

COVID cases are again on the rise. The numbers of people in our hospitals and fatalities have increased over the last two weeks. The government uses designated hotels and school buildings as treatment centers to keep up with the influx of patients. Worship service and other public gatherings are currently suspended. The schools are closed, Thando and Tumisho (my children) are doing their schooling online. My wife is supervising their classes. My family and I are doing our best to observe all necessary protocols for safety. The vaccination process in the African continent is exceptionally slow; Madagascar should receive the first shipment of vaccines in May. This will be a small number of vaccines. The country will prioritize health workers and law enforcement officers.

In addition to my regular duties, my work at this time has to a large extent focused on helping ELCA partners in the region apply for grant assistance from the ELCA Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) Fund. LDR is made possible by the generosity of ELCA members and congregations. We are doing our best to keep the Lutheran Health facilities afloat during this time. I am very encouraged by the work which Lutheran health care providers and Lutheran Churches in the region where I serve are doing in response to the current situation:

Madagascar:

The ELCA is working with SALFA, the health system of the Malagasy Lutheran Church. Together with other international partners, we provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), medication, oxygen tanks, and other medical supplies for SALFA Hospital and Clinics. SALFA has more than ten hospitals and more than forty clinics nationally. The sad news is that we have lost a number of health workers due to COVID 19.

Liberia:

The ELCA, together with other international partners, is working together with the Lutheran Church in Liberia to provide aid to Phebe Hospital and Curran Hospital. We have provided grants to support these facilities with PPE, medications, and other medical supplies for COVID 19. We have provided food assistance to quarantined individuals and families. Through ELCA support and the support provided by other partners, the Lutheran Church in Liberia has completed the constructions of additional units to house COVID patients and those awaiting their COVID test results at Curran Hospital and Phebe Hospital. We have also assisted in addressing water and sanitation challenges at Phebe Hospital. Keeping hospitals afloat and well resources is extremely important at this time.

Guinea

Guinea is facing the COVID 19 and Ebola reality at the same time. The ELCA is providing support for the Lutheran Church in Guinea (LCG) to help in responding to the current situation. The LCG is retraining help workers in local clinics on health safety procedures. They are doing public

sensitization campaign to remind people about preventative measures for COVID and Ebola. The LCG is also providing PPE and hygiene supplies to vulnerable communities.

COVID 19 is teaching us new ways of working and connecting. I am doing all my work with ELCA partners remotely through e-mail, WhatsApp, and Zoom. In addition to WhatsApp, Zoom, Facebook, and other social media outlets, local churches use radio and television to connect with the congregations and share God's word.

To keep me sane during this pandemic, I have also tried to focus some of my attention on my studies for the Doctorate in Ministry degree I am doing through United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia (online). I have now completed all my coursework. Next, I will start to work on my final project (dissertation). As part of my study program, I am writing a Bible Study book on Gender Justice to help instill mutual respect and admiration between men and women and to help address gender-based violence in the communities I save. Kwena (wife) completed her bachelor's degree program in teaching in 2019; she has been accepted into a master's degree program online with Liverpool John Moores University in England. She is doing her own studies and supervising Thando and Tumisho's online classes during the lockdown.

Please allow me to give my heartfelt thanks to you and your congregation for your continued support and prayers. I would also like to thank you for your monetary support, which helps to support my family and allow me to do the work I am doing. I am also grateful for the support which ELCA congregations have provided to the ELCA - Lutheran Disaster Response Fund. Among other important projects, your support allows us to keep the Lutheran Health institutions I have mentioned in this letter afloat at this crucial time so that they can serve their people and buttress the efforts of their public institutions.

I apologize that you do not hear from me regularly; it is the reality of the unpredictability of our work during this time in human history. The situation changes rapidly from country to country. I must be available to respond to the needs of ELCA partner churches as they deal with the COVID reality in their respective countries. Rest assured that you are always in my thoughts and prayers.



One of the things which Thando and Tumisho miss the most during lockdown is going swimming at the local public pool.

Your sibling in Christ,

Rev. Lancelot Themba Mkhabela

ELCA Missionary – Regional Representative for Madagascar and West Africa