

Better Together: Jeff and Cheryl

By Beth Foreman, Associate Editor

From the heartland of Nebraska, home of Kool-Aid, Cabela's, and the Cornhuskers, to the urban settings of Baltimore, Atlanta, Bangkok, and now Phoenix, Jeff and Cheryl Ehlers have opened a lot of doors together in their 29 years as a husband and wife mission team.





Jeff and Cheryl's marriage verse:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10).



On a hot Arizona afternoon, Jeff and Cheryl gave me a peek into their marriage and their ministries, sharing their joys and their struggles as a real couple, a better-together couple, who have found joy serving their Lord and Savior. Grab your map so you can follow the Ehlers' journey together ...

Q: Where did your relationship adventures begin?

Cheryl: Jeff and I grew up in Nebraska City, Nebraska. That's a big part of our story because we both knew each other from our small church, Christ Lutheran.

Jeff: We've known each other for a long, long, long time! *Laughter.*

Cheryl: *Laughter.* Not that long!

Jeff: Two hundred years! *More laughing.*

Cheryl: Jeff is a few years older, so I didn't hang out with him when we were little. But we were both very involved at church. I was the organist; Jeff was an acolyte and an usher. Our parents were friends.

Q: So was it young love?

Cheryl: We dated off and on for years. My family moved to the East Coast when I was in high school. Jeff went to Concordia Teachers College (as it was known at the time), Seward, Nebraska, so we did our own thing for a while. But we stayed in touch even if it was just through our parents. I came back to Nebraska during summers to work and spend time with family. Jeff and I would reconnect then. And we used to write letters too. Boy, that dates us! God found ways to keep those ties there.

Q: When did you decide you were "better together"?

Cheryl: At the right time, we reconnected. After his first year at the Seminary, he had a week-long break and called. I think he was testing the waters! I told him, "Why don't you come visit South Carolina? The beaches are great." I really didn't expect that he would come, but he did!

Q: The wedding date was set ... ?

Jeff: Is this a test?

Cheryl: I want Jeff to answer this one. He probably looked it up since you sent your questions ahead of time. We got married July 30, '83. Right, Jeff?

Jeff: I think it was 1883!

Cheryl: 1983. It happened quickly but we knew each other so well that once it was the right time, there wasn't a need to wait longer.

Q: Tell us about your wedding.

Cheryl: People came from all over for the ceremony. It was a neat compilation of our past. Extended family, seminary friends, college friends, Jeff's field work pastor and youth group.

Jeff: One of the things we did was to ask our groomsmen to pick a reading, and they read the verse over us as a blessing.

Q: Did you have time for a honeymoon?

Jeff: Cheryl trusted me to surprise her! She got on the airplane and didn't know where we were going.

Cheryl: *Laughing at the memory.* I thought I knew where we were going!

Jeff: She thought we were going to California or somewhere west. She found out in New York that we were heading the wrong way!

Cheryl: Jeff wanted it to be a trip that was super special to match our courtship and our wedding ceremony, so he took me to Ireland! We had waited so many years to be together, and we really valued our marriage vows. It was very special.

Jeff: I had been there with a bike ministry traveling through England, Scotland, and Ireland. They have these old castles that have been refurbished, and so we were able to stay in a castle and see the countryside for not too much money in those days.

Q: Back to real life, your vicarage?

Cheryl: We didn't have too much time when we got back from our honeymoon to pack up and head for Baltimore, Jeff's vicarage assignment. I remember pulling up to the row house that would be our home for a year and thinking this is definitely not Nebraska!

Jeff: I wanted to be part of an urban experience. I like front-line challenges, working where the Gospel hasn't been taken before.

Q: Newlyweds, new city. How did that go?

Jeff: It helped that we knew each other well. We have shared values, a faith-based, grace-based understanding of things. Our parents have been tremendous role models for us. Like our theme verse, "two are better than one." That has been true in our life together. We are on the same page.

Q: After finishing up at the seminary, you accepted your first call?

Cheryl: Christ Lutheran, East Point, Georgia. They had a school, very small, and a preschool, so it was a perfect time. They needed a teacher. Of course, in a small school you get to wear many hats! I taught two classes, and I was the lead teacher. Jeff was named headmaster. It was kind of funny because we were both pretty green when it came to education! We didn't

have any children for our first couple of years in Atlanta, so it was just the two of us, Jeff and me, 24/7 at church, school, working together. Two years of a lot of fun!

Q: Better together! And then children entered the mix ... changes? Challenges?

