1. ***Don, you were born in Renovo, Pennsylvania in 1939.  Tell us a little bit about what life was like for a Lutheran in this part of the country.***

I honestly did not realize in the first 10 years of my life that there was anything other than Lutherans! As a kid… even as a PK (Preacher’s kid)… I simply went to church whenever I was expected to be there, usually accompanied by mother and younger siblings, and the fact that there were other denominations other than Lutheran never entered my mind. As far as I knew, all my playmates also went to church… somewhere… at least, I assumed they did. I just never questioned them. I guess what it boils down to is that for the first 10 years of my life there was really no denominational identity for me.

1. ***When did you move to the South?  How was life different from Pennsylvania?  What were some of your first observations?***

We moved to Albany, GA, in August 1949… the summer of my 10th year. Dad had accepted a call from the ULCA Board of American Missions to be a mission developer in the southwest Georgia town of Albany. As I thought about making that move, I was really excited by the idea of moving South. I actually had visions of citrus groves and lots of palm trees. When we arrived in Albany I was greatly disappointed to find only pecan trees and gnats! Albany, Ga, in August is HOT… but that didn’t really bother me or my three younger siblings. Our first year in Albany was spent living in TWO apartments (side by side… not enough room for a family of six in one apartment!) about four miles outside of the city of Albany. Within a couple weeks of arriving in Albany I entered 6th grade… and I had to ride a school bus for the first (and only) time in my life throughout that year. I don’t recall having problems fitting in at school. One thing that amazed me was that one of my new friends in the 6th grade came to school not wearing shoes. I never thought anything of it… for example, that this kid was poor. I actually thought it was pretty cool that he could come to school without shoes. But when I asked mother if I could do the same, the answer was a stern “No!”

It was also in the first year that we lived in Albany that I “discovered” non-Lutheran denominations. We were in Albany a few months before Dad was able to find a place (a Seventh Day Adventist church) and a group of people to start having worship services. In those months before we gathered as a Lutheran congregation, Dad and Mother would take us to worship on Sunday in various churches in town… Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, and even a Baptist church. I found these worship experiences both interesting and a little “scary.” When Sunday worship is VERY different from what one is used to, it can be a bit intimidating, especially for a 10-year old. When we were finally able to worship as a Lutheran congregation, it felt like being home! Although I must admit that I was both mystified and intrigued by the ”big water tank/small swimming pool” up behind the pulpit in that Seventh Day Adventist church!

1. ***Your father was a pastor.  Can you tell us a bit about his ministry, and how it influenced you to become a pastor?***

By the time I entered college in the fall of 1956, Dad was serving in the 5th congregation since starting his ministry. Although Dad had encouraged me to consider the ministry as a vocation, I was determined that would never happen! No way, José! Dad never pressured me about being a pastor. I was allowed to move in whatever direction I wanted. And at that point in my life, I had decided that I wanted to become an Electronics Engineer. (That’s another whole story about why I was drawn to that vocation.) However, I had a *Kairos* moment about two months after entering college that convinced me that God had other plans for me, specifically God was calling me to parish ministry… and electronics was an avocation, not a vocation.

1. ***You graduated high-school in 1956.  What was the mood of America during this time?  Did you feel confident about enrolling in college in the midst of the Cold War?***

The “mood of America” as I remember it was fear of an attack from the Soviet Union. Beginning around 1955 I was somewhat involved in the communications end of Civil Defense, so I was aware of some of the concern that adults had about a possible war with the USSR. I knew that there were people in the area who built “bomb shelters”. Since Albany was the location of Turner Air Force Base, a SAC (Strategic Air Command) base, with fighter jets and bombers, we were all aware that the base would be a prime target should there be a war. However, none of that deterred me from enrolling in college. I must say that when I became of age to register for the Draft, I first registered as a student, and later as a clergyman, which granted me student and religious deferment.

