



October 2019 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Beloved of God –

I give thanks to God for...

In January 2016 I stood with ELCIC and ELCA bishop colleagues at the border between Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico. We were silenced by the high, seemingly impenetrable metal wall that separated not only countries, but cities, neighbourhoods, friends and families.

And so I was fascinated this summer when news reported what seemed like an ordinary scene: children and adults playing on bright, hot-pink seesaws, laughing and chatting with each other. But this scene filmed at the end of July was a playground unlike any other, for these custom-built seesaws had been placed through the slatted steel border fence that separates the United States and Mexico.

The idea for this "Teeter-Totter Wall" came from Ronald Rael, an architecture professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and Virginia San Fratello, a professor of design at San Jose State University – and it was a long time coming. In 2009, the two designed a concept for a binational seesaw at the border, and ten years later, their conceptual drawings became reality. The "Teeter-Totter Wall" featured three pink seesaws installed between the slats on the border fence, allowing people on both sides of the border to see and to play with each other.

The seesaws were fabricated by a group of artists and the project was realized with help from Colectivo Chopeke, which focuses on bringing communities together through design. Rael and his crew transported the colourful seesaws to Sunland Park, New Mexico, which is separated by a steel fence from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Sunland Park is also where many migrants have been detained this year.

In an Instagram post (July 29, 2019) Rael wrote that the event was "filled with joy, excitement, and togetherness at the borderwall. The wall became a literal fulcrum for U.S.-Mexico relations and children and adults were connected in meaningful ways on both sides, with the recognition that the actions that take place on one side have a direct consequence on the other side."

Rael and San Fratello, speaking to Forbes Media, said: "The seesaw demonstrates how those immediate relationships between people can create an environment where happiness and play are also important aspects of life on the border and that our relationships with our neighbors can extend past political relationships but also humanistic relationships."

Word of the installation spread quickly across social media, but as quickly as the seesaws went up, they came down equally fast.

"There is no playground along the U.S.-Mexico border wall in New Mexico," a customs and border patrol official is quoted by Forbes Media as saying. "On the evening of July 28, U.S. Border Patrol agents encountered a small group who identified themselves as local university faculty/staff at the border wall. They had placed boards through the wall and appeared to be playing with residents of Mexico while recording the engagement. The group removed the boards and left the area without incident after it was established that there was no advance coordination."

I remain fascinated by this report, this experience, this play. The wall, which I had seen only as an impenetrable metal barrier, had become a fulcrum to create meaningful connections on both sides as the hot-pink seesaws went up and down.

Though the wall still separates the two countries and their people, the alternate life given it by professors and artists is profound. This was an image of community and relationships, and a striking contrast to the heart-wrenching scenes that now fill the news.

Joy, excitement, togetherness.

I give thanks to God for artists, architects, poets, musicians, playwrights, actors, dancers and theologians who open our eyes to hope and possibility, and to a vision to see beyond the barriers that separate us, creating meaningful connections.

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Bishop Larry Kochendorfer

"The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)

(A brief video of the teeter-totter wall may be viewed at Ronald Rael's instagram feed <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0fY2R6hfKr/>)