

Madagascar Mission

By David Lerseth

Meet Some Missionaries, January 2026

Beginnings

Twenty-five years ago, when I was the executive director of Global Mission Support for the ELCA (Missionary Sponsorship and Major Gifts), I wrote a pamphlet entitled, “The Changing Role of the Missionary”. The story of this pamphlet was that in most countries where there was an established church, we did not need to send missionaries. Why? Because the missionaries already had done great mission work and ministry to establish a church with seminaries to train pastors, and the church was now self-sufficient in most cases. This was great news!

Such was the case in Madagascar. The last missionaries left Madagascar in the early 2000s. The people in Madagascar are so appreciative of the missionaries sent from the USA who came to share the Good News of the Gospel and to help them establish a Malagasy Lutheran Church in 1950.

The legacy of the history of USA Lutheran missionaries in Madagascar from 1866 to 2006:
We sent 366 missionaries!

- A total of 5,445 years of mission service!
- The average time of service for a missionary was 14.85 years!
- The longest service by a missionary was 46 years!



Some early missionaries to Madagascar



Early missionaries with their families



Pastor Hogstad and his wife Oline, early missionaries

The Malagasy Lutheran Church 75 Years Later

The missionaries helped to establish the Malagasy Lutheran Church. They established seminaries, Bible schools and other social ministry organizations, so the church was able to become a dynamic growing church. Today it has 7,000 congregations with a total membership of 4 million.

Besides pastors trained in theological seminaries, there are Bible schools in most of the 24 synods that train lay persons to do missionary work within the country. They are the “New Missionaries” (evangelists). I have invited Pastor Tolotra Daniel, a professor at Mananovy Bible School of the Malagasy Lutheran Church, to write a story about Tsikivy, a student who is in his second year of Bible School training. After Tsikivy graduates, he will be assigned to move out to a rural village to serve as one of the “New Missionaries”.

Pastor Tolotra Daniel’s story about Tsikivy is both inspirational and dynamic – it’s about coming from a non-believer situation to a Christian now ready to share the Gospel with others who have not heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. His story is full of anguish, torment of evil spirits, and finally finding hope and meaning in becoming Christian.



The first Lutheran Church in Madagascar



Pastor Tolotra Daniel



A modest sign for the Mananovy Bible School



The Faculty and students at the Mananovy Bible School

The Story of Tsikivy

1. Life before becoming a Christian

Raised in a pagan family, Tsikivy was cared for through witchcraft. At the age of seven, he was taken by spirits in the sacred river Asakoabe, where ancestral spirits dwell. He remained there for three days before being released, after which the spirits from this experience guided his life.

*Student TSIKIVY – his name means “a person who never gives up.”
He is 40 years old.*



A witch doctor



At the age of thirteen, he was given three wives, following his culture's tradition of polygamy. His father had four wives and his grandfather had seven wives. By age twenty, the spirits taught him witchcraft, and he claims the devil himself appeared in female form to instruct him.

For twenty years he worked as a witchdoctor and his work consisted of:

- Healing people with mental and physical illnesses;
- Providing witchcraft to protect villages, fields, cattle and families; and
- Using lightning for supernatural acts such as teleportation, “The hypothetical transfer of matter or energy from one point to another without traversing the physical space between them.”

Apart from these activities, he also used witchcraft charms to attract women and to keep them as his wives. He became wealthy, owning about seventy oxen and having 60,000,000 AR in money (USA equivalent: \$13,333, a lot of money for a Malagasy person.) He had forty-nine wives during his pagan life, always maintaining seven at one time. As a businessman he traded oxen for profit. He was caught selling stolen oxen and went to jail for two years.

Those involved in witchcraft are under God's judgment (Leviticus 20:6-7) and will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:20), though witchdoctors and sorcerers will be saved if they repent and trust in Christ (Acts 19:18-19).

2. His Baptism

Pastor ANDRIAMIHAJA Jean Norbert, the president (Bishop) of the Betroka Synod, preached a sermon from Genesis 3 and John 3:16 through the Madagascar Prison Ministry [which Friends of Madagascar Mission (FOMM) supports]. During his time in prison, Tsikivy heard that sermon, which explained the fall of humanity and God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Tsikivy was deeply moved and said, "I want to be forgiven too." He believed and was baptized.

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

— Matthew 28:19

3. Life after Baptism

After being released from the prison, Tsikivy returned to his village. Without Christian discipleship and facing persecution, he reverted to witchcraft and polygamy. His bond with the spirits grew stronger, and it sent him to seek even more powerful witchcraft in another region of the country. He returned to his home village with confidence that his newly-found witchcraft powers would guide him to be a stronger person.

4. Breaking with the spirits

But things did not happen as he wished. One night, thieves stole all of his oxen and Tsikivy realized the spirits could not protect him. Soon after, through Christian preaching, he again became convicted of needing God's forgiveness and decided to abandon witchcraft completely.

FREE, GOD'S SON HAS SET US FREE!

5. New beginning in Christ

In tears, Tsikivy declared to a pastor: "There is a lost lamb among us, and it is me. Now I will give up my witchcraft and follow Jesus." He burned all of his witchcraft items and committed to studying the Bible to grow in faith and share the message of Jesus Christ with others. This decision cost him his material wealth, wives and clan identity.



Breaking the chains of witchcraft and free in Christ!

6. Becoming an evangelist

Tsikivy now studies at Manavovy Bible School and is in his second year (it is a two-year course), is married to one wife and has a newborn son. He testifies that witchcraft offered fake freedom and healing, but Jesus Christ gives true freedom and healing. He desires to preach this message to his relatives and others who are living in bondage. As his name means "to never give up", this story illustrates that God certainly did not give up on Tsikivy, just as God does give up on any of us! THANKS BE TO GOD!



The work of evangelism is done with a group of Christians traveling to a neighboring village to share the Gospel.

Read about the Friends of Madagascar Mission evangelist program.



For more information, contact us:

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Pastor David Lerseth served parishes in Rosholt, SD; Bartonville (Peoria), IL; and Aberdeen, SD. He also served as an assistant to the Bishop in the former Iowa District of the ALC and as Executive Director of the ELCA Office for Global Mission Support. He is the founder and current Executive Director of Friends of Madagascar Mission (FOMM).

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Links:

Madagascar: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Madagascar>

Malagasy Lutheran Church: https://www.cgmmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/MalagasyLutheranChurch_DavidLerseth_HistoryOfMission_January2022.pdf

Hogstad: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/799227/summary>

Mananovy: <https://madagascarmission.org/bible-schools/>

Betroka Synod: <https://madagascarmission.org/evangelists-evangelism/>

Prison Ministry: <https://madagascarmission.org/prison-ministry-program/>

FOMM: <https://madagascarmission.org/>

Evangelist program: <https://madagascarmission.org/evangelists-evangelism/>