



## “Pastor, if you want to help our church. . .”

by the Rev. Arden Strasser, ELCA missionary in Zambia

Only one year in Zambia, I was asked to accompany the senior pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia as he resolved a crisis in a distant congregation. This entailed meeting with the chief of the Lunda people.

We traveled together to the chief's palace and asked his headman for an audience. After spending a few hours waiting under a shade tree, we were allowed inside his walled compound. As the chief entered, his headman instructed us to lower our stance. Everyone got down on one knee, heads bowed and began to clap in rhythm. Astounded, I hesitated, not comfortable with this. I'd never kneeled before a chief before.



*Pastor Arden Strasser, ELCA missionary in Zambia, meets with Alfred Chana, senior pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia, to discuss funding for the church's HIV and AIDS strategy.*

The senior pastor told me, “Pastor, if you want to help our church, kneel! Even the president of the nation kneels when he visits the chiefs. It is our tradition.” Forcing aside my reluctance, I kneeled and clapped the rhythm of respect for the chief standing before us.

What was the correct thing to do? What would my refusal to kneel have accomplished? How would it have been understood? What does kneeling really mean to Africans? Does kneeling imply my agreement with things contrary to my faith?

As I struggle with such questions personally, I see African Christians seeking to find their own answers to such questions. African churches are best capable of discerning the relationship between cultural practices and their Christian faith.

Called in 2006 as an ELCA missionary with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia, I focus on leadership development in the church. In workshops that I am invited to lead, the church's pastors and evangelists debate the relationship between Christ and culture.

I am privileged to join this Zambian church as it matures into its identity. Knowing that the ELCA cares enough to share one of their pastors with them is a powerful sign of a steadfast, alive and active partnership.

Thanks for your support of our ELCA global mission personnel.

P.S. Since that first meeting, I've met other chiefs over a cup of tea and learned more about the social value chiefs provide in a changing world. For official decisions from a chief, the visitors kneel. When the chief comes to take communion in his congregation, he kneels like everyone else!



*Pastor Strasser, occasionally invited by local pastors to participate in worship leadership, blesses a Zambian child at baptism.*

