

The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

Digital

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Submitted photo
John and Diane Bittikofer with one of the dogs they raised for service.

St. James Members Raise Dogs that Help Others

(Editor's note: John and Dianne Bittikofer answered questions for this story together.)

By RICK KAZMER
Editor

If you visit John and Dianne Bittikofer, members of St. James Lutheran Church in Huntingdon, they will likely have at

least one puppy in the vicinity.

That's because the couple raises puppies for Canine Companions, a non-profit that enhances independence for children, adults, and veterans with disabilities through expertly trained service dogs.

(See DOGS, Page 8)



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



The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

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Please contact the editorial team (above) with your comments and story ideas. We look forward to hearing from you.

OUR MISSION

Inviting people to love one another.

OUR VISION

All creation living in harmony with Christ.

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Articles for the Letter should be about 300 words or less and include applicable website or contact information.

Images should be as high resolution as possible, ideally 300 ppi at 3x5 inches (900x1500 pixels.)

Send files to LutheranLetter@AlleghenySynod.com.

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Allegheny Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

New Questions for a New Time

During the last few weeks, I have been asked a few times, "What's the future of the Allegheny Synod?" I will admit, I have to pause and take a deep breath before I answer because I know that what I say isn't necessarily what the person asking wants to hear. It's tempting, of course, to say, "The future is bright and all will be well and we will see record numbers of people coming back to church!"



Bishop Paula Schmitt

I think we all know that's a hope, but probably not accurate.

Because we know that, we need to be asking ourselves new questions. If we keep asking the same questions about the church, we won't get new answers.

The church is experiencing a reformation of sorts. We are on the edge of something new. We don't know exactly what it is, yet, but we know that if we do not start asking different — and sometimes difficult — questions, we will not meet the needs of the coming generations when it comes to faith and faith practices.

A little more than 15 years ago, Phyllis Tickle published a book titled, "The Great Emergence." She spoke about the need for church to have a rummage sale so we can rid ourselves of all those practices, beliefs, and ways of being that are no longer effective and get in the way of being the church God calls us to be. She asserted that many of the questions we have asked in the church for decades need to be put on that rummage sale.

(See BISHOP 1, Page 16)

Scene of the Edition



A scene from near Davidsville from early February. Pastor Kevin Shock was in the area. Soon the field will be full of growing crops.

Photo by Pastor Kevin Shock

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Remember in Prayer

Join the Allegheny Synod in prayer for these congregations this issue.

MARCH

Week 1: Luthersburg-Rockton Parish: St. John, Luthersburg and St. Peter, Rockton

Week 2: Bethany Lutheran, Altoona

Week 3: Zion Lutheran, Clearville

Week 4: Grace Lutheran, Curwensville

APRIL

Week 1: First Lutheran, Altoona

Week 2: St. Andrew, Boswell

Week 3: St. David's Lutheran, Davidsville

Week 4: St. Clairsville Parish: Messiah, Bedford; and St. Peter, Osterburg

'Songs of Our Time'

Music Program Aims to Ignite the Spirit

By LAUREL SANDERS

Director of Music and Arts Ministries at Grace Lutheran Church, and the director of the annual ecumenical choir

Grace, peace, love, and hope.

These are among many words we speak as people of faith, but they can be difficult to embrace, especially in times of strong opinions and divisive rhetoric. Grace Lutheran Church of State College and friends from throughout the Centre region invite you to bask in the Light of God's presence as they host an ecumenical Lenten music program called "Songs of Our Time: A Lenten Meditation" on the evening of March 20.

The program — the 11th annual Lenten ecumenical offering of music and the first since the pandemic began, presents an hour of powerful music, readings, and prayer. It explores tenets of our faith that we are often challenged to abide by in our everyday living, revealing through Word, song, and dance how God's mercy transforms our hearts and thinking so we can share with others the hope, peace, and other expressions of life in Christ that result from it. The musical meditation will be presented by an ecumenical choir representing approximately 15 churches and organizations from the Centre region, as well as pianist Victoria Petrovsky; violin, mandolin and double bass; dancers from VanDance Inc.; and The Bells of Grace handbell choir.

Martin Luther once said, "He who sings prays twice." Those who gather to rehearse in February and March and all who attend the resulting musical meditation will get plenty of practice praying through music! Subtle lighting will reinforce the colors of faith as they unfold and are revealed in the music.

