Madagascar doesn't seem to get the same "press" as other African nations, especially in relation to its east African neighbors such as Tanzania and Kenya. When Madagascar does get some attention, it is usually for its unique flora and fauna: the traveler’s palm (raonala, in Malagasy), for instance, and the lemurs, which are the earliest form of primate. Not as much is known about Madagascar's people or the country in general. This lack of general knowledge is true also in the ecclesiastical realm. Yet the three-million member (and growing) Malagasy Lutheran Church is a communion with a very significant and interesting history.

Madagascar is the fourth-largest island in the world, over a thousand miles long, which makes it roughly the same size as California. The Malagasy people are of both Melanesian and African origins. The Melanesian portion originated in Borneo, traveling to Madagascar by long boats, perhaps stopping for a time along the coast of India before finally arriving and settling on what has been called "The Great Red Island." The Melanesian people group (known as the Merina; there are some other related groups, including the Vakinakaritra and the Betsileo) quickly moved inland to create a terraced rice culture in the highlands. At about the same time, around the year 1000 AD, Africans migrated to Madagascar, using the Comoros and other Indian Ocean islands as stepping stones since they were not the same kind of long-distance seafaring peoples as the Melanesians. The two main groups have been in constant conflict throughout Malagasy history.

The Merina kingdom in the central highlands, centered around what is still the nation's capital of Antananarivo, developed a highly sophisticated government. During the period of European expansion, they took advantage of British presence in the area through the conquest of the islands of Mauritius and Reunion during the Napoleonic wars. Banking on British anti-slavery sentiment, they concluded a state treaty with Great Britain whereby the Merina kingdom promised to abolish the slave trade in its land in exchange for British arms. With these modern weapons the Merina were able to subjugate most if not all of the other people groups on the island. The Merina kingdom even exchanged official diplomatic missions with England, the United States, and the Prussian Union in the 1880s. Despite this, during the "land grab" for colonies in the nineteenth century, Madagascar fell victim to the French, who used the very thin argument of "ancient rights"—based on a single failed little colony in the south of the island at Fort Dauphin—to justify their conquest in 1895–96.

The church history of Madagascar began in earnest in 1818 when two couples from the London Missionary Society landed on the east coast of Madagascar at Toamasina (Tamatafe in French). Within months, Rev. and Mrs. Bevans were dead from malaria along with Mrs. Jones. David Jones, the remaining missionary, departed for Mauritius, where he recovered while spending his time learning the Malagasy language. In 1820 he returned and then began a most amazing and successful ministry. By 1835 the missionaries and their Malagasy assistants had translated and published the entire Bible into the Malagasy language, the first such complete translation of any country in Africa south of the Sahara. This proved providential, as not long afterward a new monarch, Queen Ranavalona, came to the throne and, acting on the advice of her counselors, expelled all the missionaries and outlawed the Christian faith on penalty of death. During the remainder of her thirty-year reign, thousands of Malagasy Christians were martyred for their faith.

The situation during that time was analogous to what happened in the twentieth century in China. According to the Western press, the church was "dead" in China due to harsh Communist oppression and the closing of the churches. This sentiment is also to be observed in the missionary literature of the time concerning Madagascar. In both cases, faith in the work of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's word were completely discounted. When China finally opened to the West again, however, it was found that the church had, in fact, become truly indigenous and multiplied in unbelievable numbers. The same thing happened in Madagascar when the missionaries returned upon the death of Queen Ravalona in 1865. The English
missionaries found the church vibrant and strong. When
the story of “the Malagasy martyrs” was told in the mis-
sionary press, monies were collected from all over the world
and seven “martyr churches” built of stone in the Gothic
style were constructed throughout the capital. They still
stand today.

It was at this point that Lutheran history began in Mad-
agascar. In Norway a great revival had spread throughout
the country, first led by a layman, Hans Nielsen Hauge,
later by a theologian and pastor, Gisle Johnson, who man-
aged to keep the Pietists within the Norwegian state church
rather than separating and forming new communions, as
happened in many other countries. The revival created a
passion for mission work, and the Norwegian Missionary
Society (NMS) was formed in 1842, not as an agency of the
state church but as an independent, nondenominational
body. While the society sent out its first missionary, Hans
Paludan Smith Schreuder, to South Africa in 1843, they
spent most of their early efforts in raising money for a mis-
sionary training college founded in Stavanger, on the west
coast of Norway, where they trained a cadre of missionary
recruits to be sent out into the fields “ripe for harvest,” to
use the language of the day.

By 1866 they had a crew of three pastors and their wives
ready to be sent out. Their original intention was to join
Schreuder in South Africa. When they communicated this
plan to him, though, he strongly advised against it because
at that moment the British were fighting a “pacification”
battle against those they termed Kaffirs (a derogatory term
similar to “nigger” in English). Missionaries were no longer
welcomed there by the white population, said Schreuder,
because they took the indigenous people’s side in the war!

