

ACCOMPANIMENT RETREAT
FAITH STORIES
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MALAGASY GUESTS



COMPANION SYNOD SUMMIT
August 3-14, 2008



My Life Story: Noeline Lucie Rasoanandrasana
Director of Spouses' Studies, Betela Lutheran Regional Seminary

I - CHILDHOOD

I was born on May 30, 1954 in Antsirabe. I was baptized one month after that and was confirmed when I was 15 years old. There were five children in my family and I was child number three. My parents raised us in a Christian life. We heard my mother play church music in our home every Saturday and Sunday morning. I especially like studying at Sunday School. I was a strong and healthy child and I liked to play hard. For that reason my clothes were often ruined. My mother then taught me to sew. A Lutheran church school was where I first went to school. There was a time for worship every morning and evening and a study of Scripture and the catechism there. I received my government diploma in 1972 and I was among some of the few students accepted by the government to study in High School. The way of living I saw at the High School was not good. – it was a gentile (non-Christian) way of living among both teachers and students. I missed the church school. I had become alone. My fellow students even gave me the name “My Sister” (as in a Catholic nun). It was like the sound of a bell in my ears that got my attention to consider work in the church.

II - CALL AND PASTORAL STUDY

It was in a Lutheran Church newspaper that I saw the announcement that both young men and women could study theology at the Ivory Lutheran Theological Seminary in Fianarantsoa. This was the first call to women to study theology (1974) since the beginning of Lutheran mission work in Madagascar (1866). I took the entrance exam and passed. I was among four women who studied theology in the 44th graduating class of the Malagasy Lutheran Church. When my studies were finished, I received my diploma in 1977 and entered the church work I had so long desired.

III - THE BEGINNING OF CHURCH WORK

I was assigned by the Western Regional Synod to lead the parish of Ambatovaventy (1977). I was in charge of 6 churches. The working relationship between all the churches and the catechist and the committee was excellent. I was not ordained and so a retired pastor worked with me to do ministerial work (preside at communion and do baptisms). I was discouraged together with the church I was leading when we heard that the Malagasy Lutheran Church did not agree to ordain Malagasy Lutheran women. It was not a theological decision but simply a protection of culture. Women are not permitted to do priestly work in Malagasy culture. This was very difficult for the church I was leading. I was moved to another type of work that did not involve ministerial functions. I was appointed to be the Director of Sunday School (1978-1979). My heart, however, was not free of the desire to be an ordained pastor. Nonetheless, the work of Sunday School Director made me happy. I remained in that work until my marriage.

IV - HOUSEHOLD

On December 8, 1979 I was married to Pastor Daniel Rakotoarijaona. This took place at the first church he led in Marovoay. He had come from Farafangana in the southeast while I was from Antsirabe in the central highlands. And so we were different in where we came from, in our tribes, in our customs and in our dialects. These were not a problem for the two families. Our differences complimented one another. All the work went well. God blessed our household. Our children include three girls: Mino (28) who studies in the US, Trabonjy (23) who is at the University in Antananarivo, and Lalaina (18) who is in a church-run High School in Mahajanga.

V - CONTINUATION OF CHURCH WORK

Our work together as spouses complimented each other even though I was not ordained. I took care of the women's ministry, the Sunday School, confirmation instructions, the visitation of households and those who were sick in the government hospital. We moved to Mahajanga when my husband was President of the Synod(1986-1991). Together with Mme. Rambolarisoa, the wife of a retired pastor, I began an organization for the wives of church workers in the Mahajanga Synod. We promoted the idea that the wives of church workers should have responsibilities in the church just like the men. I volunteered to teach at the Betela Bible School (1988-1989). I had to leave my husband and children every week at the time. It was rather difficult for us as a family because our first child, Mino, was only seven years old. The Bible School was made a Regional Theological Seminary because there were many places eager to have pastors. I was appointed to instruct those who were to be spouses of pastors in 1992. My work was rather difficult at first. Among the women were those who believed that caring for their household and raising children were their only responsibilities and therefore thought that they didn't need to study any more. At the same time, the educational level of the wives of the students varied widely; there were differences in where they came from and in their customs. An effort was made to help them recognize their call so that they could face their life within the church in the future.

Our family was guests of the Rocky Mountain Synod from May 1994 to August of 1995. I learned many lessons during that time. I spoke often with the Spouses' Class about the close relationship between the Rocky Mountain Synod and the Mahajanga Synod. Something I had seen in the United States was the role of women in the work of service in the church and the equality of men and women in society. I spoke to the Spouses' Class of these things. In general, this still hasn't taken root 100%. But slowly pastors and their wives are beginning to live in mutual respect of one another.

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO HAS GIVEN ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE.



A Woman in Ministry: Noeline Lucie Rasoanandrasana
Director of Spouses' Studies, Betela Lutheran Regional Seminary

In September of 1977 I was handed my pastoral diploma from Ivory Lutheran Seminary in Fianarantsoa, Madagascar.

About a year after I entered the seminary, there had been some mild disagreement between myself and the other three women with whom I studied concerning whether or not the ordination of women would be possible. At that point there had been no clear decision and no official announcement from the central office of the church about this and so we joyfully continued our studies as the first women theologians in the Malagasy Lutheran Church.

