



**Office of the Bishop
New Jersey Synod, ELCA**
God's work. Our hands.

March 31, 2025

Commemoration of John Donne, poet

*I have a sin of fear that when I've spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
Swear by Thyself, that at my death Thy Son
Shall shine as He shines now, and heretofore.
And having done that, Thou hast done,
I fear no more.*

(Wilt Thou Forgive That Sin Where I Begun)

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today the church commemorates John Donne who died on this day in 1631. During his life, he served as an Anglican priest and was a prolific poet. Some of his poems became hymns of the church, including the one quoted above. Perhaps you are more familiar with his poems *Death, Be Not Proud* or *The Flea*. But as we are in the latter days of Lent, the stanza from the hymn quoted above seems an appropriate way to remember him today as it speaks to the truth of Christ's resurrection conquering our fear of death.

We don't need to look too hard to see the effects of fear all around us. It is fear that holds us hostage to fully loving our neighbors – fear that there isn't enough, causing us to hoard our food or money; fear of the "other" whomever that other may be for us; fear of change which might call us to something uncomfortable; and ultimately, fear of death, whether our physical death or the death of something we've held dear throughout our lives causing us to deny the reality of abundant life in Christ.

But as Donne reminds us, God's final act is to relieve our fear by the shining light of Christ's life. My prayer is that we will hold tight to that truth as we live out our faith every day.

I am writing today to update you on several items important for our life together – some of which involve significant changes. [TL;DR – good stuff is happening 😊]

Lutherans Engaging in Advocacy Ministry to Merge with the NJ Coalition of Religious Leaders

As you know, LEAMNJ is the advocacy arm of the NJ Synod, staffed part-time by Pastor Sara Lilja. The goal of LEAMNJ has been two-fold: to educate and train members of synod congregations on public issues in the state of NJ about which our church has a social teaching, and to work with ecumenical and interfaith partners at the state house in Trenton to voice a faith perspective to lawmakers. LEAMNJ is funded by the ELCA, the NJ Synod, and other grants.

Over the past five years, Pastor Lilja has looked for ways to make LEAMNJ sustainable as well as to amplify faith-based advocacy in the state. In 2024, the NJ Coalition of Religious Leaders, a grassroots and grassroots interfaith organization, completed a strategic plan which calls for a stronger advocacy emphasis. Realizing the needs and goals of the Coalition and LEAMNJ intersect, Pastor Lilja began exploring the possibility of merging LEAMNJ into the Coalition.

This exploration included researching other interfaith advocacy groups the ELCA supports in various synods, talking with the leadership team of the Coalition to ensure alignment of purpose, speaking with the ELCA to ascertain ongoing financial support, engaging the synod council in conversation about this possibility, and praying about this idea.

At its March 15 meeting, the NJ Synod Council officially approved this merger. This means that as of July 1, LEAMNJ will become part of the Coalition of Religious Leaders and no longer be a standalone advocacy organization. Pastor Lilja will become the Executive Director of the Coalition. The NJ Synod will continue to support advocacy ministry with a grant to the Coalition as well as maintaining Justice and Peace groups in the synod structure. Congregations and their members will need to continue to be involved in learning and action. The social teachings of the ELCA will continue to guide the work of our advocacy efforts and the ways we will support the work of the Coalition.

You will hear more about this change at our synod assembly where we also will have a chance to thank Pastor Lilja for her years of service as the director of LEAMNJ and a member of the synod staff.

Georgetown Lawsuit regarding Sensitive Locations

Many of you are aware that a lawsuit has been filed by several faith groups against the US government for de-designating churches, schools, and hospitals as sensitive locations where ICE cannot enter. This de-designation has caused fear among our immigrant neighbors and impacted our congregations' ministries.

Due to our polity, the ELCA churchwide expression does not have legal standing and did not sign on as a plaintiff in this lawsuit (along with the UCC). As a reminder, our polity is that we are a church in three expressions – churchwide, synod, and congregation. Churchwide does not supervise or direct synods or congregations. The synod does not supervise or direct congregations. While we function in the spirit of interdependence, legally each of these expressions is an independent entity with their own constitutions.

As a synod, we do have direct responsibility for new mission starts and synodically authorized worshipping communities or outreach ministries. Therefore, on January 29, when I received word about this lawsuit, I reached out to the lead attorney to inquire about the synod signing on as a plaintiff. On February 4th, I was informed that the law firm could not take on any more plaintiffs, but we would be notified if there was to be a second round of sign-ons or if an amicus brief would be in order. If that happens, the synod council will consider it.

In the meantime, I continue to monitor our congregations most directly affected by the action de-designating churches as sensitive locations. To date, none of our congregations have reported ICE agents interrupting worship services or food distribution ministries. ICE agents have been seen in and around congregations serving immigrant neighbors. Some of our less vulnerable congregations have stepped up to accompany our more vulnerable congregations by positioning themselves as the front line of interaction with any ICE encounters. We continue to pray for and with our neighbors and to advocate for more just immigration policies.

Namibia Companion Synod Relationship

As I announced earlier this year, a group of 12 people from the four synods who are companions with Namibia traveled for the installations of new bishops from Feb 10-20, 2025. Deacon Linda Walker, Pastor Dan Whitener, and I represented the NJ Synod. We met with church officials from the German Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, and the Lutheran Church of Angola. We also met with leaders from the Lutheran Seminary – Paulinum in Windhoek. Our relationship had been on a hiatus for a decade as the churches worked out internal issues related to their own leadership. They are now requesting that we re-engage our partnership. What that will look like is yet to be determined. We did present financial gifts to the seminary, ELCIN, and the church of Angola.

Dan and I traveled to Angola to participate in the installation of the newly elected Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Angola and at their invitation, to lay the groundwork for a potential companion relationship with this growing church. Linda remained in Namibia for the installation of the two new bishops of ELCIN, including the first female bishop elected in Namibia.

The four ELCA synods relating to these churches are inviting the Namibian and Angolan bishops for a visit to the US in the early fall. Details of that invitation and the need for hosts in NJ will be forthcoming. We are looking to rebuild our Namibia (and perhaps Angola) Companion Synod Team. Please let me know if you are interested in serving in this ministry.

2025 Synod Assembly

By now you should be aware that we are gathering June 5-7 for our assembly. You can register [here](#). Our theme is **Behold! I Make All Things New** which refers not just to the election of a new bishop, but celebrating how God is leading us into new ways of being Christ's church across our synod. The synod council approved investing significant funds to reduce the cost of attendance for voting members. The hope is that with this reduced cost you will send the full contingent of voting members. What is a full contingent? It is the rostered ministers and at least two lay people from every congregation. If at least one of your voting members is under 30, then it includes a third voting member. Remember, you aren't limited to only one person under 30 – all of your voting members could be under 30, but you need at least one in order to send more than two lay people.

Pastors, if you are in discernment about leaving your name in the bishop's election, please visit the assembly page on our [website](#) for several documents that may be helpful to you and will need to be completed: a bio form, disclosure form, and a background check. You can begin to complete these now and have them ready to submit when requested.

If you've read this far, thank you! You can see we are a synod that is working hard to love God and love our neighbors. We do this because God loves us first. And that's enough to be the church we are called to be for the sake of the world.

Your sister in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tracie L. Bartholomew". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a long, sweeping underline.

The Rev. Tracie L. Bartholomew, Bishop