1. ***You graduated from Newberry College in 1960.  When did you enroll at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and what were your expectations at the time?***

From the summer of 1958 onward, I was consciously (and unconsciously) preparing for the ministry. My freshman year of college was at Gettysburg College, my Dad’s alma mater. As I got close to the end of that freshman year, I made the decision to transfer to Newberry College for the remainder of my college education. I made that decision for two reasons: 1) I was running out of money at Gettysburg; and 2) I had friends from the GA-AL Synod who were students at Newberry, and since I was already thinking of seminary at LTSS, it made sense to me to make this transfer. So in the summers of 1958 and 1959 I worked on the summer staff at Lutheridge… where all but one of the male staff were planning to go into the ministry. For me, there was never any question about where I would go to seminary… it was always LTSS. In the summer of 1960 I worked for Lutheran Social Services of Lancaster County, Lancaster, PA (a job I got through Dad’s connections with the Lutheran Brotherhood men’s organization.) And although I was getting tired of school after 16 years of it when I graduated from Newberry, I could “see the light at the end of the tunnel” … just three more years to go! And I had a lot of friends who were students at LTSS.

1. ***Give us an impression of life at Southern Seminary.  Were you challenged academically?  How did it prepare you to become a missionary?***

Life at Southern Seminary was great! I knew that I had so much to learn before becoming a pastor, but I felt like I had a leg-up because my father was a pastor. I quickly discovered that being a PK did NOT prepare me for the academic work that was expected of me. I WAS challenged academically. The new Church History professor, the Rev. Dr. H. George Anderson, scared the crap out of me! (BTW, many years later it dawned on me that Dr. Anderson was only about 5 years older than me!) I studied more in seminary than I had ever studied in my life. But I had a goal in mind, and kept going… especially since I did not want to disappoint either my parents or my professors.

The idea of becoming a missionary began to jell in my mind after Frankie-San entered Southern. This young man from Japan who barely spoke English was a delight to be around. And I began to develop this idea of becoming a missionary to Japan. I even bought a set of Japanese language records to try to learn some Japanese! (It didn’t work! I had too many other things to study!) Every year a staff member from the ULCA Board of World Missions would visit the Lutheran seminary campuses to meet with and recruit students who might be interested in becoming missionaries. So I met with this gentleman during my Middler year (1961-62)… and discovered that he and my Dad were old friends from PA. He encouraged me to continue considering world missionary work, and said that we would meet again in my Senior year… which we did. At that senior year meeting, he told me and my fiancée as we met with him that the normal practice of the World Mission Board was to call pastors who had served at least two years in a parish. And he gave me the word that the ULCA/LCA was no longer sending “evangelistic missionaries” to Japan. Would I be interested in Malaysia? Sure, why not. When we left our meeting, I rushed over to the library to check an encyclopedia on where in the world was Malaysia!! I had no idea!

1. ***Brenta, give us some of your earliest memories of Lutheranism.***

I was born in Savannah, GA, June 7, 1940. When I was 2, my dad went into the army as a chaplain. Mother, my younger sister Trudy, and I moved to Jackson, Miss. to live with my Granddad and Grandmother Schaeffer. Grandy Schaeffer was a pastor also; so, of course, our activities had to do with the church. After a short while, Mother moved us to a house out in the country, and we had no friends out there. So, Trudy and I would line up our stuffed animals and dolls and we played Sunday School. After World War II we moved to Burke’s Garden, Va. Followed by Blacksburg, Va. I learned to read, and could soon follow the entire service from the *Common Service Book*. I don’t suppose my life was much different from that of my friends except that we went to ALL the services, and we lived beside the church.

1. ***Your father was a pastor, as well.  What was life like as a pastor’s child?***

I didn’t look at myself as different from anyone else who went to our church. We were taught to be polite to everyone else and to go to all services. We didn’t have much money, so Daddy had two lots made into gardens. We had plenty to eat. All of us helped to weed the gardens and prepare the food for canning.