A letter appointing me to serve as pastor of a parish declared to me that the Malagasy Lutheran Church was ready to approve the ordination of women. The parish to which I was assigned worked

hard to prepare for my arrival, as did my family – and especially myself who had hoped for years that my long-held dream would be realized.

Yet five months after beginning my ministry, I received a letter from my synod in central Madagascar reassigning me to work that did not involve pastoral ministry. It would seem that the Malagasy Lutheran Church was not yet prepared to ordain women.

It's hard to put into words what this announcement meant to me: it was bitter, heavy and difficult – it dashed my hopes. Having to leave my parish and its members was more difficult than facing a death. We grieved and cried together.

I was truly in a quandary about whether I would accept this new assignment. It seemed like asking me to be responsible for the synod's Sunday School program was like offering a piece of candy to a crying child – it did not serve as balm to heal my wounded heart.

However, God nurtured me on this very difficult road, because as I considered whether to decline this new assignment, I realized that I am not in charge of my own life. It's not what I want that is best for me – what is best is God's will for me. The voice of the Spirit speaking quietly within me said that to reject an assignment of serving in the church would be like saying that my calling meant nothing.

Beginning with that, I was ready to move forward with whatever God might need me to do – whether it was Sunday School (which I continue to be involved with to this day) or teaching about the kingdom of God (in both the Bible School and the Regional Lutheran Seminary), or whether it was helping with various types of ministry in the church: confirmation, women's ministry, social ministry, etc.

This difficult experience encouraged me to desire the working out of God's plan for me. Even though the Malagasy Lutheran Church is still not prepared to ordain women, I know that it is God's will for women to serve in ministry within my church. I hope and believe that my church's bondage to Malagasy cultural ideas about priestly service will be overcome, because the truth is that all believers are called to be priests!

I give thanks to God because I am able to serve him!



THE STORY OF MY PAST AND PRESENT: Pastor Daniel Rakotoarijaona

National Director of Project Shalom (Witness among Muslim communities)

I -MY CHILDHOOD

I come from a simple family in the countryside near Farafangana. We were a family of five children. My father and mother were rice farmers and raised cattle. My father did not study at school but was self taught during the Second World War in Algeria. My mother did not know how to read or write. It was four years after I was born that a birth certificate was made. I was said to have been

born in about 1958. It is recorded in the ministerial book of Pastor Ernest Rabenja that I was born on May 3, 1954 and baptized on July 14, 1954. My parents were Christian. My father worked as a catechist for many years. I often went with him by foot each week on trips of more than 10 kilometers to visit churches. I thought that church work was truly precious. I was already 12 years old when I began to study (1966). I watched cattle in the morning and went to school in the afternoons. People did not want me to become a government employee but rather a church worker like my father. The church led by my father sent me to study at the Bible School in Vangaindrano (1970-1975) when I was 16 years old.

II - MY PREPARATION TO BECOME A CHURCH WORKER

The Bible School not only offered studies in the Scriptures, but Math, French, Malagasy, History, and World Geography. At that time the Bible School truly prepared one to be a church worker. I was not among the brightest students. When it came time to take the entrance exam for the Lutheran Theological Seminary, I was number five. However, only the top three students from each Regional Synod were accepted because of a shortage of housing at Ivory. The Eastern Regional Synod considered the students to be sent and this decision was sent by Synod President Pastor Edmond Doany to the seminary: "Whether the Seminary accepts one or two, among those to be received will be Daniel ..."

I was called to study theology in the 45th graduating class of Ivory (1976-1979). I was almost discouraged by the method of rote memorization required of the many lessons there. My grades were low and I repeated the exams when I couldn't repeat verbatim the lessons given by the professors. I strived to simply memorize the teaching of the professors and was not encouraged to explore outside of what the teachers offered. There was a small consequence to this when I began my pastoral work. I was tempted to use a bit of Greek and Hebrew in the pulpit when I preached. And yet most of the people in the church I was leading were Christians from the countryside. I thought this was necessary due to the emphasis on memorization. Therefore I chose a helper fit for me who could assist me in my work.

III - MY HOUSEHOLD

It was at the first church I served in Marovoay that my marriage to Noeline Lucie Rasoanandrana took place on December 8, 1979. She was among the first four women that the Malagasy Lutheran Church agreed to allow to study theology in the 44th graduating class at Ivory. My origins were in the rural southeast but she was from a large town in the central highlands. We were different. We were able, however, to use our difference of origin and tribe, etc to accomplish the goal in front of us. God blessed our household and all our work. We celebrated together our three daughters.

IV - THE WORK TO WHICH THE CHURCH CALLED ME

While our marriage was held on December 8, 1979, my ordination took place in Marovoay on December 9, 1979. The synod from which I came, the Eastern Regional Synod, sent me to be one of the pioneers in the new field of church work in Mahajanga. I began my work with six churches in 1980. By 1986 they had grown to 23. It was necessary to visit four churches every week. My wife and I visited these rural congregations together. When our children were young, my wife took care of all the organization, taught confirmation, prepared Sunday School teachers and directed the Women's Ministry in the parish's main congregation. On July 19, 1986 I was elected to be the first President of the Boina Mahajanga Regional Synod. Four Malagasy pastors and one ELCA missionary were colleagues with me throughout the Mahajanga Synod. We had responsibility for 57 congregations and 7,205 Christians. The number of congregations constantly grew. I realized there were not enough church workers, which led me to request the establishment of the Bible School at

Betela on December 12, 1984. This became a Lutheran Regional Theological Seminary on October 3, 1988.

