



New Jersey Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

March 30, 2020

Dear Congregational Leaders, Pastors and Deacons,

I want to express the high esteem I have for you especially during and because of ‘this time’ we are in. I am in awe of those many and varied ways that in the midst of uncertainty, you are ministering tirelessly, faithfully and creatively. Thank you for your witness. I also want to write to you briefly -or at least comparatively so- on the topic of generosity during this time where you are also being tireless, faithful and creative in how you approach stewardship while encouraging congregational giving and support.

Right from the beginning of the Governor’s physical/social distancing measures, I have seen and heard of congregational leaders, deacons, pastors continuing to cultivate the faith practice of generosity in its most extensive (i.e., reflecting theologically on the paradox of caring for one’s neighbor while remaining physically distant) and intensive (i.e., encouraging offerings to be made) ways. Believe me, I appreciate how challenging it is to be sensitive about the changing economics among ourselves *and* the changing or uncertain economics among the members and friends of the faith communities we serve. This is ‘most certainly true’ for the short term. And it shall remain most certainly true going into the slightly longer-term.

But, I also know that the whole endeavor of being church -*its mission*- is to be engaged in a kind of ‘kingdom of heaven’ work that is fully aware of one’s present circumstance *while at the same time* leans forward into God’s invisible new thing: that which is hoped for and yet not fully manifest or revealed; that which at times may appear as completely the opposite of what is currently felt or easily perceived. It seems to me that is at least one of the aspects of preaching, teaching, exhorting generosity -not as some distinct activity among many- but as integrated into the whole project of being baptized...being Christ’s body. To that end, and strictly insofar as it is an aid to you...a help to you...I want to reiterate what our bishop has shared in her letter through last week’s Jersey Jottings (March 25, 2020) as well as what many of you are experimenting with regarding congregational generosity. I also want to refer you to a possible congregational plan to help you through the meantime.

So as to be efficient while respecting the tidal wave of information you’ve been and continue to be subjected to, I’m going to do this rather tersely through bullet points:

- It is right and faithful for you to be commanding generosity even now. You are doing the right thing by lifting this faith practice up.
- It is right and faithful for you to speak of making offerings that flow from an appreciation of God’s abundance and the ministry that continues even in the midst of physical distancing.
- It is important to be pastoral and sensitive to the ground shifting beneath everyone’s feet so that no one feels left behind or criticized in the midst of encouraging that ongoing generous offerings be made.
- Attach the motivation of mission and ministry to the reason we give and share as opposed to saying ‘we’ve got bills to pay.’ Remember we are created for generosity (and, ‘Yes!’ - this takes many shapes and forms).

- Witnessing appreciation while offering perpetual words of thanks and thanksgiving are contagious. Consider how you are sowing seeds of reconciliation while demonstrating the spiritual practice of pointing out ‘God moments’ or those easy to miss yet powerful ways God is stirring even now as faith compels us to pause and look.
- Low tech appeals like writing a letter with a church addressed envelope to encourage a special/ongoing offering, or, circulating emails complemented by phone chains are great ways of reminding people to maintain generosity in their lives!
- Slightly higher ‘tech’ appeals by commanding automatic bill pay features to congregants is a great suggestion to make too!
- Kudos to those congregations that already have been or have moved further along on various forms of electronic giving whether it be through their website, and/or, one of the ELCA endorsed providers of those services (i.e., Tithe.ly and Vanco). And to those of you who have not: don’t beat yourself up about this! Focus on your strengths and hold this idea for a more opportune time for implementation.
- Encourage congregational members who are able to ‘front load’ (i.e., give a larger portion of their annual offerings now as opposed to distributing it evenly throughout the year) their planned offerings. When you do this, frame it calmly and matter of fact by saying, for example, ‘Oh, by the way if at all possible....’ A tone of possibility and jovial invitation is a welcome thing!
- Communicate these possibilities through all your communication channels utilizing not only ‘tech,’ texts and livestream announcements (though those are excellent and necessary too) but through phone chains or discrete phone calls to those outside of tech-silos. Handwritten notes are great too!
- A more systematic plan (i.e., what I referred to above as a ‘possible congregational plan’) may be found here: <https://gsbfundraising.com/key-ways-to-keep-stewardship-strong-in-uncertain-times/>. This is a plan that is not for all congregations but may be appealing and possible for some. It requires comfort and a particular form of trust among congregational leaders, pastors and lead-givers coordinating with one another. In a nutshell, it is confirming and thanking profoundly all along the way -no matter the response-the degree to which lead-givers, congregational council and other core congregational leaders will maintain their current level of financial giving. *And then, communicating that news in inspiring and comforting ways that helps people have confidence about how their congregation is responding, and, motivating people through hope!*

I know. We are Lutherans and this could be interpreted as ‘law.’ And perhaps in some ways that is precisely what it is: ‘law’ in its first and most salutary sense; that which instructs, guides and preserves us. However, even more than or in addition to that, I pray you experience this list as positive reinforcement for what you are already doing, and, as a helpful guide with suggestions for you -not all of which you are required or able to do- but offered to aid you in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Last, please do not hesitate to reach out to me by email (dbrown@njsynod.org) or phone (732-747-1050). I am not glad for these challenges. But I am glad to speak with –be a sounding board to– you.

As St. Paul reminded us this past Sunday, it is true, ‘God’s Spirit dwells in you!’

In Christ,
Dean+