

Amsterdam, Holland

December 17, 2010

Dear Family, Friends, and Sponsoring Congregations,

I have never attempted a Christmas newsletter from the seat of a stranded airplane, but today is the day. Our KLM connecting flight from Amsterdam to Minneapolis was already two hours late because of weather, and we were just being de-iced for the second time when we were informed they were closing down all runways for snow removal. It means I suddenly have the blessing of lots of time to greet you for Christmas.

Linda is already in the United States, thank goodness. We had our first family visitor last month, and Linda decided to accompany Aunt Elsie back to North Dakota in November. If this plane ever gets off in this snowstorm, I will join her, Mom, and our kids and grandkids for Christmas. Let me say a word about each of them.

1. Our daughter, Pauline was ordained into the Lutheran ministry last March, and she and her family are having a very positive first parish experience in the Bowdon area, at the very heart of North Dakota. Larry has built a Quonset for his machinery, Joshua is in first grade in Fessenden, and Michael likes being a four-year-old because he no longer has to divide his vitamin.
2. Our first son, Matthew, now in his fifth year at Unisys Corporation in Bismarck, graduated with his MBA from St. Mary's College in May. Dina continues at Bismarck State College as she serves a retirement home, Tchina won a hard-fought election to the sixth grade student council, and beaming little Alvin is proud to be in kindergarten.
3. Our second son, John, is moving into his fourth year with Transport Security Administration at the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport. Heidi joined him at his Burnsville apartment last winter, having gotten a transfer from Minot and a promotion with her job. And we love it when their little Lily keeps a running conversation on the phone with us, though it's a bit like listening to Arabic.
4. And my mom, Martha, 91 is still living on the family farm. For breaks from time to time, she drives (if the weather is nice) or buses (if it's not) to Bismarck to see sister Joanne's family, and even talks of taking the train to Milwaukee in the spring to see brother Neal's family. She's a blessing we don't take for granted.

Linda and I are now halfway through our second year in Egypt, I in my teaching and master's program planning, Linda in her library work and homemaking, and both of us, yes, in those exciting Arabic studies. We have had a good response to an experiment at the seminary to open available class space to auditors trying to improve their English, and I have just declared my January course, Issues and Challenges of the Church in the Middle East, "full," – the first time this has happened. Linda and I have moved to an apartment closer to the seminary, thereby exchanging our thirty-minute commute in heavy traffic for a twenty-minute walk through a poetic neighborhood that looks to my eyes like old Jerusalem. It's like we've moved beyond mere coping into actually shaping our life and work here.

May the amazement of Christmas be yours this year as we try to get our minds around a God who takes on human nature. The thought is a bit shocking amidst all the cheery lights and tinsel, as well it should be, for a God who would do such a thing is full of surprises. May his surprises deepen and fulfill you in 2011.

Your kin, friends, and missionaries,

Mark and Linda Nygard

P.S. My flight never made it off the Amsterdam runway. After six hours of waiting (gasp), we were finally trundled down an icy stairway (the gates were all full of grounded planes) and released without further advice into an airport full of hundreds of stranded travelers. I had supper with a pair of Norwegians, waited 10 hours in a transfer line a quarter of a mile long, slept on the tile floor to keep my place, and was finally placed on an alternate flight via Washington, not by the Amsterdam desks too busy to think about me, but by my son John acting on my behalf way back in Minnesota. Homecoming was 30 hours late, but happy.

Merry Christmas.