

Theologians Without Borders

Pastor Scott Ness shares his experiences while serving in Denmark

By Pastor Scott Ness

People, no matter the culture, really are not all that different. Our struggles are the same. The world really isn't all that big. The struggle against human sin knows no boundary. It needs no passport. It is everywhere. Fallen human nature effects and affects us all. And it does so in the same way.

The struggles we face in the United States are so very similar to the struggles families face in Denmark.

For two weeks in July, I had the joy of traveling to Denmark as part of the NALC's "Theologians without Borders" initiative. (You can learn more about the program at thenalc.org/theologians-without-borders.) I taught parents at a family camp some simple steps to reclaim their rightful place as chief faith formers for their children.

Repeatedly I was told how blessed they were to have me there to teach and share. But, truth be told, I was the one who received the blessing. Something powerful happens when the people of God gather around His Word and His purposes.

Together we wrestled with questions like: How to insulate our children with an identity rooted in Christ to keep them anchored in a society that has little to no use for Jesus — at least in society's mind.

It was clear that we all struggle with priorities. We all struggle with investing daily time in the Word. We all struggle with the challenges presented by our culture, our governments, and the broken human condition. We all need to be encouraged.



Pastor Scott Ness traveled to Morkholt Strand, Denmark, as part of Theologians without Borders with the North American Lutheran Church.

We all need to be reminded of God's grace. We all need to be inspired from time to time. We all desire the best for our families. And we all fear that, too often, we are failing as parents. In short, we all need Jesus. And the beauty of the Holy Spirit is that as He draws our gaze toward Jesus we are drawn together — we are united to those right next to us and to those who live on the other side of the sea.

I know about five words in Danish — not all that helpful. And yet the language barrier was hardly a barrier at all. Why? Because many there have learned to speak my language. By second grade the Danes are learning English in school. While at camp I was fascinated as I listened to the Danes talk back and forth. I understood nothing. Sometimes things were translated for me. Sometimes not. At points it was very lonely, even though I was sitting in a room with 10 or more people.

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I think we do the same thing in the Church. The world no longer speaks our language. The Church (rightly so) is obsessed with things like the Sacraments and Scripture and worship. We speak of grace and justification and righteousness. But, to the world, this sounds like gibberish. Are we willing to translate? Are we willing to leave our native tongue to welcome in the foreigner? To learn a new language in order to translate the timeless truth of Jesus? To get outside of our blockheadedness so that those who don't know Jesus might come to know Him?

There are certainly times for conversations about Sacraments and the rest — the vital work of theology — but we must become more aware of our surroundings. "Let those with ears, hear." And let those of us who know the story of Jesus tell it in ways that can be heard.



The flag of Denmark



Pastor Scott Ness teaches a tent full of adults on both the importance of being the chief faith formers for their children and also equipped them with tools to make this a reality.

I serve as one of the pastors at St. John's Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio. We have been working hard to develop a relational ministry that provides opportunities for deep levels of communication. We believe that it is in these moments, when we connect with others deeply, that God can do some really amazing things.

However, in our culture, this is not an easy thing to do. Midwestern Americans are pretty good at being polite. I can talk about the weather with anyone — and do it with a smile on my face that makes us all feel good. However, it is challenging to go deep and to have real, meaningful conversations.

It was very clear that the Danish attendees at the family Bible camp struggled through some really rough life experiences. And yet, like Job, the beauty of their faith witnessed to an overwhelming trust in Jesus. It was a true ashes-to-alleluia story. And it continues to unfold. Oh, that we would be willing to be more open with our deepest pains and God's providence through them all! And, in sharing out of our pain inviting others to be vulnerable in sharing their story as well.

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I found the opposite to be true in Denmark. The Danes, self-admittedly, are less polite. Small chit chat is not the norm. They can appear to be stand-offish, almost rude, to my Midwestern sensibilities. But, oh, once you break through that exterior; once you are welcomed into their homes, you are welcomed all the way into their lives.

The hospitality and vulnerability provided opportunity for amazing conversations. Over the course of one lunch, a couple shared their heart-wrenching story of pain and ongoing challenges.

The most beautiful story that was shared with me was from the mouth of a six-year-old named David. One day, seemingly at random, he told his mom, "God is



There were more than 1,500 people of all ages at the week-long camp along the Vejle Fjord in Denmark.



The artwork above the altar of a church in Copenhagen. Jesus rises from "a treasure box."

going to have so much fun one day when he opens all of those treasure boxes." Confused, she asked David, "Treasure boxes? What do you mean?"

"You know, treasure boxes. Those boxes that people are put in when they die. God is going to have so much fun when He opens them up one day."

A casket as a treasure box — there is an image for you! "And a child will lead them."

I was blessed to take my nine-year-old son, Ethan, with me on the trip. On Sunday, in Copenhagen, we went to worship and, half way through worship, Ethan pointed above the altar and said, "Look Dad, a treasure box!"

Yes, Ethan. The greatest treasure box of all. The treasure box that leads to all of the others. Thanks be to God.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring greetings to the people of Denmark on behalf of the North American Lutheran Church. It was a true blessing.

The Rev. Dr. Scott M. Ness is associate pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Grove City, Ohio where he lives with his wife and their six children.