So much for the popular notion that missionaries were
always the witting agents of some great colonial “plan of
conquest.” Having learned of the new openness in Mada-
gascar after the violent queen’s death, Schreuder advised
the mission board to send the missionaries there instead.
That is exactly what happened, and thus Madagascar
became the largest mission field of the NMS throughout its
history.

But of course not only Lutherans were there. The mod-
ern ecumenical movement did not grow out of deep theo-
logical reflection and praxis on the part of the churches
“at home” in the U.S. or Europe, but rather from the close
cooperation of missionaries and their boards who sought
to create what were then called “comity agreements.” In
these agreements, the various mission sending agencies
agreed not to dispute territory as if in imitation of secu-
lar states competing for land and empires. In this spirit,
the NMS board formally contacted the London Missionary
Society (LMS), asking for its blessing upon their efforts
and inquiring as to which portion of the island they might take
up without interfering with the LMS or the shared goal of
bringing the whole Malagasy people to Christ. The LMS
accepted their intention and suggested that the NMS begin
work south of the central highlands of Imerina and the
capital. Accordingly, the NMS established headquarters in
Antsirabe, a three-hour drive (today!) south of the capital.
They later also negotiated permission for a single Lutheran
church to be built in the capital for the sake of the NMS
personnel stationed there to work with the government—
still an indigenous kingdom at that time, not a colonial
regime—and to orient their missionaries to the field by first
providing language training.

It was also through the Norwegian connection that
American Lutherans began work in Madagascar. This was
the era of extensive emigration from Norway to the U.S. As
a way of keeping in touch with their homeland, and also
often their own relatives serving as missionaries in Mada-
gascar, many Norwegian immigrants in America kept up
their subscriptions to the Norske Misjons Tidene (“Norwegian
Missionary Times”), which they received for a few pennies
a month at their farms and homesteads in the midwestern
United States. So it was that when American Lutherans of
Norwegian descent began to think of foreign mission work,
they thought first of all of Madagascar.

For many years all the immigrants could do was send
their mission collection money off to Stavanger, stipulating
that the funds go toward work in Madagascar. In 1887,
however, a young graduate of Augsburg College and Semi-
nary, Johan Peder Hogstad, offered himself for missionary
service. Since the Americans still had no infrastructure in
place to assist a new mission start, an agreement was made
with the NMS to accept Hogstad and his new bride, Oline,
as one of their own, albeit supported financially entirely
by money from America. The Hogstads traveled first to
Stavanger to be trained in its missiology and evangelism
strategy, then sailed for Madagascar aboard the NMS's own ship, the Paulus. Hogstad was more fully oriented to the work in the capital and also received his language training there. The NMS then decided to send him to its farthest-off outpost in the extreme southeast of the island, at a place called Tolagnaro (the former Fort Dauphin), where he arrived in September 1888.

The Hogstads were followed over the years by many more American Lutheran missionaries, as only a few years later the NMS agreed to a completely independent American Lutheran field of labor. Unfortunately, due to internal theological squabbling and personal power plays in the States, the one field later became two following the split among Norwegian Americans into the United Norwegian Lutheran Church (UNLC) and the Lutheran Free Church in 1897. The UNLC was centered in the southeast coast and inland as far as Bekily in the northwest and Antanimora to the west, while the Free Church was centered around Manasoa in the southwest. Again, though, to highlight the missionary contribution to ecumenism, the two mission fields organically merged in Madagascar a full three years ahead of the formal healing of the split that brought the former Free Church into what had by then become the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The two mission fields were merged in 1960, whereas that didn't happen in the U.S. until 1963. Throughout its whole existence, the work in Madagascar was the largest of the ALC's former fields. This situation changed, however, with the creation of the ELCA. Today there is only one long-term missionary serving in Madagascar in semi-retirement, Pat Bentsen. She is a registered nurse and trainer in the Malagasy Lutheran Church's amazing healthcare system, which counts nine hospitals, thirteen dispensaries, and countless small clinics in the spiritual health centers called toby. These are central to the indigenous revival movement called Fifohazana, "Awakening."

This background of close cooperation between the missionary sending agencies and the churches they created in the island meant a great advantage when Madagascar became one of the first former mission churches to become fully independent and nationwide. That took place in 1950, a full ten years ahead of national independence. There are still many countries throughout the world where this artificial division between former mission churches and one unified national church (even within a single communion) has not yet been healed and overcome. As a result, the Malagasy Lutheran Church (Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy, FLM) was the very first formerly missionary-led church to become a member of the Lutheran World Federation; it remains the ninth-largest member. The FLM also joined the World Council of Churches in 1966 and is a member of the All Africa Conference of Churches and the Act Alliance for development work. Internally it belongs to two ecumenical fellowships within Madagascar, the FFPM, an all-Protestant fellowship of churches that has published a joint hymnal and cooperates in chaplaincy work, and the FFKM, a broader group including Roman Catholics as full members. This latter group was formed in the 1980s mostly to counter the Marxist government for fear that it might follow the anti-clerical interference in Ethiopia at that time.

