



## ARTS ISSUE

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# Church as center for community arts and people

Originally, it was a matter of good stewardship. The Lutheran Church of the Messiah opened its doors for worship every Sunday morning, but otherwise the church building sat closed for much of the week. When Pastor Griffin Thomas began wondering how the building could be better used, he cleaned out the choir loft and advertised it on Craigslist as a space for an artist. A young rock band, Friends Academy, responded to the ad and, despite some concerns about noise, began practicing in the space.

That was the beginning of Messiah's connection with the arts community in the Greenpoint neighborhood of Brooklyn. Then, because Friends Academy was practicing there, a few other bands began asking to use the space as well. Because bands were practicing there, the church was used to hold concerts. Because music was coming from the church, a neighbor's complaints about noise led to a

partnership with a well-known theater group which needed a place to rehearse. Doors were opened, in more ways than anyone ever expected!

People in Greenpoint began recognizing Messiah as an active arts and people center in the community, a gathering place where things happened. Wanting the church to be utilized even more widely, Pr. Thomas offered the use of the church building for his community-supported agriculture (CSA) program's annual Harvest Dinner. The Greenpoint-Williamsburg CSA then approached Messiah about hosting its weekly distribution. The congregation agreed, which brought another 120 people through the church doors every Wednesday to pick up their locally-grown fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Some church members joined the CSA when it began using the parish hall four years ago, but mostly it was people from the

surrounding neighborhood who came to pick up their food. Pr. Thomas began working more intentionally to make connections.

Jeff Hnilicka, an arts administrator and member of the Greenpoint-Williamsburg CSA, came to Pr. Thomas with an idea following the market crash of 2008. It was a hard time for everyone, but artists especially were struggling. Hnilicka was looking for a sustainable and responsible way to fund public art. He and his friends came up with a model for FEAST: Funding Emerging Art

*After winning a \$1,000 FEAST grant in August 2010, the viBe SongMakers return to perform at a November gathering at the Lutheran Church of the Messiah.*

PHOTO BY KRAMER O'NEILL



## Praising God with our whole selves

For a pastor, when a sermon you give keeps *you* thinking through to the next day, you have to wonder what God is trying to get through your thick skull.

A recent gospel from Matthew 22 shared the story of the Pharisees sending their followers and the Herodians to ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes. Jesus amazed them with an answer that subverted their trap: “Give to the Emperor what is the Emperor’s, and give to God what is God’s.”

If all that we are and all that we have belong to God, why do we spend so much time sitting around in the pews?

I proceeded to preach with props, asking the congregation to take out a dollar bill and look at the picture on the front. It turns out we are really not much better than the Romans. We still put the picture of our leaders on the front of our cash. But turning to the back of the bill, we read the words “In God We Trust.”

Is it true? Do we really trust God? Or do we spend most of our time trying to trust money as if the *money* is a god? Even as Americans we often would like to complain against our taxes, but with the logic Jesus used perhaps we should be sending all our money to some long buried national leaders.

The question is: If we understand that all that we have and all that we are belong to God, what and how do we give to God what is God’s?

I asked my congregation that question in the sermon and I am still trying to figure out the answer for myself.

As a trained opera singer, I try to use that training and the voice that God gave me in leading music in worship. I also have scheduled concerts as fundraisers for the church. As a trained dancer, I have helped the kids to dance through the aisles of the sanctuary in worship of a God who gives us reason to rejoice. As a pastor, I try to put all those years of seminary training to good use.

But is that all of me? Am I only my training and education?

God gives us the ability to do so many things, gives us every second and every breath. If all that we are and all that we have belong to God, why do we spend so much time sitting around in the pews?

Perhaps it is time that we as Lutherans begin to live out the challenge Jesus lands in our laps. Perhaps we should find renewed ways of giving to God what God first gave us—our whole selves.

As a dancer I have always been so mindful of how meaningful every movement in every moment can be. You do not have to be a ballerina for movement to be meaningful.

When we gather in worship, can you use your whole self—not just your body or your voice, but your *whole* self—in praising the God who gives us everything?

✦ **THE REV. DANIELLE FEY** is pastor of Christ, Staten Island.

### Discussion Questions

- What does “whole self” or “all of me” mean to you? What part of you would you like God to develop?
- What God-given abilities do you love to use? How might you share these in new or deeper ways for the glory of God?