1. ***Please tell us about your education background.  What were some of your favorite subjects?***

I learned to read at age 6, but the school in Burke’s Garden was overcrowded and at first had no room for me. When I was finally able to get into the school, it was into a combined 1st through 3rd grade class… so I learned to read with all three grades. But then Daddy moved to Blacksburg the next year and I was put into a 1st grade class even though I read at 3rd grade level. Fortunately I had a teacher who helped me get into a 1st/2nd grade class, and after that I was with my peers. I loved to read. We had to help with chores in the morning, but were free in the afternoons. When I was in the 6th grade we moved to Chapin, SC. During my first summer in Chapin, I read 12 books a week—the library was open three times a week. In school I liked math best. In high school I stayed at the top of the class. We had few upper-level classes and all the girls took 2 hours of Home Ec. every day. We learned a lot that was useful in later years. I made most of my clothes, and I did canning and freezing. I was Valedictorian of my class. My higher education was at Newberry College. I majored in Math and minored in Education. Because I had so little higher math at Chapin, I hardly had enough math to teach, but I took advantage of all they had to offer; and I was a lab assistant in the Physics Lab.

1. ***When did you meet Don?  What was your first impression of him?***

I met Don at Newberry College and at Lutheridge when we both worked on the summer staff; but we didn’t date until my senior year at Newberry. He seemed so-so at the time. But at a Luther League rally at Newberry College in August 1961 a spark was set off; and by the end of my senior year (1962) we were planning to be married.

1. ***Don, what led to your commitment to become a missionary, and what was life like in Asia during your first year?***

The idea of becoming a missionary began to jell in my mind after Frankie-San entered Southern. This young man from Japan who barely spoke English was a delight to be around. And I began to develop this idea of becoming a missionary to Japan.

Every year a staff member from the ULCA Board of World Missions would visit the seminaries to meet with and recruit students. So I met with this gentleman during my Middler year. He encouraged me to continue considering world missionary work and said that we would meet again in my Senior year. At that senior year meeting, he told me and my fiancée as we met with him that the normal practice of the World Mission Board was to call pastors who had served at least two years in a parish. And he gave me the word that the ULCA/LCA was no longer sending “evangelistic missionaries” to Japan. Would I be interested in Malaysia? Sure, why not. When we left our meeting, I rushed over to the library to find where in the world was Malaysia!

Following graduation from Southern Seminary in May 1963, I was ordained a Lutheran pastor… got married… and moved into my first parish (St. Paul LC, Decatur, GA)… all in less than a month! After two years in the parish, I wrote to friends who were missionaries in Malaysia, Carl & Miriam Fisher. I told them of my interest in becoming a missionary in Malaysia; in their almost immediate reply they strongly encouraged us toward that end. I then wrote to the pastor from the Board of World Missions who had interviewed me when I was in seminary; told him we were still very much interested in mission work in Malaysia; and had a quick reply saying that he had a business trip planned for Florida and would stopover in Atlanta for another interview. Then in early December 1965 Pastor Art Bauer from the BWM came to Atlanta, and sat in our living room, and said: “Right now we have no requests from the church in Malaysia for missionary pastors. Would you be interested in going to Liberia?” Short answer: NO! Long story short, within a month they had such a request from the church in Malaysia… and the process leading up to a Call from the BWM began in earnest. By June we had the Call in-hand… resigned from our parish in Decatur… and in mid-August moved to Chicago where we were to attend the School of Missions. We moved when my wife was 8 months pregnant! We attended the School of Missions for a full school year, leaving in May 1967… preparing to move in July to Hong Kong where we were enrolled in the Yale-in-China Language School to learn the Cantonese dialect in preparation for work in Malaysia.

1. ***Brenta, how prepared were you to move to Hong Kong and Malaysia?  What did you enjoy the most?  What did you miss the most?***

I wasn’t really ready to go overseas, but the move took place over two years and that helped prepare me. We already had one child at the time Don accepted the Call to go to Malaysia; and our second child was born in Chicago during the School of Missions year of study. My family had done some traveling as I grew up, and living in a country area left me prepared for shanty toilets and things like that. I wasn’t afraid of cockroaches and rats! Other missionaries taught us a lot—how to pack barrels, for example, since we shipped our belongings overseas in 55-gallon steel barrels. We first traveled to Hong Kong with two other missionary families, and in Hong Kong lived beside missionaries who looked after us. I enjoyed learning Cantonese and got fluent enough to carry on a simple conversation. I did all my shopping in Cantonese. After a year or so in Hong Kong, we moved on to Malaysia. Malaysia is a beautiful country, and while we lived there, we visited both the mountain highlands and the west and east coast beaches. The people in the church were very nice, too. I missed some of the foods we ate back home, but we learned to eat new foods, too. We could get almost anything we wanted—as long as we were willing to pay for it.

