



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP  
NEW JERSEY SYNOD  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
*God's work. Our hands.*  
1930 Highway 33, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

July 15, 2020

Dear Friends,

Thank you for the ways you are church for the sake of the world. Last week I spent time meeting with rostered leaders in our six mission districts. Our pastors and deacons expressed joy, sorrow, weariness, hope, and deep faithfulness in serving during this time. My encouragement was to take time off, even if travel is not possible. It's important to step back, step away, and re-charge for the work of ministry. Colleagues are stepping up to cover for each other and worship is being shared across congregations. This is what it means to be church together and I thank you.

I also met with over 50 congregation council leaders last week, representing 45 congregations. We spent 1 ½ hours sharing where and how God has been active in our ministries during this time. I heard stories of increased educational ministries, creative worship services, online fellowship opportunities, and increased advocacy efforts. Thank you for listening to the Spirit's call and answering in ways that increase our witness to the world.

While these conversations were powerful testimonies to the faithfulness of God, it's also been over 120 days of this pandemic and I hear how tired you are of thinking and re-thinking how to serve God's mission. One pastor commented that the first Sunday of outdoor, in-person worship felt mechanical rather than beautiful because of all the logistical decisions that needed to be made and observed. Several of you are facing disagreements between council leadership and pastoral guidance on when and how to gather in person and how the building may be used for small groups. Work for racial justice and an end to white supremacy in our churches and our world is never-ending. Worries about finances add to the stress of planning for the future.

Into these realities, I offer a few reminders:

- ❖ This is Christ's church. What we say and do is a reflection of the One who loves unconditionally and who holds our future secure. Decisions about how we carry out this ministry should follow conversations about why we are engaged in ministry.
- ❖ Embrace our core values: *faithfulness, respect, diversity, change, generosity, and interdependence*. Embodying these values in our life together makes for a stronger witness in the world.
- ❖ Dwell in God's word. Our biblical ancestors knew hardship and suffering as well as joy and love. There are stories that speak to our time which can give us insight into how God still provides all we need.
- ❖ Forgive each other. We have never been in a time of pandemic like this before. We will make mistakes, our patience will wear thin, and our worries will get the best of us – when that happens, admit it, receive (and offer) forgiveness, and move forward.
- ❖ Celebrate often. Take time to recognize those in the congregation working hard, highlight new ministries explored, look for opportunities to laugh together. Even in the face of death, we celebrate the abundant life which is ours in Christ Jesus.

I end as I began – thank you for the ways you are church for the sake of the world.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew