

Herman and Jeanette Fink

Companion Synod Committee Honorees

Herman and Jeanette Fink are well-known by many in the South Dakota Synod for their steadfast faithfulness to family, church and community. Others know them best as stewards of God's beautiful earth. Their love of the land and all it produces is felt by all who visit their farm in rural Armour, SD and by all who taste Jeanette's famous homemade jams and jellies, and breads.

But the Fink's outreach extends far beyond the borders of South Dakota. For thirty years, Herman and Jeanette have played a fundamental role in helping to found, develop, nurture and grow the Companion Synod Program and the SD Synod's relationship with Companion Synod Churches in Cameroon and Nicaragua. From the program's inception, Herman and Jeanette played an integral role in teaching about the companion synods: encouraging travel, nurturing relationships, and supporting the needs and ministries of our companion churches overseas.

Although they both were interested in global mission for much of their lives, their involvement did not take flight until after they retired. Herman grew up on the family farm. He was the oldest of 7 children, and when he started first grade only German was spoken, so he had to learn to speak and read in English. When he was in the 8th grade, his Dad was faced with the decision of sending him to high school or buying a new tractor for Herman to use on the farm. Herman knew he was needed on the farm, so the tractor was purchased. In spite of not having the chance to attend high school, Herman stated, "my education never stopped." He first considered travel abroad when his son Donald, who served in the Peace Corps deep in the mountains of Nepal, urged his father to "get a passport" and become involved in mission work.

Jeanette grew up on a farm near Salem, attended 8 years of country school, and graduated from Salem High School. She was the youngest of five siblings, so she spent a lot of her early years at her sister's home, helping raise their six children. She attended General Beadle College for two years, and then got a job teaching in Mitchell. She met Herman at the young adult group that met at First Lutheran in Mitchell. When they married, Herman had a three-year-old son he was raising, so she married into a family. The church Jeanette grew up in sponsored two women missionaries in Tanzania, and she felt a special connection to the stories they told when they came home to visit. She recalls, "I was involved with knowing missionaries all my life, and I think that had an influence on me."

In 1995 when Herman was almost 60 years old, he received an invitation to join a South Dakota delegation that would travel to Cameroon and the Central African Republic with former missionaries Bob and Susie Waite. Recognizing God's call, he booked his flight right away for his first trip overseas. 6900 miles later, he found himself in the midst of a life-changing experience. The South Dakota cowboy boot-wearing farmer was warmly welcomed into the homes and churches of Cameroonian brothers and sisters in the faith, and time spent worshiping, traveling, and helping build a church roof alongside them touched him deeply. Upon returning to South Dakota, he jumped at the chance to talk about Cameroon with everyone he could.

Herman's excitement about the emerging relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon caught the attention of congregational members throughout the state who were interested in traveling or offering support for specific projects like roof building. In response, Bishop Andrea DeGroot Nesdahl formed the Companion Synod Task Force, which Herman chaired for ten years. The task force eventually developed into the Companion Synod Committee, open to all who are interested in furthering the mission and relationships with South Dakota's companion synod partners.

Jeanette never visited Cameroon, but fully supported Herman in all his trips and the projects he spearheaded upon returning. However, the Lord also had a special call to mission work for her. When the opportunity arose for both Herman and Jeanette to travel to Nicaragua in 2004 as part of a small delegation exploring a companion synod relationship with the Nicaraguan Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope, she packed their bags without hesitation. Jeanette recalled the incredible generosity of the Nicaraguan people – giving up their beds and offering much-needed food and resources to their visitors before feeding their own families. Her experiences in Nicaragua had a profound impact on her, and she returned to South Dakota bubbling with enthusiasm, eager to tell stories and involve other congregations in this new companion synod relationship with the Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope in Nicaragua.

Over the past thirty years, Herman and Jeanette have traveled, educated and supported South Dakota's companion synods in Nicaragua and Cameroon. Each time they returned from a trip abroad, Herman and Jeanette dove headfirst into advocating on behalf of the companion churches, inspiring neighbors, friends, and fellow Lutherans to join them. They never dragged their feet because a need was too great or a project too large. Instead, they faithfully invested their time and resources, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide them to do the work that needed to be done. Time after time, God honored their faithful service with miraculous results.

Volumes could be written about the creative and faithful ways Herman and Jeanette reached out to support our companion churches over the years. Some of their more memorable contributions include:

- sending an ambulance from South Dakota to Nicaragua to address rural health care needs
- purchasing seed storage silos and water tanks in rural Nicaraguan villages
- initiating the “Raise the Roof” campaign that has since helped provide nearly 100 church roofs in Cameroon
- helping to fund an irrigation project for farmers in San Luis, Nicaragua that included a well, pump, solar panels, water tanks and hoses
- providing nontraditional transportation – including horses named after their South Dakota donors – for Nicaraguan pastors
- and being the conscience and voice behind countless additional projects to raise awareness and funds for construction, agriculture, food security, schooling, and health care in both countries.

The work undertaken by the Finks and fellow companion synod members was not always easy. Travel to both countries often required delegations to be adventurous, flexible, and persistent when difficult circumstances arose. Road conditions were often less than ideal, making visits to rural areas an adventure. Herman described the treacherous roads in Cameroon, commenting that once they encountered a pothole “so large you could turn a car upside down in order to level the road out.”

But they also found common connections and learning opportunities wherever they traveled - sharing knowledge of farming practices with new friends in Cameroon and Nicaragua, making tortillas alongside women in rural villages, witnessing the astonished faces of children who saw themselves in photographs for the first time, learning how to make efficient use of limited agricultural tools and resources, participating in outdoor worship services with chickens and roosters joining the chorus of praise, and most of all - celebrating a shared faith and that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Herman and Jeanette also were adept at finding humor in challenging situations. On the day of departure from one particular trip to Nicaragua, the SD delegation was waiting in the hotel lobby for the airport van when all of a sudden Jeanette felt something crawling inside her pantleg. As she described the scene through laughter, she “jumped up, pulled off her pants, and a scorpion fell out!” Eugene Weerts, a fellow traveler, quickly stepped on it – much to everyone’s relief. Later, at the Atlanta airport, the scorpion was re-discovered on the bottom of Eugene’s shoe!

Three decades and 26 trips later, at ages 84 and almost 90, Herman and Jeanette are still active and enthusiastic members of the Companion Synod Committee. Their legacy is deep and broad, as church leaders, congregational members, and fellow travelers from three continents will all attest. Their greatest impact, however, has been the bridges of love and faith they have built that continue to connect Lutherans in South Dakota, Cameroon, and Nicaragua after all these years.

Reflecting on their self-proclaimed “retirement vocation” of mission work and accompaniment with churches in Cameroon and Nicaragua, Herman reflected, “I had to finally come to the conclusion that Jesus got all his apostles from the common sector. He chose fishermen, tax collectors, etc. This one just ‘happened to be a farmer!’”

“You can either pack up and go,” he says, “or you can find lots of excuses not to go.”

The South Dakota Synod is forever grateful that Herman and Jeanette Fink decided to “pack up and go” when the Holy Spirit called them. Their faithfulness, enthusiasm, and generosity have touched thousands of lives, and the good work they have begun will bless our companion synod partners on three different continents for generations to come.