID patients to be cared for, local and expat companies have pulled together to design and produce locally made cloth face masks (thank you Evanna & Alexis at Dunia Designs, Jessica Peterson at Dorobo, Beate at Blue Heron!) paid for by the NICU Fund, local Rotary Club, and private donations from within the expat community! Some of the cloth face masks have been donated to Ace Africa who are providing COVID training and information sessions in the outlying wards of Arusha District.

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A design for a prototype for COVID19 protective face shields has been created by our son and his two friends, using the 3-D printer at our school. They are now being produced and assembled for hospitals. Special shout out to Cody, Magnus and Caedmon, their UWCEA school and Dunia Design! Though it has been challenging, it is also encouraging to see the determination, creativity, and collaboration that has risen during difficult times.

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**Anna's baby.** She was born 13 weeks premature, weighing barely 1 kilogram (2 lb- 2 oz).

Now she is 8 weeks old, still learning how to breastfeed. Supported by our NICU Fund.

These little ones are so unaware of the what rages outside.

They continue to need our love, support, and medical care.

[www.tanzanianchildren.com](http://www.tanzanianchildren.com)

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When Indya was evacuated to South Africa in 2016, Isaiah 40:31 became "our theme verse" for that time. Again, we have found comfort in these words:

*"Those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.*

*They will soar high on wings like eagles."*

I (Jodi) have found myself anxious in this unknown situation where facts are hard to find and guidelines are vague or sporadically practiced around me. When we came to Tanzania in 2013, Psalm 139:9-10 was a guiding verse for me and it is amazing how in these times, this verse has again been spoken to me through a song here and a friend's text there... it seems to me, a timely reminder.

*"If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."*

These are difficult and uncharted times, but we are not alone. We are so grateful for God's ever present help in times of trouble (Ps. 46:1) and for your love and support. Thank you reaching out to us, for standing with us in these times.

Steve and Jodi