Jeff: I was almost thirty years old when Megan, our first, was born, so I was ready. We'd been married over four years, and we had time to do a lot of fun things together, so we were excited about the new challenge. Cheryl's role in the congregation changed, but it was nice on several levels because Cheryl could then participate in activities and ministries of our congregation that she couldn't as a teacher.

Cheryl: It was really nice to have had four years together prior to parenting. We knew each other well and had enjoyed those years of relative freedom, being able to attend church events, devote ourselves to the school/church ministries, travel a bit, and become more financially stable before embarking on the "next phase." I stayed home after Megan was born but was very involved with school board, music, and children's ministries. All three of our children were born in Atlanta. Megan, who is almost twenty-five years old, lives in San Francisco and teaches at Zion Lutheran. Our son Josh is ... Jeff ... help me here ...

Jeff: Twenty-three.

Cheryl: *Laughs.* Josh is twenty-three, finishing his student teaching at ASU with plans to get his colloquy. Emily, our youngest, is almost twenty years old and in her second year at Grand Canyon University here in Phoenix, majoring in nursing.

Q: Then Jeff accepted the call to Bangkok with LCMS World Mission?

Cheryl: Yes, I think Jeff was more interested in missions at that point than I was. I remember thinking, "I don't know if we talked about this before we got married!"

Jeff: I like front-line challenges!

Cheryl: *Laughs.* I always wanted to be a pastor's wife, but I never thought about being a missionary's wife. I think the hardest part about the call was that Jeff was asked to make a commitment of seven to ten years. And when you have little kids and you have to tell their grandparents ... Well, that was the biggest test. It broke our hearts to take their only grandchildren so far away.

Jeff: We were starting from scratch in this very large city, where fewer than one percent of the population is Christian. Almost 95 percent of Thailand is Buddhist. No Christian churches. None of the indigenous people we knew were believers. There were teams of four or five families with LCMS World Mission, and we decided to work together. We thought we'd make a greater impact that way. It wasn't legal to publicly evangelize, so we had to be open to ways to draw people to us. If they came into our place to learn English, we could tell them about Christ.



Q: How did your family adjust?

Cheryl: Well, it was an urban jungle! I never expected to fall in love with it like I did. We were far from extended family, so we had to rely on one another. But that helped us grow close.

Jeff: When you do something as a family, it's rewarding. Sharing the Gospel, serving the church.

Cheryl: Our kids were key to making contacts with the Thai folks because we lived in a Thai neighborhood. The kids attended an international Christian school in Bangkok that was filled with American teachers and English-speaking kids. It felt like a piece of home for them. But when they were home, they experienced the local life. They'd feed bananas to the elephants who came up to our front gate. When it rained hard and fast, the kiddos would play in the street, up to their knees in water with fish everywhere.

Q: What made you decide to leave Bangkok?

Jeff: It was time to come back. The folks overseas were ready to be on their own. Today there are about ten congregations, 500 to 600 members. It all started with the teaching of English. We also wanted the kids to be grounded in high school so they felt like they had a home country.

Q: The next stop on your journey ... another urban setting. Phoenix. The southwest desert ...

Cheryl: We moved to Phoenix in 2000 to be closer to extended family.

Jeff: But neither one of us actually had a job when we decided to come back.

Cheryl: Jeff came ahead of me and picked a school, Christ Lutheran, and they needed a last-minute second grade teacher. God's right timing.

Jeff: Meanwhile, a position opened up for me with the LCMS Foundation and fundraising for missions.

Cheryl: Then after a few years I was asked to be assistant principal, and today I'm in my seventh year as principal.

Q: There must have been some adjustments in your relationship at that time ... Cheryl working outside the home again?

Cheryl: It was a turnabout. For the first time we were going in different directions in our ministries.

Jeff: In parish ministry and overseas, I was kind of the lead and Cheryl was supportive. When we came to Phoenix, I started the Garuna Foundation, but it was pretty quiet. Not a lot of people knew what I was doing. Cheryl had a prominent position and folks at our church really didn't know what I did. So it was a bit of a change, an adjustment.

Cheryl: The ministries we are involved with are very important to us. We are uniquely suited to them. And now we're beginning to see our ministries come full circle. Wow! It is God's right timing once again.

Q: Tell us about your work, Cheryl.

Cheryl: I love my ministry as principal at our Lutheran school. The church and school work very closely together. We have pastors who love missions and see the school as an outreach and recognize that we are both better because of each other. And I love my staff. We laugh a lot as we work toward the same goal, to give the kiddos a better view of Jesus and to learn what He is all about.

Jeff: Cheryl is the perfect person for this position. She's very talented!