The event is preceded by a community meal from 5 to 6:15 p.m. and piano prelude music by Bach, Tchaikovsky, and Schubert begins at 6:40 p.m. The program ("Songs of Our Time") begins at 7 p.m., and includes contemporary sacred classics by Craig Courtney, Greg Gilpin, Kevin McChesney, Mark Miller, Michael John Trotta, Susan LaBarr, Mark Hayes, Larry Shackley, and Fred Gramann, interspersed with short readings and poetry. Join us as we journey through the challenges of today; look toward the hope of the cross; and live into the joy of the resurrection.

(See MUSIC, Page 5)

Songs of Our Time: A Lenten Meditation

Presented by an ecumenical choir
from the Centre Region
and The Bells of Grace

Wednesday, March 20, 2024 at 7:00 PM

Grace Lutheran Church

205 S. Garner Street
State College, PA. 16801
www.glcpa.org * 814-238-2478



5:00-6:15 Community fellowship meal

6:40 Piano prelude: music of J.S. Bach; classics

7:00 Songs of Our Time: A Lenten Meditation

Songs of mercy, hope, peace, love, unity, light and joy

featuring music by Craig Courtney, Greg Gilpin,
Kevin McChesney, Mark Miller, Michael John Trotta,
Susan LaBarr, Mark Hayes, Larry Shackley and Fred Gramann

Laurel Sanders, Director, Ecumenical Choir
Sarah Rodgers, Director, The Bells of Grace

Bask in the sounds of compassion, kindness, humility,
gentleness and patience.

A freewill collection helps defray event costs.
Suggested meal donation: \$6 per person; \$15/family.

MUSIC

(Continued from Page 4)

The musical meditation, which will be held in the sanctuary of Grace Lutheran Church, 205 South Garner Street in downtown State College, will last approximately one hour and is free; donations are welcome to defray costs. Whether you decide to sing or attend the event, the music will strive to ignite the Spirit within you and generate excitement for the future that awaits us all as people of faith.

For details, contact Laurel Sanders at lsanders@glcpa.org, or call the church office at 814-883-8484. †

SAVE THE DATE
7 p.m. March 20 at
Grace Lutheran
Church

Composer, Clinician to Lead Children's Summer Camp

By **LAUREL SANDERS**

Director of Music and Arts Ministries at Grace Lutheran Church

Residents of Central Pennsylvania are invited to take part in two noteworthy worship and music opportunities during June 2024 when Dr. Michael Burkhardt, internationally known composer, organist, and children's worship arts clinician, offers a worship arts residency in downtown State College.

Burkhardt will be in residence from June 21-27 to make music, build confidence in young musicians/artists, and inspire creativity. The residency includes an organ recital/hymn festival on June 21, followed by a worship and arts day camp for children entering grades 2-8 (Monday, June 24 through Thursday, June 27).

The residency begins Friday, June 21, when Burkhardt will present a one-hour recital/hymn festival at Grace Lutheran Church. Free and open to the public, the event will take place from 7:30-8:30 p.m. in Grace Lutheran's sanctuary and is sponsored in part by the American Guild of Organists, State College Chapter. The recital will include Burkhardt's compositions, with music that is accessible for children and adults. It will also provide an excellent introduction to his inventive and effective work with children.

The residency will continue with Burkhardt's Hearts, Hands and Voices worship arts and music camp, based on the theme "Take It to the Lord in Prayer." The camp (9 a.m. to 3

p.m.) brings children together in a safe, welcoming environment to grow spiritually and musically. Children will be invited to MAKE (art), RING (handbells), DRUM (global drumming), and SING (choral music) as they pray the psalms with Burkhardt and regional fine arts educators. Burkhardt and the arts instructors will help children build skills in creative expression; envision faith through music; and develop confidence in their leadership skills, giving them tools to take home. Campers return to Grace the final evening to share their creativity with the public in a worship setting, followed by a reception.

The camp is open to all children entering grades 2-8, regardless of musical background or experience. The \$175 cost includes a \$50 non-refundable registration fee and covers daily lunches, snacks, a camper t-shirt, and all supplies. There are discounts for multiple children and early registration; tuition assistance information is available upon request.

(See CAMP, Page 7)

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An Easter Message from Pastor Tyler J. Graham
The Salisbury Lutheran Parish

The Veil of Love & Life



"We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. God walks everywhere incognito." — C.S. Lewis

This Easter season, as we commemorate Jesus' resurrection and witness to the re-awakening of creation from its winter rest, we are reminded once again of God's abiding presence and active participation within humanity and the world. Life — our own and that of our neighbors, communities, and world — has been transformed through Christ and the Cross.

While His presence may be disguised or hidden, you and I encounter the living God every day; all the while our hope is being renewed and the fulfillment of our Lord's promises is being experienced in the midst of illness, evil, and death.

