

Papua New Guinea Reflections Wanda Childs

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When packing for my trip to Papua New Guinea, my husband Steve handed me a thick spiral-ring notebook. In case you want to keep notes, he suggested, you know, keep a journal. Oddly enough, I've never had much success at journaling, but OK, I told him. I'll try. And so, I did. Between journaling and my attempts at daily social media posts, here are some tiny glimpses into the trip of a lifetime was truly.

August 12: We are here, at least part of us! I boarded in Roanoke on Sunday at 2 PM and landed in Cairns at 12:05 PM on Tuesday. Happy Australia! Yes, we have been on an airplane or in an airport for over 40 hours. Our rooms aren't ready; there isn't any water, and a helicopter hit the hotel last night? I'm really trying to stay positive.

August 13 & 14: Rest and recover, get to know the entire super-talented and fun ELCA delegation (all 16 of us), and explore a bit. Who knew Australia has the oldest surviving rainforest in the world?

August 15: My alarm sweetly awakens me at 3:30 am for departure at 4 am. Our layover from Port Moresby to Lae was scheduled for 3 hours, becomes 4 hours, then 5 hours, and our fingers are crossed...you know it's all about the journey.

August 16: 8:00 am breakfast, and it's raining. There are two seasons here – dry & wet. This is the rainy season. There is so much packed into this day that I don't even know where to begin. My heart is full and my head is bursting. New friends, holy conversations, exquisite flowers, ancient tribal welcome ceremonies, and the sweetest pineapple I've ever tasted.

August 17: Companion Synod Consultation & Sharing. We gather at Martin Luther Seminary, part of the Lutheran University of Papua New Guinea. We pray together, sing together, share stories, and discuss the values of accompaniment in English & Tok Pisin (the pidgin language widely spoken):

- Mutuality = Wok Wantaim (walk together)
- Vulnerability = Pelim Pen (feeling pain)
- Empowerment = strongim wanpela arapela (you & me, we got power)

Bonus! While exploring the town during our break, I purchased a kundu, the drum used across PNG to accompany formal celebrations!

August 18: Another wonderful day of stirring music and excellent preaching by Pastor Cassie Overcash, from North Carolina Synod, the first woman to preach in the seminary chapel. The Bamboo band leads the music with guitars and a homemade instrument made from PVC pipes and flipflops. I'm struck not only by the brilliance of their creativity but also by the super cool sound!

August 19: We woke up early to catch our flight to the New Guinea Islands, our Virginia Synod sister synod. As we stumble off the plane, we are serenaded with another sing-sing by the youth of the ELC-Bethel. Cultures were colliding, an amazing display of love and strength, welcome, ancient tribal tradition, markings, masks, and leaves. I have no words, just a deep feeling of wonderment and awe. *"Through Christ, we are called together"* District Caretaker President Rev. Gedisa Okamaisa quoted as he prayed & welcomed us.

August 20: Up at 4 AM with slow & tedious Land Rover travel to congregations in the Bialla Circuit. Twelve-hour days. Every congregation welcomes us with celebrations, sing-sings, gift-giving, lots of photos with excited children, conversations and prayers. My heart is full, but my body is exhausted!

August 21: More congregational visits to the Kimbe Circuit, including Mt. Olive, where I gift them a handmade oak bowl from the Oak Grove Pavilion behind Zion Lutheran in Floyd, VA, and prayer squares knitted just for them. The service ends with a joyous planting of a coconut seed to commemorate our visit to this special place in the mountains.

August 22: This is our last day in the New Guinea Islands. The first half of the day is spent in Mingai, a mission start that includes a health clinic and primary and secondary schools. We love their big hearts and the beauty of their spirits.

In the second half of the day, we gather with our partners, collaborating on how we will work together in the future. We share many gifts, including beautiful stoles and stained glass crosses for pastors and congregations, all lovingly created by members of the Va Synod as well as eyeglass readers that Floyd Lutherans had collected. We are showered with bilums (handmade bags, meriblauses (traditional women's dresses), and headwear, followed by a farewell song, a final celebratory sing-sing, and a feast of fruits & tasty foods. I fall into the bed again with a full heart and a tired body.

August 25: My husband travels to Roanoke to pick me up from the long flight home. I'm ready for his big smile and long hug and delighted by our dog Roxy's yips and face kisses. I'm still answering and will continue to ponder the question he later asked me: Did this trip change your life? Indeed. My life is forever changed. Thanks be to God.

