



NEW JERSEY SYNOD  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
*God's work. Our hands.*

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**TO:** Parish Pastors, Retired Pastors, Lay Rostered-Leaders

**FR:** Bishop Roy Riley

**RE:** Thinking ahead to September 11, 2011

As you know, the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001 falls on a Sunday. There are many resources being provided on the internet for observing that anniversary. Deciding how to observe the anniversary will be impacted by a number of factors, including rally day activities in some congregations, the relative distance from New York City, the actual experience of that day in your community ten years ago, and in some places plans for ecumenical and interfaith observances.

While New York City, Washington, DC, and Western Pennsylvania are the places primarily identified with the 9-11 attacks, New Jersey residents accounted for about one in every four of the persons who lost their lives in the World Trade Center attack. Some communities (Hoboken, Jersey City, and Middletown, for instance) were very deeply impacted.

I remember the wrenching mix of helplessness and heroism on that day. Some of us could only stand by waiting for news. Others, mostly first-responders, hurried toward and into the disaster to do what needed to be done. As the day wore on, pastors began to go to train station platforms to stand with family members and to receive those who made it home. Teachers in bedroom communities began to quietly identify the children in their classrooms who had parents with 212 area codes for their business phones and plan for how those children could be cared for at end of the day. The doors of churches stood wide open on a Tuesday night, and on Wednesday and Thursday, candles lit, open for prayers. Everything changed.

In those days in 2001, there was for a time a genuine sense of being together. A sharing of what was truly bad became the ground for commitment to the common good. People lined up at blood banks to give, even when it was becoming clear that there would be few, if any, to be saved. Christian citizens walked with and protected neighbors who had suddenly become the object of violent hatred because of their speech, dress, or association with Islamic faith. When our own nation's extremists (religious and otherwise) made outrageous assertions about why and how this happened, others stood up immediately, repudiating their inflammatory rhetoric and calling for reason and reasonableness and reflection. Calm largely became the state of our deep sorrow, and not violence. But most of all, there was a sense of needing to be and work together for the good of all – the common good.

On the first anniversary of the 9-11 attacks, Lutheran pastors and bishops from all over the country came to the greater New York area to fill pulpits and give witness to the support of the whole church for those who were still reeling from what had happened. Marcia Carrier was one of those, a pastor of the ELCA Greater Milwaukee Synod serving Our Savior Lutheran Church in Hartland, Wisconsin. At the close of her sermon preached at Immanuel, Staten Island, she told this story:

“This last Thursday evening I was having a rather fragile conversation with the President of the congregation. At the end of our conversation he was about to leave when he turned around at the door and stopped very still. After a moment of awkwardness he said in a very soft and gentle voice: ‘Please tell them they didn’t cry alone – that they were not alone.’ Then he told me with tears edging his eyes about how he had come to church that day and just cried and prayed. ‘We all cried for different reasons,’ he said, ‘but we all cried together in God’s precious presence.’”<sup>1</sup>

Remember this: all the days of our lives – the best days and the worst days – are lived *in God’s precious presence*, because God chooses to be present and promises to be with us to the end of time. A cross that was lifted up on a hill outside of Jerusalem makes a cross that emerges from the ruins of the World Trade Center Towers mean something to us. We know that we and all those who lost their lives on 9-11-01 mean something to God, something very precious. This Gospel holds us in common and bids us to hold one another in love and in mercy – the common good born out of a most uncommon, unfathomable grace. Remember.

Peace be with you and with all the people of the earth.

1. From *The Cross at Ground Zero*, Metropolitan New York Mission Institute, 2002 The Center for Public Theology, H. Gaylon Barker, Ed.; a sermon by Marcia G. Carrier, p. 69.