## THE LUTHERAN NEW YORKER

*The Lutheran New Yorker* is published twice a year by the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1620  
New York, NY 10115  
212-665-0732 • [www.mnys.org](http://www.mnys.org)

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This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.



# Unleashing creativity at KEMPS

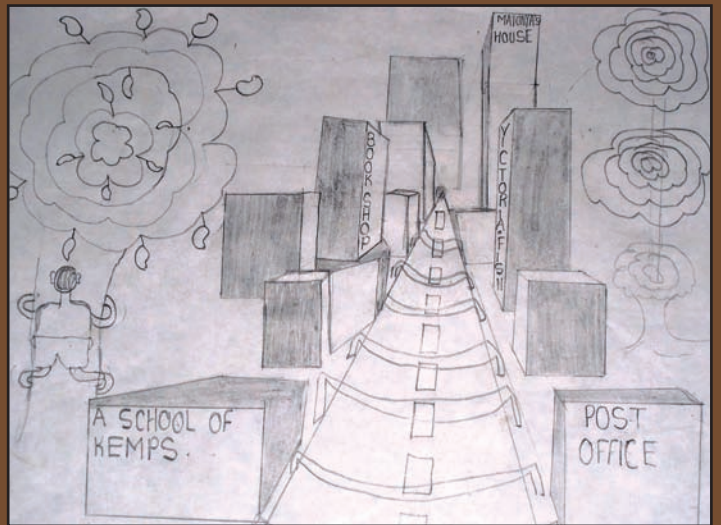
“Teacher, is this correct?” pupils asked as they began their Van Gogh night landscapes. This year I have been teaching Standard 4 (Grade 3) Vocational Skills, or Art. At the beginning of the year I received choruses of similar questions as pupils struggled to find what they thought was the one correct answer. Everyone wanted to use a ruler, and I still get grumbles when I say Van Gogh never used a ruler in his paintings! However, since January, they have unleashed their creativity. Instead of asking whether something is correct, they stand back from their work and look to see whether they, themselves, are happy with it.

My approach to the class has been to introduce my pupils to the work of famous artists by having them create pictures using the same distinctive techniques. They created Starry Night landscapes after observing the stars above Lake Victoria; they experimented with optical illusions à la Escher; they created pointillism patterns and Picasso portraits. The students have also learned about the color wheel and one-point perspective, recently completing their own cityscapes that featured many Bukoba landmarks. Needless to say, this project was a favorite because they got to use their much-loved rulers to make buildings go back to their vanishing points!

In the remaining few weeks we will try a color matching project in which pupils will have to copy and enlarge a mystery square. The squares will (hopefully!) form a cohesive drawing by a well-known artist. Another will focus on still-life drawing so that pupils can enhance their observation skills, something they will need when they reach my Standard 5 science class.

This class has truly been a rewarding group to teach. My students are enthusiastic—coming in the afternoons to look more closely at paintings we have studied as well as to inquire about paintings they see hanging on my walls. “Teacher, who did this painting?” and “Will we study this artist?” are now common questions. It has been a joy to teach art in this country where the senses are bombarded by the rhythm of drums and bright colors and patterns of flowers and fabrics.

✦ **STEPHANIE SCHMIEGE** is a Metro New York Synod-sponsored teacher at Kibeta English Medium Primary School in Bukoba, Tanzania.



## Discussion Questions

- What experiences have helped you to see the world around you in a new way?
- What “ruler” in your life can you put aside so you can think out of the box?



Case-Leal's "Radical Spirit" installation

with Sustainable Tactics, an evening where people pay admission for dinner and entertainment. Art proposals are set up around the room; the artists get to network and introduce their work to the whole group. At the end of the evening, the diners vote on their favorite project and all the money collected that evening is given to the winning artist. "It's very exciting," says Pr. Thomas. "There have been some really interesting things that have gotten funded." Messiah has served as a home base for FEAST since it began.

Once again, one thing led to another. A FEAST supporter and CSA member, James Case-Leal, is a professional artist who had his twin sons baptized at Messiah. As summer 2010 approached, Pr. Thomas offered him the use of the nave as studio space during July and August. The congregation regularly held worship services downstairs during the summer to escape the heat. "It's become a natural part of my process to find alternative spaces, spaces that reach into a new community," says Case-Leal. "And Pr. Thomas is always looking for new ways to activate the space."

