



Kari and Justin Eller. Submitted photo.



The Rev. Justin Eller offers communion to a woman in La Paz, Bolivia. Submitted photo.



Justin Eller and some children in La Paz, Bolivia. Submitted photo.

Local couple share their faith in Bolivia

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By Susan Shinn

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When the Rev. Justin Eller decided to go into the ministry, he determined that global mission work would be his first call.

He and wife Kari were told over and over it couldn't be done. Still, they felt that's where the Holy Spirit was leading them.

Today, Justin, 29, and Kari, 28, are pastoral team educators with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in La Paz, Bolivia. They are serving their second year of a two-year contract which they hope will be renewed in the spring. Both natives of eastern Rowan County, Justin and Kari spoke at St. John's Lutheran Church Jan. 2 during its three Sunday morning services. The two are very much partners in ministry. Kari teaches English at an ecumenical seminary, while Justin teaches a variety of classes there. Kari taught Spanish in the Chicago public schools while Justin attended Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

The Ellers are a new brand of missionaries, called pastoral team educators.

"We wear lots of different hats," Kari says.

Rather than taking the lead when they work in a mission area, pastoral team educators are in the role of "accompaniment" — walking with, or walking alongside, according to the Rev. Harvey Huntley, the ELCA's Region 9 coordinator who worked with Justin during his candidacy and assignment process.

The longstanding guideline is that a pastor will serve three years in a parish before going into mission work. But that has changed in the last 10 years, Huntley admits.

So has the model of missionary work.

"Missionaries typically work with a pastor who is indigenous to the culture," Huntley says. "The missionary has skills to empower and enable ministry, but not come in and do it. You are not coming in a hierarchical way, telling people what to do. You are coming in to be a companion."

Justin says he first received the call to ministry when he was about 15, but didn't quite know what to do with it.

Justin and Kari went on to graduate from N.C.



With alpacas in the background, Kari Eller poses in La Paz, Bolivia. Submitted photo.



The Rev. Justin Eller works with a group of men in La Paz, Bolivia. Submitted photo.



The Rev. Justin Eller baptizes a baby in La Paz Brazil. Submitted photo.

State, he with a degree in biochemistry and genetics, she with a degree in Spanish, English and literature.

Their pastor in Raleigh asked him, "Have you ever considered studying theology?"

"No," Justin answered, "and I don't want to be a pastor."

That wasn't the question, the pastor said.

But the idea was out there.

In the days and weeks that followed, Justin started to ask, "What if?"

"That's when God said yes," he says.

Justin graduated from State in December 2002 and entered seminary in the fall of 2005. Kari taught while he was in seminary, and he says he is blessed to have graduated with no debt.

Justin and Kari consider themselves to be among a new generation of couples in the ministry. She has her own career, and they are equal partners in mission.

During Justin's second year in seminary, he asked her after church one Sunday, "What would you say to international ministry?"

Her reply: "I would say, how would you know what I'm thinking?"

They started making inquiries, only to be told it couldn't be done.

In the summer of 2008, they attended an ELCA Global Mission event in Wisconsin. One of the workshops they went to was "So you think you want to be a missionary?"

By far, they were the youngest couple in the room, but one of only two couples who stayed afterward to ask more questions.

They quickly found teachers were needed in mission work.

"Kari being a Spanish teacher with an ESL licensure was exactly what they needed," Justin says.

The fact that he was going to be a pastor was a bonus.

They decided to "step out of the boat" and apply to both foreign and domestic assignments. Justin was assigned to the North Carolina Synod, which was supportive of his desire to serve overseas.

Justin graduated in May 2009. The Ellers found out they were accepted for mission work before he was ordained the next month.

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They left for Bolivia in August 2009.

Justin and Kari mainly work with the Aymara people, in such diverse areas as Lutheran identity, leadership and self-esteem. They plan to expand to other topics in the new year.

Until 1984, the Aymara people had no official written language.

Justin and Kari do a lot of translating, interpreting and contextualizing, he says. "We ask, how does this fit in here, in our time and place?"

Justin and Kari travel often. They work with some 100 congregations in Bolivia, but concentrate their efforts in La Paz and El Alto, another large city.

The two share a small house in La Paz. It has running water but no heat, as is common with the homes in the area.

"We have lots of blankets and space heaters," Justin says.

The two hope to continue their work in South America. If all goes well, the Ellers could be in Bolivia a total of six years.

"We think they want us there," Justin says of the ELCA's Global Mission unit. "We are at the beginning of a paradigm shift there."

Not only are Justin and Kari working on local projects, they serve as ambassadors and hosts for visiting missionaries, and work on regional projects for Lutheran World Relief and ELCA World Hunger.

"We see God's mission at work on all of those levels," Justin says.

For more information about Justin and Kari Eller's work in Bolivia, visit her Website at kari-eller.weebly.com.

Freelance writer Susan Shinn lives in Salisbury.