1. ***Brenta, your family began while you were abroad.  What was life like as a new mother?***

I had a good life as a new mother. It helped to have already had two children by the time we arrived in Malaysia. However, I was pregnant with our third child when we arrived in Malaysia, so I had to find a doctor fairly quickly. I had a Portuguese doctor, and went to midwives of a Catholic order that ran a small hospital in the city of Ipoh. I had had the first two children without anesthesia, and this one was that way, too. I stayed in the hospital five days and was pampered with morning coffee and afternoon tea, served in silver dishes! We had an “amah” at home—a great “luxury” for us. We were members of the Ipoh swim club and our amah, Ah Long, took care of baby Diane while I took the boys swimming. I enjoyed my weekly shopping trips to the market. But I really didn’t have much contact with the local people other than shopping and at church. Perhaps that was our fault, but that was the way it was. Don’s work was mostly with young people, and during our second term in Malaysia, we did not have a servant, which greatly restricted what I could do. That being said, I did play the organ for church services; I taught piano to some of the young people; and, as needed, I taught Sunday School. During our second term I was in a Bible Study with other missionary wives. It was good for me because, except for Thursdays which Don took as his day off, I was without transportation most of the time.

1. ***Did you find the people of Hong Kong and Malaysia to be very open to the Gospel?***

Yes, especially the English-educated young people.

1. ***From your point of view, how did this ministry impact you and your young family?***

Our children were well aware of what was going on in the world. They loved to travel, and as they grew, they had a world view unlike that of most American children. This often caused problems because they found local people (in America) shallow and uncaring. Two of our children have lived and worked outside the USA, and the third has done much travel overseas.

1. ***Don, how did this ministry impact family life?***

We were not certain about what life would be like in Malaysia, or what my work as a missionary pastor there would entail… but we tried to live by the “missionary motto”: Be Flexible! In September 1968 we headed for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia… with a several days stopover in Bangkok, Thailand, where we had friends from my Dad’s congregation in Severna Park, MD. We arrived in Malaysia in the evening, and were greeted at the airport by several missionary families. We felt immediately at ease… especially since the Missionary Association and Lutheran Church business manager and his family had been our neighbors in Hong Kong for most of the time we lived there. After a day or so in Petaling Jaya (a suburb of Kuala Lumpur) where several of the missionary families lived, we were sent to our first assignment in the town of Menglembu, a “suburb” of the northern Malaysian city of Ipoh. Our friends, Carl & Miriam Fisher and their family, lived and worked in Ipoh… so we felt immediately welcome and comfortable. Our home was a beautiful 3-bedroom, 2-bath, bungalow situated near the edge of the town of Menglembu. The church where I would be serving with Chinese Pastor Timothy Lai, was located about a block from where we lived. Our children loved where we lived, as there was plenty of room to play in the yard. We served in this location for about a year and a half, before we moved into the home where the Fishers had been after they moved to Petaling Jaya. And we stayed in that location in Ipoh until we returned to the USA on a 1-year furlough in 1971.

Life for us in Malaysia was fulfilling and eventful. I served three different congregations in the Lutheran Church in Malaysia, and in all three I worked with a Chinese pastor who was designated the “Worker-in-Charge.” We made good friends, especially among the young people, who were the focus of our ministry, since it was the English educated youth (mostly Chinese) who were inquiring, and who were open to the Gospel message. In Menglembu Pastor Lai was the Chinese language pastor while I focused on the English language ministry. Our third child (a daughter) was born about 6 months after we arrived in Malaysia. So with three young children and my wife and I, we lived, worked, and played in Malaysia for a total of six years. After our 1-year furlough, we returned to Malaysia and were assigned a church in Kuala Lumpur. The three years we spent at Christ Lutheran Church were the highlight of our 6-year ministry in Malaysia. We left Malaysia and returned permanently to the USA in the summer of 1975. I have always felt that I gained so much more than I contributed to the church in Malaysia. And to this day, I continue to maintain contact through social media with several of the “young people” (now senior citizens!) from that Kuala Lumpur congregation.