I believed that partnership with those from overseas would advance my work. I was pleased to receive a letter from the Rocky Mountain Synod on February 14, 1990 that expressed to me the desire to be in relationship with the Mahajanga Synod. I responded right away on April 12, 1990 that we were prepared to be partners and I sent a short description and some basic statistics about the Mahajanga Synod. ELCA missionary Bob Wandersee helped me translate this letter of correspondence. It was clear to me that a good partnership was possible despite the differences in customs and language. The reason for this relationship was not about the wealth of the RMS or the poverty of the Mahajanga Synod. I believed that the individual spiritual gifts possessed by each were a great treasure from God. These can work together well even though they are different. I studied in England from 1991-1992 and was no longer President of the Mahajanga Synod. An exchange of pastor work and mutual visits began the relationship between the Rocky Mountain Synod and the Mahajanga Synod. The RMS came to visit the Mahajanga Synod in 1992. My family and I did a pastoral exchange in the RMS as well as study from May of 1994 to August of 1995. We had many new relatives in the RMS then, at which point the RMS and the Mahajanga Synod become relatives as well. After returning to Madagascar, I taught at Betela Seminary from 1995-1999. The students named me "Companion Synod" because I so often discussed the RMS in my classes. The relationship between the Rocky Mountain Synod and the Mahajanga Synod continues: an exchange of news, mutual visits, carrying each other in prayer and support of Betela Seminary.

Project Shalom was established in 1997. I worked together with Pastor Jim Gonia, Dr Lon Kightlinger, Pastor Kevin Mohr, and Pastor Arild Bakke to lay out the structure that would support this work. I was the first director from 1997 to 1999. I continued my studies in Norway from 1999-2001 and was no longer director.

My studies in Norway concluded in 2001. I was assigned by the Mahajanga Synod to serve a church in Antsohihy from 2001-2002. There was a great distance (more than 300 kilometers) between myself and the place in which my wife worked at that time. My wife was a teacher at Betela Seminary. I led a church in Antsohihy. There were some tears that fell during this separation. The Malagasy Lutheran Church and our partners overseas were not happy with my placement. The 108th Church Council of the Malagasy Lutheran Church meeting from November 21-28, 2002 decided to elect me as Assistant Director of Shalom. Perhaps the Church Council and the overseas partners thought that the work within Shalom was a better match for what I had studied than serving a congregation. I was the Assistant Director of Shalom from January 2003 to May of 2008. My responsibilities included training workshops about Christian-Muslim relations, supervision of evangelists and relationships with congregations. It was not only Malagasy Lutheran Christians who received this training. I was also called to teach by the Reformed Church in Madagascar, the Catholics, and those Christians and foreigners who live in the Comoro Islands. The 119th Church Council of the Malagasy Lutheran Church meeting in Ihosy from May 16-24 chose me to be Director of Shalom again.

All the days of my life have been surrounded by the grace of God and to Him I give thanks!





A FAMILY STORY: Pastor Daniel Rakotoarijaona
National Director of Project Shalom (Witness among Muslim communities)

My name is Daniel Rakotoarijaona. Malagasy names usually begin with Ra which means Mr. for older man. When the Catholic missionaries first came to Madagascar in 1816, they translated the Bible and they called Jesus RaJesus. The meaning of my name is Jaona (John), son of Rakoto (my father).

I grew up as a Lutheran. My father worked as a catechist in our local church. We were a family of five children. My father always told us life without Jesus is not really life. So you must go to church and he said devotions before going to bed and in the early morning. In the evening devotions, he read to us one chapter from the Bible before we went to bed. Some chapters were too long. We fell asleep and we could not hear the end of what he read.

I often went with my father by foot each week on trips of more than 10 km to visit the church he served. We came he carried me on his back when we returned home because it was too dark and I was so tired.

When I was sent to study at Bible School (1970-1975) at the Seminary (1976-1979) it came to my mind theologically what my father did. That when I faced some difficulties in my life God, my heavenly Father, carries me, takes care of me.

I began my work as a Pastor in 1979. My marriage to Lucy was held on December 8, 1979 and I was ordained on December 9 the same year. My wife and I came from different tribes. In our culture it is not accepted by the family to have a wife or husband from another tribe. But my family and Lucy's family accepted our household We were able to use our differences to do our works.

I found difficulties and this story put my faith down. My wife had difficulty to give birth of Mino. She was almost half dead. My relatives and I took her to the hospital and waited for her to give birth for two days. The baby did not come out. The doctor decided to take her to Mahajanga, 95 km from where we lived, to take her for surgery. The ambulance came and took her with the doctor and one nurse. I was not with her. I had to find a bus to follow my wife but I could not find a bus right away.