While working in the sweltering church, Case-Leal came up with a vision for an installation called "Radical Spirit" which grew larger and more ambitious as the weeks went by. By the time it opened as part of Greenpoint Open Studios, it took over the entire sanctuary, making the building part of the artwork. Seventeen 25-foot towers shot up from the floor, leading viewers' eyes to the video projection on the ceiling of people ascending into the heavens. A live feed of the artist making scrolls from magazines was broadcast to the neighborhood

simultaneously. "Transforming something normal into something sacred became the core of the project," says Case-Leal. "A narrative of my work is transmission as a metaphor for ascension. It's pretty much about communion." Now, a paschal candle crafted by Case-Leal stands next to Messiah's baptismal font.

Other exhibits at Messiah have led to fortuitous connections as well. A member of the congregation and two of her friends won a grant to stage a painting exhibit, "Drawing Closer to Nature," which was then displayed at Messiah during September 2010. Volunteers from FEAST helped to build movable walls on which to display the artwork, and the opening of the show coincided with the CSA. Every week at the CSA, the vegetables were set up near the paintings so that people interacted with the art. "It was a really great way to show the work," says one of the featured artists, Melissa Staiger. "Obviously, it's not a traditional space, but you're working with all the things that go on in the church and that's really beautiful to me."

Staiger, a Brooklyn painter, and her friend and fellow painter Molly Herman now offer adult art classes in Messiah's parish hall. Abstract Art Lab began last fall and runs for five-week sessions. Messiah's connection with the arts "gives it a holistic feeling. There are different groups—it's not just visual arts, it's yoga and theater and music. That creates community," says Staiger. "It makes the church a place to come and express yourself."

While the community connections are strong, focusing on the arts hasn't been a direct evangelism strategy for Messiah. But that was never the goal. Says Pr. Thomas,

“Even if they’re not sitting in the pews on Sunday—and I wish they were—to have those people around us and in our building means we’re really getting something back besides a little help paying the bills. And learning to share has been a good thing to do as a community.”

“There’s such a historical connection between the arts and the church. It went on for centuries, especially in Europe, and it’s sad that the American church has been disconnected from the arts,” says Pr. Thomas. “For me, I feel very connected to God when I’m in the presence of art and creativity. Sometimes it’s a bit of chaos, but I like to think it’s usually holy chaos. You can just feel the creative spirit of God coming through the art.”

+ **SARAH GIOE** is Director of Communication and Interpretation.

### Discussion Questions

- What visual, musical or other artwork or form touches you with God’s creativity? What does it “say” to you?
- Is there space at your church that might be better used? What ideas can you share with your pastor about that?



PHOTO BY NICK MANGO

CSA members are treated to the “Drawing Closer to Nature” exhibit in Messiah’s parish hall.

### The cultural center of the church

When Terri and I began to lead worship in Romania, we did not use the stately neoclassical cathedral. Able to seat 600 or more, it seemed likely to overwhelm the small crowds we anticipated. Instead, we chose a smaller and more intimate place: the Reményik Sándor Gallery. This is a center for art and culture located in the very heart of Cluj-Napoca’s historic center—and underneath the cathedral courtyard.

Named for a Hungarian poet, himself a native of Cluj and a leader in the Lutheran church, the gallery is a sign of the importance that art and culture have in building community. Bishop Deszö Adorjani and his staff understand this and have made these things an important part of their parish’s common life.

Like many buildings in the old part of the city, the Lutheran church has a long, barrel-vaulted cellar. Most of these, I expect, are like basements everywhere, filled with puddles of water seeping in through the walls, as well as old equipment sent down for storage decades ago, now rusting away in the dark. A few have been turned into restaurants or nightclubs. Only this one, so far as I know, has become a stylish and modern (and bone-dry!) exhibition space.

The gallery houses curated exhibits of artwork by both

local and international artists, as well as chamber concerts and other activities, both religious and secular. Church office administrator Krisztina Szep organizes six to ten exhibits per year. Music often accompanies gallery openings and “Jarosi” cultural nights held in the gallery include chamber music.

While the English ministry doesn’t use the gallery for worship anymore, the gallery is still an important part of life in Cluj and a wonderful asset for bringing people together.

+ **THE REV. MICHAEL CHURCH** is a Metro New York Synod-sponsored missionary leading the English ministry with his wife, The Rev. Terri Church, in Cluj, Romania.