The Malagasy Lutheran Church today is vibrant, strong, and growing. It boasts six theological seminaries. The flagship institution is the historically oldest one, Ivory, in Fianarantsoa in the central highlands, some eight hours' drive south of the capital. This was, until 1983, the only Lutheran seminary on the whole thousand-mile long island. As a result of this, as well as of the explosive growth of the church, the school could not possibly house or educate all the students who wished to study for the ministry of word and sacrament. So in the 1980s five regional seminaries were founded all around the island. I founded the largest of these in the south of the island in the former American area of work, where it serves four regional synods, the most of any of the regional seminaries. A second regional seminary in Mahajanga, in the northwestern part of the island, has also been the recipient of American Lutheran support. Its founder was Arlen Stensland, a now-retired pastor, and its second director is now bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod of the ELCA, Jim Gonia. The five regional seminaries serve as feeder institutions to Ivory, which is the only one that offers a Master of Theology degree. Only the top students at the regional seminaries are granted the right to study at Ivory. The rest remain behind at their regional seminary and follow the same coursework as at Ivory but at not quite the same rigorous level. Due to flatlined support.
from abroad for more than twenty years now, all of these seminaries are struggling financially but somehow continue to press on with their important work.

There are twenty-three regional synods and many congregations in Europe that relate to the FLM, mostly in France, but also one in Belgium. The FLM also runs seven hospitals, twenty-five dispensaries, a nurse’s training school, two leprosy hospitals, and a school for the deaf. The FLM has also been the largest contributor of what the ELCA has termed “South-South” missionaries, sending highly trained and charismatic personnel to Cameroon and Papua New Guinea. One of these, a doctor named Mamy Ranaivoson, served both in Papua New Guinea and as the head of the anti-AIDS campaign in Africa, which was active in twenty-three nations. He later graduated from Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and was recently ordained and called to serve Trinity Lutheran Church in Topeka, Kansas. For many years a Malagasy pastor and theologian, Péri Rasolon-draibe, served as the Director for Mission and Development at the Lutheran World Federation.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the story of the Malagasy Lutheran Church is that of the Fyfohaiana movement mentioned above. This movement, together with the experience of martyrdom for the faith in its early history, has led to the explosive growth of the Christian faith in Madagascar, especially among Lutherans, who are the most sympathetic to the aims of the revival. Madagascar has had a series of revivals throughout its history. Earlier examples grew up in communities not traditionally served by Lutherans, though they still had an impact upon many within the Lutheran communion. The current revival, however, grew out of indigenous Lutheran roots and has expanded to include people from almost all Christian communities.

At first many of the missionaries sought to discourage or even to hinder the revival, thinking it was too anemic or too loosely organized. This was also the case on the continent of Africa and resulted in the huge growth of African Independent Churches, many of which are quite syncretistic. Fortunately, though, the movement originated in the area where the NMS had long worked. A number of the NMS missionaries pointed out that the missionaries were treating the revivalist Malagasy the same way their own ancestors had been treated by the state church of Norway! Why not work with them rather than against them? And that is exactly what happened. There is now even a Department of Revival in the FLM, which sounds rather like an oxymoron! The movement operates under a constitution and strict guidelines that require new converts to the revival movement to study under the direction of their local Lutheran pastor in a three-year program, amounting almost to a theological education-by-extension program. Only after passing through examinations by a national board are they set apart as “shepherds,” mpiandry in Malagasy.

This ministry is probably best compared to that of the diaconate. The mpiandry remain in their jobs but work in the parish under the guidance of the local pastor. Some who are either retired or unemployed also live in and work at toby, or camps, where the poor are taken in and the sick are tended to, including those with mental illnesses or what the Malagasy identify as demon possession. Their service and their success is analogous to that of the early church. They witness to God’s saving action in word and deed in the here and now. Their work is another major factor in the growth of the church. For many many years now, practically all those coming to seminary do so after first studying and serving as mpiandry. All the people in the top leadership of the FLM are also mpiandry. The FLM’s current president, Modeste Rakoto Endor, a graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago with a doctorate in New Testament, is also a leader in the revival movement.

Christians throughout Madagascar continue to be faithful despite conditions of great volatility in national politics and abject poverty. Madagascar is, economically, among the poorest countries in the world and had a major revolution in 2009. Recognizing that we are both part of the global Lutheran communion, American Lutherans need to find more ways to support our brothers and sisters in Christ in Madagascar.

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To support Lutheran missions in Madagascar, visit <www.madagasarmacmission.org>, the website of the Friends of Madagascar Mission. To support health work in Madagascar, visit <www.ghm.org>, the website of Global Health Ministries, an NGO set up by former medical personnel to assist the needs of companion communities around the world. The ELCA global mission website will not allow contributors to give specifically to one country, though it is possible to designate gifts to a missionary serving there.