The situation put my faith down. I found my faith being questioned and criticized. I said by myself if my wife died I will not be married anymore and I will resign as a pastor. I realized God abandoned me. He did not carry me on his shoulder when I was in the hardest situation. After one hour I found a bus to take us to Mahajanga where my wife was taken for operation. When I came to the hospital, I walked around where my wife was. No one in the hospital told me that the operation was okay! About half an hour the doctor was coming out to tell me that your wife is okay and you have a new baby. I turned my face from the doctor. There were tears in my eyes. I felt like Peter who denied Jesus and Jesus turned His face to Peter and Peter cried.

I believed at that time God does not abandon me but I felt God sees me. I had a little faith and my faith depends on what was going well in my life. I asked God to forgive me, to have mercy on me. I believe God is mighty and merciful. That is why we gave our daughter's name "Mino" which means "I believe".

Now she is in the USA and lives kind of like a representative of your companion Synod in the RMS. I appreciate deeply what you are doing for her while she is with you. You are her new family and relatives here.



Life Story: Pastor Joseph RALAIVAO

President (Bishop) of the Antsiranana Synod

Pastor Joseph died while presiding at worship on October 19, 2008

I was born on March 18, 1951 in Talata –Ampano in the region of Fianarantsoa to Zanad-Rafaralahy Jean and Ravaohita Margueritte.

I was a child of the countryside. My parents were very poor. My father was a carpenter and my mother was a weaver. A rice field less than half a hectare was our means of living, yet we were six children living in the same household. Five now remain and the rest are all married with children.

At the time I'm writing my parents are very old. They can no longer work and are cared for at home.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

My parents were Lutheran Christians because my father's father was the cook for the Norwegian Mission at Ivory Atsimo in Fianarantsoa. He raised my father in the Lutheran faith so that right after I was born I was baptized in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. I went to Sunday School, was confirmed and sang in the choir of the Malagasy Lutheran Church.

MY STUDIES

I've already indicated that I was the child of the countryside and that life was difficult, and that impacted my studies. I was already seven years old when I entered school. I completed the first fundamental level and the second level, but when it came to secondary classes I had to stop because my parents could no longer afford to support my studies.

In light of that, my baptismal godmother helped me and encouraged me to do church work since I was already at home and lived well within the church. She wanted me to do the work of an evangelist. I gave this much deep thought and proceeded to teach Sunday School.

The year 1969 arrived and my baptismal godparent encouraged me to take the entrance exam to the Bible School. My birth father, however, was not in favor of this. It pleased him for me to become a carpenter with him. It was necessary for me to sneak off to take the entrance exam because I was filled with uncertainty. What was surprising is that I passed without any problem. When the letter came calling me to go study at the Bible School at Alakamisy Ambohimaha-Fianarantsoa, I was truly filled with dread and I was fearful because I thought that this was the holiest of places that I was not worthy to go because I was a poor sinner. It was a dilemma for me and I thought about how I could possibly go there. I wanted to discuss this with my parents but I was scared. At that time, however, I was not being raised by my parents but was living instead with my grandmother with whom I'd been raised anyway. I discussed this with her and asked for her blessing to go and study at the Bible School. She took a full cup of water and splashed it upon me said: Jehovah bless you – so go well and whatever is for the good, receive from Jesus. My father, however, was not happy and so my grandmother helped me at that time, sending me with a prayer and one small cooking pot.

I studied at the Bible School for four years (1969-1973).

I studied at the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Ivory Avaratra in Fianarantsoa from 1974-1977. I graduated as a pastor in June 1977 and earned by Pastoral Diploma.

I was ordained in October of 1977.

I served the parish of Ambovombe-Centre – in the District of Fihasinana (SPAF) from 1977 – 1979. I served in Antalaha –Sambava -Andapa (a new field for the Malagasy Lutheran Church) from September 1979 to 1987.

I was elected to be President of the Antsiranana Synod in June of 1986 and installed in that work on November 23, 1986. I have lived in the capital of the Synod, Antsiranana since July of 1987. I've been married to Mme. Georgette Ravaomampandra since 1972. We have six children: five sons and one daughter. The oldest son is married with two children. Our second son studied theology and graduated to do the work of a pastor. He will be ordained this coming August 24, 2008 in Antsiranana and will serve the Parish of Dzamandzar –Nosy be in the Antsiranana Synod.

As for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah. May Jesus be with and bless us all.



A SHORT STORY ABOUT MYSELF: Pastor RAMARO
President (Bishop) of the Boeny – Mahajanga Synod

Pastor RAMARO was born June 1, 1957 in Nohosoa Vangaindrano. That is what is written in my birth certificate, but the truth is that I was born in Saronalabe Mampikony, in the region of Mahajanga. Because there was no accurate birth certificate, my father made a new cope when we arrived in our homeland. That is why it says I was born on June 1, 1957.