Cheryl: Jeff helps me so much, behind the scenes. I have a large staff and a huge parent population, so there are many things I like to run by him. He gives me great advice. He's a counselor, a perspective-giver.

Q: So Phoenix, Arizona, is another mission field?

Cheryl: It's actually very similar to what we saw overseas. Most of our incoming students are not Lutheran or even Christian. New families come because they are looking for strong academics or programs. The priority is not usually on faith. It's not the culture we knew growing up. We average at least twenty baptisms each year!

Q: How has your experience up to this point impacted your mission work?

Cheryl: Serving in urban ministries and Asian ministries has helped both Jeff and me learn respect and to have a better understanding of where people are coming from. I'm seeing a lot more Eastern thought, for example, from families who haven't found a church home yet. They are searching. I'm blessed to be able to guide them in a fun and non-threatening way.





The Garuna Foundation sponsored a booth at the LWML National Convention in Peoria. However, the Ehlers' connection to LWML started many years before that.

Jeff: Throughout the years we've been happily involved in various ways with the LWML. We fully supported the LWML at Christ in East Point, Georgia. We were associated with an LWML grant in the 1990s, a ministry in Thailand, House of Living Water. (Project Rahab 1989–1991 biennium) I've enjoyed speaking at local and district LWML gatherings and retreats and, recently, I've been meeting with the Pacific Southwest District leadership about Garuna. Cheryl and I highly value LWML's dedication to mission.

Cheryl: I remember my mom (and Jeff's mom) as being active in LWML when we were growing up. They would go to monthly evening meetings and zone rallies, often traveling together. I remember saving our mites in the Mite Boxes that were on my mom's dresser. As a pastor's wife, I would attend LWML meetings at our church in Atlanta, where we had an active group of ladies. In Bangkok, the LWML gave much-appreciated support to the missionary community. I remember an amazing assortment of American goodies that was sent to us by an LWML group in Holdrege, Nebraska. Cheerios, chocolate chips, American candy, cake mixes, and more. The postage was probably higher than the value of the goods, but it was such a treat for our family!

Q: Tell us about The Garuna Foundation and Garuna Kids, Jeff.

Jeff: The mission statement of the foundation is to support and encourage, through financial assistance, the proclamation of the grace, mercy, and compassion [*garuna*] of Jesus Christ to the peoples of Thailand, Cambodia, and surrounding countries. We really have three emphases. First, we train pastors, deaconesses, and leaders. Second, we help the local national Lutheran Churches get established and help with infrastructure in the early years. Third, we help with children's ministry and starting local Christian schools.

Q: Cheryl, you mentioned seeing your ministries come full circle. Can you explain?

Cheryl: Jeff and I have always been very careful that we didn't take advantage of our positions to support the other. But there came a point, about a year ago, when Christ Lutheran School began to cross paths with Garuna Kids. Our school really got excited about sponsoring children. It started as a pilot project to sponsor two kiddos at \$30 per month for a year.

Jeff: By the end of the program, 35 children were sponsored from school and church families! That was enough funding to open a new school for 140 to 150 new kids. The first school opened in November.

Cheryl: It's our "sister" school! Jeff and I can work together again because this is something our school wants to continue. Last summer, we took two teachers and our two daughters, along with others, to Cambodia. This next phase, Thai leaders, a growing church, and kids going to a Christian school ... Wow! This has been in our hearts for many years.

Q: It's a challenge, though, day in and day out, to stay connected as a couple and as a family. How do you handle that with all your travels, Jeff, and your busy schedule, Cheryl?

Cheryl: We work back to back at our desks at home!

Jeff: Except when I travel to Asia about three times a year for a few weeks. But we still stay connected every day. Technology helps.

Cheryl: When we're home, it doesn't take too much to keep us happy, connected. We enjoy talking, sitting out back, having a cup of coffee, going out for dessert.

Q: Staying connected helps you be "better together"? Is that wisdom for young couples?

Jeff: The family that prays together and serves together. I encourage young couples to listen to God's Word and the teachings of our church and then serve and find great joy in serving together. It's tough these days, but it's so rewarding to put faith into action. What an impact we can make in our community and beyond!

Q: What would you say to young people — your own children are at that age — who are looking for a mate, someone with whom they might be "better together"?

Cheryl: I tell them, don't sell out. Don't get into something that is less than God would want for you. Finding a Christian mate is really important, so don't give up on that. God will provide.

Clearly, the Triune God has provided for the Ehlers each step along the way, as He has equipped them to serve Him "better together." **Q**