



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

May 7, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

Our NJ Synod's Core Values of faithfulness, respect, generosity, change, diversity, and interdependence have been on display in amazing ways over these past weeks. Together we are serving the people of our congregations, our communities, and our state. Together we are mourning the loss of friends, neighbors, family members, and church siblings. Together we are finding new ways of being church – sometimes failing in our attempts and sometimes delightfully surprised at how God shows up. Thank you!

As we continue with our stay-at-home orders and yet grow antsy to be released, COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on our plans. The fallout from this disease has affected our life together as synod, which is why I am writing to you today. This letter contains several important announcements following actions by the Synod Council on April 30.

2020 Synod Assembly – *Love Matters*

Because of the uncertainties of what life will look like in mid-September, the Council agreed that holding a traditional assembly at a hotel was not prudent. Making this decision now allows us to change our contract with the hotel without incurring financial penalties. We will hold a one-day assembly on Saturday, September 12. It will look and feel different from past assemblies. It is possible we may gather in our six Mission Districts rather than in one central location, but we are still exploring our options. For now, know that you will be receiving a full refund for any registrations paid. Hotel room reservations for 2020 will be cancelled by the Westin Princeton at Forrestal Village. As soon as detailed logistics are available, you will receive them.

LEAMNJ

You are aware that Pastor Sara Lilja has been working to transition LEAMNJ into a multi-faith advocacy organization led by emerging leaders. Reforming LEAMNJ into this new reality was necessary because of the lack of funding from our Episcopal partners. A leadership team was formed and commitments from a variety of faith traditions and seminaries were made to begin a new venture in 2020. Now, in the wake of COVID-19, some of those commitments have been put on hold or undone. This means the new organization must be paused until some time in 2021. In the meantime, Pastor Lilja will continue to serve as advocacy director for the NJ

Synod on a part-time basis. LEAMNJ will become Lutherans Engaging in Advocacy Ministry in NJ. I thank Pastor Lilja for all she has done to make our advocacy efforts bear fruit for the most vulnerable in our state.

Emergency Financial Assistance for Congregations

The Synod Council approved releasing funds designated for congregational mission to be made available as loans to congregations facing financial hardship due to COVID-19. The full description of this assistance, including the criteria to qualify and the application, [can be found on our website](#). Walking together as congregations in mission is what we do as synod and this is one concrete way we can live this out. Congregations may apply any time in 2020 for these funds.

Returning to Worship

We don't know when the governor will give us the green light to return to in-person worship or what the restrictions will be when he does. Many of you have asked for guidance about what that return should look like. You and your leaders will need to make those decisions based on your space, your population, and your resources. In the coming weeks, I will provide a resource to help you think through those decisions and what those decisions communicate theologically. These will be publicized through Jersey Jottings and posted on our website.

Church Together

We give thanks that we are connected to one another through our synod and with a churchwide expression of this church. You have continued to share Mission Support which allows us to pay our bills, maintain our staff, and strengthen the work we do together – thank you. The ELCA World Hunger Appeal has granted five of our congregations \$500 matching “Daily Bread Grants” for their feeding ministries. Lutheran Disaster Response has allocated an additional \$35,000 for NJ Synod congregations’ hunger ministries. If your congregation has a hunger ministry that has been impacted by COVID-19 and you have not heard from Pastor Maristela Freiberg, please contact her. Finally, through the ELCA COVID-19 Appeal, we have been granted \$7,500 to use beyond hunger ministries to support congregations making a difference in their communities. These gifts are another sign of God’s generosity to us.

I long for the day when we will be together in person celebrating all the ways God comes to us. Until then, I remain grateful for the ways we are connected – most importantly through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That connection, dear friends, makes all the difference.

Peace to you in this time,


BISHOP TRAVIS L. BARTHOLOMEW