I began to study in school in the year 1959 in Nohosoa-Vangaindrano. I was a child who loved learning and I received my CEPE diploma in the year 1970. My mother had already died in 1964 and I was then raised by my aunt. From 1971-1973 it was necessary for me to quit my schooling because of a lack of financial means. Our whole family was gentile (non-Christian) – there was not even one Christian among us. In 1973 I received the call to become Christian. This created great difficulties for me at that time because all of the family around me were gentiles who really did not like religion. In October of 197 I heard during the church announcements that there was an entrance exam for the Bible School in Vangaindrano. After reflecting, I decided to take this exam. In November of 1973 I took the exam – a fact I hid from my father lest he becomes very angry. What is amazing however is that he was the first one to hear of the results of my exam and then said to me : So you took an exam ? When I replied, « Yes, sir » he gave his blessing to me anyway and provided the financial means for me to go to Vangaindrano in January of 1974.

I studied to become a pastor beginning in January of 1974. I spent two years in the Bible School (1974-1975) and two years also in the Preparation School at Ivory (197-1977). I was then at Ivory

Avaratra Fianarantsoa seminary from 1977 to 1980 and did my pastoral internship from 1980 to 1981. I completed my studies from 1981-1982.

These are the things that occurred and happened to me during my studies to become a pastor. Outside of my pastoral studies I also completed other studies and received my BEPC diploma and y CAE (teaching diploma). What I had really hoped to do was work as a Gendarme or soldier or police officer. The Lord didn't let me do that, however, even though I desired it. In fact, there was actually a call for me to take the Gendarme exam in 1976 and it surprised me that my own response was: "no, I won't do that but will become a pastor instead." In the year 1978 I was called to be a soldier when I had completed one year of study at Ivory Seminary in Fianarantsoa. For one week I was kept in that position before being returned to study again at Ivory in a manner I still can't comprehend – I continued to study to become a pastor even though it seems I was so well suited for this other line of work.

In October of 1979 I was engaged to Miss RANOROSOA Adéline and we were married at the Great Toby Ankaramalaza by means of MamaVOLAHAVANA Germaine.

I had already worked as a Catechist for eight years (1974 – 1980 ; 1981 – 1982) and for one year I served on a pastoral internship (1980 – 1981) in Vangaindrano.

Here are the places I did my church work :

1. I was the parish-wide lead pastor of Nosy-Be Masianaka in the District of Matanga Vangaindrano from 1982 – 1983
2. I was the lead pastor for the district of Matanga Vangaindrano from 1983 – 1986
3. I taught at the Regional Lutheran Seminary at Vangaindrano from 1986 – 1988
4. I was called to be a teacher at the Regional Lutheran Seminary of Betelan'i Boeny-Marovoay from 1988 – 1991
5. I was President of the Boeny Mahajanga Regional Synod from 1991 – 1995.
6. I was the Lead Pastor for the District of Mahajanga as well as the Lead Pastor for the Parish of Tsaramandroso from 1995 – 2001
7. I have been serving as the President of the Boeny Mahajanga Regional Synod again from the year 2001 to now.

As I already said, I was not baptized as a child but rather as an adult, in the month of October 1973. Right away in the month of November 1973 I took the entrance exam for the Bible School. My studies continued for nine straight years (January 1974 to July of 1982).

I realize that I was truly called to be a pastor because there were so many things that should have prevented it, yet my studies were completed nonetheless. Many were the obstacles and the problems that came about in the course of my work. Thanks be to the Lord who sends the call and keeps us standing because of his name even to today.

It's a great miracle to me to have now received a call to visit America, especially to preach the Gospel in Malagasy style to those dearly beloved American relatives that the Lord has given to me.

May all this be to the glory of God alone !





Life Story: Pastor Jean de Dieu RAZAFIMAHATRATRA
President (Bishop) of the Atsinanana-Avaratra (Northeast) Synod

I was born at the hospital in Belazao, the capital of the local county and lived in the town called Ambohinapetraka, also in Belazao country.

I was raised by the parents in the Roman Catholic church, and I completed by studies in Catholic school from the first to the final level. My childhood and youth were spent in this church. Because of the difficulties faced by my parents, I was unable to continue my studies. What I did instead was to look for work that would provide a living and assistance to those who had given me life.

I found work when I was 18 at a company called SGTE (Société Grand Travaux de l'Est) in Antananarivo, which is a construction company that made roads. I worked for several year in Antananarivo (from 1972-1976). It can be said that I earned a good living, enough to support a wife and children – yet I had no family at that time. I moved often due the nature of road construction work and finally arrived at Miandrivazo.

When I arrived there, God immediately gave me a wife: Jacqueline Vaviroa. She was born a Lutheran and was truly a Lutheran! Beginning with that year, I knew that I was one who would worship. Even though it wasn't customary for Catholics to become Lutheran, that's what I did. Then on January 5, 1977 I was married.

In 1979 I received a call to become a pastor. At that time we had two children. I began to study theology at Bethel Bible School in Morondava from 1979-1982. I continued my studies at the Lutheran Regional Seminary of Bethel in Morondave from 1983-1986. It should be noted that our studies at this regional seminary marked the start of the regional seminary program. Prior to this, all theological study was done at the National Lutheran Seminary of Ivory in Fianarantsoa. However, the Pastoral Diploma was still offered only at Ivory. It can be said that I received good training in the Lutheran faith because for seven straight years I studied theology. During my time of studies at the Regional Seminary we had two more children.