# Letting meanings unfold

When you arrive at St. Lydia's, a three-year-old dinner church in Brooklyn, the first thing you see is a large banner with the St. Lydia's logo quilted together from a collection of decorative dish towels. There is a towel with an owl printed on it, one with swimming trout, and one embroidered with vegetables. If you looked at the website ([www.stlydias.org](http://www.stlydias.org)) before coming to church, you might have seen the digital banners at the top of each page featuring images of pieces of fabric with woodcuts printed on them. The woodcuts depict food- and drink-related items: a group of mismatched chairs, a row of silver spoons, loaves of bread or aprons hanging on hooks. The objects on the St. Lydia's welcome table echo these themes as well: a patterned tablecloth, an old iron dinner bell, postcards with pans and other cooking tools printed on them.

By this time, before you have said one prayer or eaten one morsel of bread, you are already immersed in an aesthetic which will frame your experience of dinner church. Playing on associations like home and homemade, I make things for St. Lydia's that employ the theme of "pattern, with variation," because our worship each week is a pattern, with variation. We always have a meal, and some of the words we say are the same each week, and we use the same liturgical structure for each service. But the gathered group is a little different each time, and the recipes, scripture readings, and songs vary as well.

I am the Community Coordinator of St. Lydia's, which recently became affiliated as a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community with the Metropolitan New York Synod. But I am also an artist, as are many of the other people involved with St. Lydia's. I have a Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of

Chicago and maintain a studio in Brooklyn where I make sculptures and drawings. Emily Scott, our pastoral minister, is a fine musician, and many of our congregants are writers or performers, visual artists or musicians. Part of the reason for this high concentration of artistic energy is our location here in New York City, but I think there is something deeper at work in this statistic as well.

Art plays an important role at St. Lydia's, and not just in our graphic design or excellent taste in tablecloths. During the sacred meal we share each Sunday night, when we cook together, break bread, pray and sing at our table, we place practice before belief, choosing to let the meaning of what we do unfold from our liturgy (which is grounded in a long history and rich tradition of Christian worship) into the rest of our lives. Making art, for me at least, is also a practice, one that has important parallels with this liturgical practice. I work in my studio because I feel a kind of hunger that can't be satisfied in any other way. Many of the people who come to St. Lydia's come from outside church traditions, and the hunger they feel for spiritual communion is easiest to identify by its similarity to other kinds of hunger. The hunger for food, the hunger for fellowship and connection, and for a place to ask the questions that have no answers. We arrive hungry, we pick up what's in front of us, and we work with it until we've made something edible, or something that we can look at, consider, chew on.

There is no direct correlation between object and meaning in the making of art, and the same goes for dinner church. Every week as a community we walk up to the line between what we know and what we don't know and try to spend a few hours living in between those two realms. And

every time we make a work of art or consider one, we are walking up to the same line; we practice a radical way of looking at the world where the old categories—high church or low church, decorative art or fine art, rich or poor, in or out—don't apply.

At the end of our meal each week, I or another congregant reads a poem. Some of the poets whose work we read are alive and some of them are long dead. But hearing their voices creates a space in our liturgy for our human parts to speak back to our divine parts. The stories we read from scripture are old and wise, confusing and translated. Reading poems written by people born in years with four digits is a way of making a bridge between us and the writers of the scriptures, to inspire us to wrestle with the Word with all our might as so many before us have done.

When we join with John Donne in saying "*Batter my heart, three person'd God, for you / as yet but knock, breath, shine and seek to mend / That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new,*" we know we are in good company in our ongoing

struggle to live in the Word as a resurrected people. And when we invoke the words of Joy Harjo, "*At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks. Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite,*" we are not adorning or supplementing our worship with art, but living fully into the role laid out for us when God set the world in motion: the role of creators, charged with the holy work of building the Kingdom of Heaven, one day at a time.

✦ **RACHEL POLLAK** is Community Coordinator of St. Lydia's. You can see her artwork at [www.rachelpollak.com](http://www.rachelpollak.com).

### Discussion Questions

- What does "living between two realms" mean in your life? How are you and God at work in this regard?
- Ponder the meaning of being a creator building the Kingdom of Heaven one day at a time. Think of a time you sensed, saw, or experienced this happening.

## around THE SYNOD



### Connect on Facebook

"The synod is such a great resource for networking," say event participants. Now you can network online on our synod's new Facebook page. Visit [www.facebook.com/mnyselca](http://www.facebook.com/mnyselca). We created this space so

that Metro New York Synod congregations would have a good place to connect with each other. You can get great ideas from other churches...and you can:

- Share resources that have helped you: books, worship aids, websites, or curriculum
- Post a photo of an event at your congregation and tell us about it
- Ask for referrals or recommend professionals
- Explain a ministry "best practice" that surprised you
- Interact with other local Lutherans

Help us build our Facebook community: "Like" us today and tell your friends too!

### Festival of ordinations

Everyone is invited to the synodical celebration of Holy Communion with the Rite of Ordination, taking place on Saturday, December 3 at 10:30am at Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City. Seven candidates will be ordained; Bishop Rimbo will preside and preach. All rostered ministers of the synod are invited to vest and process; the color of the day is red.



### Educational safari in 2012

Are you a teacher with a love for traveling? Join the Metro New York Synod educational safari to our companion synod, the North Western Diocese of Tanzania, during July 2012. Travelers will partner with some of the teachers at Kibeta English Medium Primary School (KEMPS) to share lessons and work with children. The trip will also include time at an educational center in Arusha, visits to congregations, and a wildlife safari. If you are interested, contact Mary Tennermann at [mtennermann@mnys.org](mailto:mtennermann@mnys.org). *Karibu sana* (you're very welcome) to join us!



Joyful graduates pose with Bishop Rimbo at the diakonia graduation on June 11, 2011 at Ascension, Franklin Square. To learn more about this lay theological education program, visit [www.mnys.org/ministries2/diakonia](http://www.mnys.org/ministries2/diakonia).

# The art of loving God

This issue of *The Lutheran New Yorker* brings together in my mind “the arts” in a very broad sense and, of course, God. It’s a subject which I have wondered about a long time as a musician and a liturgist and a pastor and a Christian.

St. Augustine in his *Confessions* (10.6) helps me be clear that love for the material world (of painting, of music, of nature, of people—you know what I mean) is not the same thing as love for God. But, he says, our loves for those things are a sign of and a kind of “vocabulary” for our love for God. He says:

*What do I love when I love my God? Not physical beauty, or the splendor of time; not the radiance of earthly light, so pleasant to our eyes; not the sweet melodies of harmony and song; not the fragrant smell of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the flesh delights to embrace. These are not the things that I love when I love my God.*

*And yet, when I love God, I do indeed love a certain kind of light, a voice, a fragrance, a food, an embrace; but this love takes place in my inner person, where my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that time never takes away; when it breathes in a fragrance which no breeze varies away; when it tastes food which no eating can diminish; when it clings to an embrace which is not broken when desire is fulfilled. This is what I love when I love my God.*

What is the most beautiful thing you have experienced this week?

Maybe something you heard. Some beautiful music.

Maybe something you saw in the world: the sun breaking through the fog (which I often delight in from our 16th floor perch in the synod office).

Maybe a rose, or the smell of a meal cooking as you entered your home very hungry.

Maybe something at work, where things once chaotic suddenly come together and an unexpected opportunity presents itself.



## What is the most beautiful thing you have experienced this week?

Maybe something you experienced in human relationships: a gentle glance from one you love; the touch of a grandchild’s hand or the beauty of her smile.

Maybe a masterpiece of art in a local museum or hanging on your wall.

This, I believe, is the kind of creative art to which St. Augustine was referring, the art in the broadest sense that reminds us of its true source: God. It enriches us. It warms us. It makes us more alive. It makes us stronger. It makes us humble.

And what does this beauty, this art draw from you, when you think about it? Gratitude. Delight. Awe. Longing. What about worship? Does this blessing you receive turn you into one who blesses God for it?

I hope so. I hope that your experiences of beauty are an impetus for you to move on and recognize, glimpse, be overwhelmed by and so to worship the beauty of God, the one who created it all.

But, also, the God I believe in and worship is the God I see in the middle of the pain and the suffering here in the world. Without Jesus, the crucified Jesus, sharing and bearing the pain and sin and suffering of the world, I don’t actually know who on earth or in heaven God might be. If Jesus is the lens through which we glimpse the beauty of God, you will see God everywhere. And I think you will be reminded of what it means to truly love God in all things and to be loved. You will know and feel the art of loving God.

**+ THE REV. DR. ROBERT ALAN RIMBO** is bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod.