

# Report To Southwestern Minnesota Synod Council

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I've always appreciated this text from Lamentations 3 and have shared it frequently with people who are in difficult circumstances: *"The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! <sup>20</sup>My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup>But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup>they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup>"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."*

This is a reading that speaks to the "both/and" theology of our Lutheran heritage, and one that is incredibly real for our time. The pandemic is on our minds and in our hearts continually. We think about its impact on thousands, including our families, friends, congregations, the synod, and our church body. Every morning, we realize that the day won't unfold like it used to. Parents are stressed working from home and home-schooling. Pastors wish they could preach, lead worship, teach, and provide pastoral care like they used to. Everyone misses being together with others. The freedoms and relative security we enjoyed have been lost. Even the simplest daily activities cause the pandemic and its threats to fill our minds and weigh down our hearts.

So, the crisis is the focus of much of my work these days as life is lived in "the world of Zoom". Zoom meeting agendas for synod staff, rostered leaders, lay leaders, and DEM staff all address the changes ministry is going through now and will into the future. I have reached out to support rostered leaders through phone calls and email. Writing for synod news and Facebook all addresses the challenges of ministry today.

***But then there is the "BUT"!*** *"BUT this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope."* The author recognizes that our distress and discouragement cannot keep away the power of God's long arm of love. "BUT." But even though we can't get the pandemic out of our heads, even though our hearts are weighed down when we can't be with those we love, nevertheless AT THE VERY SAME TIME God is doing something new! That doesn't diminish today's difficulties. It doesn't wave a magic wand to make them all go away. It doesn't mean that the new normal will be like the old one. But this is the "simul" of our faith – the "simultaneity" of death and life, saint/sinner, law/Gospel, brokenness *and* God's power. For people whose faith is centered on the cross and resurrection, for people living in the spring of 2020, there is both/and. This is reality *and* it is good news that God's mercies ARE new every morning.

The work of DEMs is to focus on ***the hope that all ELCA congregations live out their vitality as communities of Jesus that nurture life-changing relationships with God, one another, and the world.*** Here is a glimpse of the vitality of our congregations in these challenging days:

- ***Worship that nurtures people's faith:*** Our pastors and worship leaders are exhibiting tremendous creativity and perseverance as they learn digital skills and video production at breakneck speed; and where there is access, our people love it.
- ***Deepening people's relationship with God:*** People have significant spiritual needs, are asking deep questions, and are looking more to churches for help and hope. Congregations are providing new ways for people to worship, share devotions and prayer concerns, and engage with each other.
- ***A clear sense of mission/purpose:*** Congregational leaders, rostered and lay, know how important their ministries are right now. They have a renewed sense of God's mission in this uncertain time.
- ***Excitement about the congregation's future:*** Although there is uncertainty about the future and about the economy, many congregations have discovered the need to expand their methods of providing pastoral care, serving others, and the impact of having a digital presence. They are evaluating the new discoveries they would like to continue to be part of their church's life, and sense renewed energy as they plan how these new ministries will continue in the future.

- **Always ready to try something new:** Two months ago, who would have thought that nearly all our congregations would be hosting digital or online worship, digital giving, digital faith formation, digital coffee hour, digital everything?! All of this needed to happen; it's occurred much more quickly than we'd imagined – by necessity.
- **A positive force in the community, addressing needs, and working for advocacy:** Our rostered and lay leaders are *public* leaders who are trusted in their communities. Congregations and the ELCA as a whole look toward supporting those who are most vulnerable at this time – those who are elderly, face health concerns, and live with economic challenges in rural and marginalized communities.  
As unemployment and food insecurity sky-rocket, congregations are partnering with community agencies and organizations to provide food for those in need. They are reaching out to ask, “How can we help? How can we do God’s work with our hands together while we’re apart, today?”  
Lutheran quilt-making began when church women made bandages for the war effort in WWII. After the war, they continued to gather, but then began to sew quilts which have been shared by the thousands through LWR around the world - and locally. Today those quilters have put their skills to work at home sewing masks for those on the new “front lines” of this battle against COVID-19. They are making a difference!
- **Incorporate new members into the community:** Many congregations are seeing significant increases in participation via digital worship, new and curious people are joining in, and congregations are having a reach far beyond their own members. Now we need to understand how to engage people as disciples, and not simply as “viewers.” There are excellent technical tools out there to help congregation evaluate online participation and reach out directly to these households through contacts and emails.
- **Seek out and use the gifts of members of all ages:** Worship leadership shows greater involvement of people of all ages, including the little children of pastors. ;-)
- **Build strong, healthy relationships among members:** Through phone calls & online visits, everyone is enjoying the gift of seeing the faces, hearing the voices, and reading the words of people they love.
- **Manage disagreements in a healthy, respectful manner:** Challenges of some congregations have involved the questions of whether/how to have Communion or host worship in parking lots. Now we will face many new and complex issues as congregations consider how and when they might return to in-person worship. We are encouraging congregational leaders to have intentional, proactive conversations about questions like these, and in those conversations, to foster healthy relationships.
- **Equip members to share their faith with others:** Many congregations have invited members to share their faith stories in worship this spring. This is a powerful form of testimony and evangelism.
- **Helping members live out their faith in the daily lives:** Across the synod and nation, people are living out their faith as they remain dedicated to their work of bringing people protection, safety, first response, healing, care, food, basic necessities, and education.

These days, there are many things weighing on our hearts. It is a privilege to serve our Lord together with you as we see how, through congregations and ministries of this synod, we sing, *“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*

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