When my studies were completed in 1986 I began to work and led the parish of Ambatolahy in the district of Miandrivazo, which according to the structure of the church became the District of Malaimbandy in the Menabe Synod in 1992. I was elected to be the District President of Malaimbany in 1992.

However in 1994 I was called by the Antsiranana synod to work in the north, even though my term as District President was not yet completed at the time. We arrived in the northeast and in September 1994 I was appointed to lead the Vohemar district. During the time we worked there the current church building was constructed. Again, in 1996 I was elected to lead the Sambava District. There in Sambava our fifth and final child, a son was born in 1997.

When the Antsiranana Synod divided into two in 2004, the Northeastern Synod was born and I was elected to serve as the Synod President. What strikes me is the saying: "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10) – for even though there were many difficulties and hard times, they were able to be endured because God was present and blessed us.

To God alone be the glory!



**HOLY AND HER STORY: Mme Holiharifetra
Rakotondramiadana**

Professor of Systematics, Betela Lutheran Regional Seminary

Since my childhood I've always loved to care for children; both my family and my neighbors were all surprised and astonished by this. Among the children with whom I spent time then was Lalaina, the daughter of Pastor Daniel. When Claudel and I were married we were together in that we both loved children. When my husband and I were both still at the seminary, there never ceased to be children in our house, and we, too, loved to take and care for the children of our fellow students. Sadly, however, this love we had for children and our eagerness to care for the children of our friends became salt in the wounds for us because we were unable to have children for a long time after our marriage.

In the end my husband finally went to the doctor to be treated and to get medication. It was the custom of the doctor to give medication; however behind our backs he spread the word to our colleagues and many other people that there would be no way we would have children because of my husband's illness. At that point people increasingly began to point at us behind our backs and our experience of hardship spread. During that time there was no one, not a single person, to encourage us but instead they made our burden heavier. My mother was discouraged and tearful, saying: Holy who loves children doesn't have any. In our house my husband and I were in the darkness and didn't see any joy although in public we didn't show this.

What was clear in my mind was to endure in my household because that had been my choice. My parents had already not approved of my marriage to Claudel and so I wasn't brave enough to complain to them and I didn't even consider leaving my husband. What we really hoped for was the direction for good provided by God and God's ability to work out all things even though the timing was hidden and unknown to us. At that time we offered prayers of request each time we thought of it, sometimes together and sometimes as each of us thought of it. Despite this, we went between both hope and doubt within ourselves for a long time.

There was a time when we were listening to the teaching of Scripture and had conversation with fellow servants and we remembered that when a person is consecrated as a "Shepherd" then Jesus forgives all their sin and they experience blessing in that. When my husband and I considered that, we agreed that it would be good for us to be prepared to become shepherds. This was completed on August 15 – a year and a half after our marriage.

In September of 1998 I began my internship at Antanimalandy Church in Mahajanga. We always felt ashamed when we met people because the word had already been spread through the workplace of Pastor Claudel at Antanimalandy Lutheran Hospital that he couldn't father children. That particular word really wounded my heart and caused me to appeal to God in tears and for both of us to kneel down together. Among the things I said at that time was: "Why, God, do you leave us to be ashamed, we who are your people – so save us. You are able to heal, even to the point of raising the dead – so are you not able to give us children?"

A short while after that I came down with a fever. At the same time my monthly period had not occurred, so I went to the hospital. The doctor gave me medication and my period came at that point. One month after that I was sick again, and the doctor had a realization and had me take a pregnancy test. That was a time that made me very nervous. I was afraid to be ashamed and embarrassed if the result of the test was negative. I didn't dare ask the hospital worker but sent Claudel to go there ... and lo and behold ... thanks to the grace of God the response to the test was positive. I didn't dare believe it but it was as though I was dreaming even as I was happy.

We finished our internship and returned to Betela Seminary in the month of January 1999. Like many women, I was not well during the first four months of my pregnancy. During that time there were still many who accused me and said that this wasn't my child. Some said that it wasn't a baby within me but perhaps an animal. There was nothing I could do but pray. Yes, even my inlaws did not believe it and accused me instead. When I grew and it became clear that there was indeed a baby within me, there were those who accused me of having had an affair and that this wasn't Claudel's child. This was really difficult, my friends, and yet when the time came, I delivered safe and sound. That's the reason behind the name of our first child: Fy Sarobidy (precious) Nomeniavo (given by him from above). This was truly a gift from God and we gave thanks to him. We thought this would certainly be our only child, and yet three years later God once again gave our second child who was called: Saotra (thanks) Nomeniavo (given by him from above) as thanks to God. "That's enough," my husband and I said. Beginning then we were careful and counted days so as not to become pregnant again. But when God gives, God gives in abundance. During a time when we thought I couldn't become pregnant we received our third child. My husband and I were discouraged because we faced financial difficulties as well as difficulties with our studies – we were very afraid. Caring for this three children left us tearful and full of uncertainty – whether it was buying the necessities for the child to be born or whether it was completing our challenging studies. This was all a human way of thinking. God knows the thoughts we think: shortly after that there was used by God as an instrument who gave us the necessities for the birth – even more than we had thought of. Until I gave birth there were always different gifts both from people around us as well as people from overseas. This was a great grace from God, my friends. Since then my husband and I were completely convinced that we wouldn't any more but we would let God alone guide our lives. We called our third child: Mitia (to love) Ampitoky (enough trust) Nomeniavo (given by him from above).

We pleaded with God then saying: We are going to do your work now, Lord, so make these three enough for us." When Pastor Gonia happened to pass by Madagascar I said to him that three children was enough "Not so," said God, and once again at a time we truly did not expect it the fourth child came along. Truly God gives a limit to human understanding. There was nothing for us to do but to agree. In the face of those others who had no children at all and give the pleading we had done earlier, we simply agreed and didn't complain any longer. Aikiharokanty (agree) Nomeniavo (given by him from above) was his name. It's an important thing to agree, my friends, that there is a great benefit from the One who Gives (God). We were given many blessings by the Lord with that. Among them was the easiness of this child (so easy to be cared for), the opportunity for me to go to America (which was completely unexpected and yet an enormous blessing), the consideration of the Malagasy Lutheran Church to send me to pursue a doctorate (praise be to Jesus), etc ...

May this story of mine give glory to God alone!





Faith story: Pastor Georges RAMAMPIARO

Director, Betela Lutheran Regional Seminary

As you know, I am coming from revival family, from my mother's side, but my father was not Christian. I was fortunately baptised when I was baby, December Christmas 25, 1948, and I was born September 10, 1948. My uncle, my mother's brother, eventually received renewing of his faith in 1965. And I was already aware of my faith from that time. My faith had been in maturity, when I had the access to meet Nenilava (Volahavana Germaine), the woman, revival Leader in April 1966. She also arrived in our village by having a trip to evangelize around the Marovoay area, in the north west of Madagascar. Therefore I got special rendezvous to meet her at the guest house of our church, April 1966. She always began by prayer before having conversation with someone. She gave me after, two texts from the Holy Scripture: Luke 22:7-20; Heb.1:1-9. And she said to me: "Jesus wants you to be a pastor and for you to be preaching his Good News about Jesus, Saviour for all". I willingly accepted it as a God's call, even though I would like to be a doctor in that time. I went together with her and her colleagues to evangelize around the Marovoay area, during the Easter vacation. I thought in that time, that "even though I am a sinner Jesus loves me and saved me too from all my sins; and now I know that He has been calling me to be his worker in the God's people".

The woman is a revival leader, Nenilava went back to Ankaramalaza after evangelizing around nearly all villages in around Marovoay and in the Marovoay own town. Ankaramalaza is the revival Center that she was leader from August 2 1941 till January 22 1998. This center is still working as the revival Center, even though she died on the date which mentioned above. And it is situated far away in the east coast of Madagascar in relation to the north west, ca. 1100 Km. Many of young people and some of them were still teenagers like me from Marovoay area, went together with her to Ankaramalaza at the end of April 1966. Most of them had willingly left their homes, families and their villages, included region; and they have believed in Jesus as their Savior by the Gospel preached by Nenilava and seeing the possessed people of evil spirit, totally free of their bondage. I was really impressed too to go together with her and with the renewed young people and teenagers and follow her to Ankaramalaza, but my mother did not give me yet permission because of my age. But I constantly asked for her to give permission. Finally, and a couple at our village would like to go to Ankaramalaza to be at the annual renewal/brought meeting held every year, July 27 to 02nd August (it is celebrated till now). And they asked for my mother to go together with them to Ankaramalaza and they would like to drive their car there. My mother allowed me to go with them to Ankaramalaza. And when we arrived there and came with Nenilava's house, she said again to me: "Jesus loves you and He wants you to be a pastor. He himself will accomplish his own purpose for you".

After one year of these words, I eventually decided to begin my theological studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary Ivory- Fianarantsoa, October 1967. And My theological studies were finished in July 1971 and I was ordained by the East Regional Synod (ERS) President, July 2 1972 even though I began as a parishioner September 1st 1971 at the congregation of the ERS in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. I have just been pastor parishioner for two years and the ERS made my assignment as pastor-parishioner to pastor teacher at the Biblical School in Vangaindrano in July 1973. From this time I was no longer pastor parishioner but pastor teacher at the Regional Lutheran Theological Seminary RLTS) (1981-1990) in Vangaindrano and RLTS Betelan'i Boeny Marovoay, 1990 till now.

During the long time (36 years) as the worker in God's ministry, we (my family and me) have met the difficult and peaceful situations, but we are blessed by God full of grace and mercy by Jesus Christ full of salvation and love.



A Faith Story from Pastor Georges Ramampiaro
Director of Betela Lutheran Regional Seminary

This story that I will share to you today is the story of the conversion of my uncle, i.e. my mother's brother, and gives light, not only for his faith story, but also my faith story too and the most members of my mother's family. And I would like to tell you as the following:

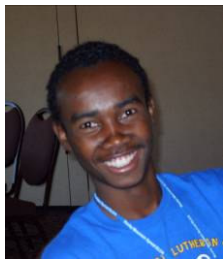
My uncle was separated of his wife in 1965 because of himself 's sake. He was even though Christian, turned back to the pagan life. His wife eventually went back to his parents, right away their separation was happened, because her parents were still alive in that time, and lived at their village that was situated 5,5 miles from my uncle's one. After some weeks of the separation, he had very missed of his wife but he could not for certain to her. He tried at the end to go to the wizard/sorcerer, by getting amulets or witchcraft things there. He believed in that time that the wizard and his amulets could help him to draw magically back his wife home; but there was altogether, no efficiency and fact to her, even though he worshipped by using the amulet, and invoking the evil spirit to help him, every day. As I know, his wife has a strong Christian faith and she believes that Jesus alone has all might in the heaven and on the earth, especially against the evil spirit. She is also still alive. Finally, he decided to tell to the catechist of his church the bad situation that he had, and asking him help by taking back home his wife from her parents.

The catechist fortunately accepted and they the catechist and my uncle) went together to her parents' village and told to her and the parents that he very missed his wife, and he was very sorry for all bad things that he did before at home against her. And he directly said to his wife the following: "I love you, I miss you. Forgive me, and let us go back to our home, please". The Catechist, my uncle and his wife went back with gladness to their own village and at home with them. He truly knew that the Catechist acted as a mediator between him and his wife by helping him to take back home her, not the wizard and his amulets, included the evil spirit. He did no longer believe the wizard and his amulets; and he threw away the amulets; but he was immediately possessed by evil spirit. He was therefore sick.

My mother's family decided to send me by bike to call someone that he was an evangelist and shepherd who lived and worked in town that is situated 9 miles from our village. And he came to our village and at home with my uncle and his wife. The members of my mother's family gathered with them. The Evangelist began and led the devotion and prayed before reading and preaching the Holy Scripture from the Matt.28:16-20. He continuously read the following Holy Scripture before impelling/driving out in the name of Jesus from Nazareth, the evil spirit in my possessed uncle: John 14:12-17; Marc 16:15-20; John 20:21-23. The evil spirit eventually went out from him by uncontrolled moving, hither and thither. He was really free from the possession of the evil spirit in that time. And the Evangelist and Shepherd especially prayed for him by laying on of hands. He was very happy and got well of his all diseases, physically and spiritually. He was really converted and

he confessed to his Christian faith by believing Jesus as his Savior and Lord. His wife was actually very glad. He deeply loved his wife; and they both live day and day the Christian faith and life. They brought testimony to my mother's family, included me. The revival movement was installed in their home and in their Church. He and his wife invited every member of family to gather with them having devotion and Bible studies every evening. I was in vacation in that time and I took part to revive my faith, and thinking about call to be a Pastor. Many people became saved by Jesus alone, from their pagan life to the Christian faith and life.

God is mighty and merciful. He loves every man and the whole humanity to be saved. Therefore He always blesses his people that are bringing out his gospel to every man in the world.



Christophere Narijaona's Story

Christophere served as a counselor at Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp in 2008

Between 1997- 2000 , we stayed at the seminary pastoral BETELA Morondava because my Dad was studying to be a Pastor. And when I was 10 years old, mean on September 2000 , my Dad had the pastor diploma (Mean he is pastor) . So when he is a pastor, we left the seminary and moved to my Mother's village because my Dad worked near there. So we found a lorry because we had a lot of baggage. And when we found the lorry, we left the seminary and went to my Mother's village. The trip was 5 days because It was like 650 km and the road was very very bad, broken. And when we' ve done 3 days of car , the car was broken and our foods was almost done too. And we went again when the car finished but in the 5th days of trip, the car was broken again . It was 21 km from my Mother's village . But we didn't have any food , only water, we were so hungry. So we try to go to the village who we want to go to get some food. It was not problem for me to go by foot but I have 2 little brothers (4 and 7 years old) so that was the problem because my little brothers can't walk for 21 km and my Mother was pregnant my sister (8 months) so that's the problem too. But we should go because when we stayed with the car we died because we don't know when the car finished so we tried to go for 21km with the group of people with us in the car. So I take care my on brother and my Dad take care my other brother. It was a hard time for me because we was crying and my parents was crying too when they saw us crying. So It was a very hard time for me because It was my first time to walk by foot for 21km and I didn't see my parents who crying. I think when we continue 2 more km we died because we was very very hungry and tired. But God love's us and we arrived there after 10 hours. And on October 2000 my Dad leaved us again and went to the small village who he working on for 3 years (in the bosh). And we didn't see my Dad for 3 years because the way to g to my Dad's village was not good. Only the lorry or Cross Moto or Bicycle can went there. It was 129 km from my Mother's village and only june, july and Aougust the lorrys can go there because there are 3 big rivers in the way. So we didn't see my Dad for 3 years. Pour my sister, she didn't see my Dad when she born to 3 years old., because she born on October 24th 2000 but my Dad leaved us October 13th 2000. But after that my Dad was coming back and stayed with us because my Mama asked to our president of Synod that my Dad stay with us and work with us.

So the Christian dia miady mafy isanandro ka tsy tokony halaky kivy. (must strive mightily each day and must not become quickly discouraged).