Where are you encountering the risen Christ? How is your life being resurrected?

Throughout this Easter season, may we have eyes to see God's presence and ears to hear His voice. And may we know in the depths of our hearts and souls His desire for reconciliation, love, and life. †

CAMP

For details, click [here](#). To register, click [here](#). Take advantage of Burkhardt's music, warm and welcoming manner, and enthusiasm. Whether you are an audience member, participant, camper, or parent/guardian, you will leave with new ideas and inspiration!

(Editor's note: Michael Burkhardt is artist-professor of

organ at Eastern Michigan University, organ instructor at Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music, and artistic director of the Hearts, Hands and Voices Worship and Fine Arts Program for Children in Southeast Michigan. He has performed and led seminars at both national and regional events for the American Guild of Organists, the Hymn

Society, the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, the Presbyterian Association of Musicians, the Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts, and the American Choral Directors Association. Since 2003 he has made nine performance-teaching tours to South Korea and Singapore.) †

WE *are* LUTHERAN

DOGS

(Continued from Page 1)

The couple said that 64 million Americans live with a disability, but few of them have access to a service dog. The nonprofit's mission is to provide a service companion to the folks who qualify for one.

"We became volunteer puppy raisers in 2001 after talking with a puppy raiser and learning about Canine Companions and its mission. The puppy raiser we met came to church once and we never saw her again. We have always felt that the Holy Spirit had a hand in that interaction," the couple wrote in an email about the project.

The puppies are about 8 weeks old when they arrive. Then, the training begins.

"We socialize the puppy and introduce them to 30 different cues (commands) before returning them to a regional campus after 14-16 months. Of course there is house training involved, but enjoying such a little ball of fur is overwhelming. Then the challenge begins in shaping that little mind into an obedient, energetic, enthusiastic future service dog," the couple wrote. The training is completed with knowledge that the puppy may one day make someone's life better. They said it is hard to send the dogs on to their next part of the journey.

"We have shed our share of tears ,but knowing what their future may be is more than enough to ease the pain. We are presently raising the 19th puppy," the couple wrote.

The results are amazing. One puppy went

to a Vietnam veteran with no legs. Another one was given to a child with a muscle degeneration disease, bound to a wheelchair. The most recent puppy they raised was delivered to a Marine who suffers from PTSD. The biggest challenge, according to the couple, is to raise money for the program, and to find more volunteers. In the end, it's about fulfilling God's message to help others.

"Jesus said, feed the hungry, serve the poor, visit the prisoner ... To us this program exemplifies that challenge," they wrote.

WE ARE LUTHERAN

The Lutheran Letter: Do you remember your first experience in a Lutheran church, can you describe it?

The Bittikofers: We both grew up in a Lutheran church so there wasn't really a "first" experience remembered. My (Dianne) most vivid experience was sitting in front of the entire congregation trying to answer questions following our two years of catechetical training.

TLL: What would you tell someone considering visiting a Lutheran church for the first time?

TB: Everyone is welcome and the love of God is preached. Embrace the liturgy, enjoy the fellowship, and don't be afraid to ask questions.

TLL: What are you praying for the most lately?

TB: That our country and world wake up to the way we as humans have abused the Earth and created global warming. We hope that we can rise to the challenge and save some semblance of what God intended. †

Learning From Our Origin Stories

By **SUE ELLEN SPOTTS**

Director of Evangelical Mission

I like stories.

I especially like origin stories; hearing the history of people, places, or events. I suppose that's why I like to watch the PBS series, "Finding Your Roots." In this program, Dr. Henry Louis Gates leads a team of genealogical detectives to discover the family history of celebrities.

Usually, the request comes because there is something missing in what they know about their origin story. The researchers dig back for generations. The conversation between Dr. Gates and the celebrity unfolds with stories that were known previously, as well as stories that were unknown. When something surprising is discovered, Dr. Gates asks, "How does that make you feel?" It's interesting to hear how people incorporate this clarified history into their identity.

In the church, we also have origin stories. We have stories telling how our congregation was formed and how we became members. These histories help inform the decisions we make about our programs and ministries. Of course, individual members may remember different parts of the history, or even remember the history differently.

I was once a member of a congregation contemplating some major renovations to the sanctuary. There were three sisters in their seventies who had been members of



**Director of
Evangelical Mission,
Sue Ellen Spotts**

the congregation their entire lives. One was complaining about the changes.

"It won't feel like my church if we change the way it looks," she said.

To which her sisters replied, "Dot, what are you talking about? When we were girls the entire

sanctuary faced the other direction!"

Telling our stories can lead us to new understandings ... or to correct misunderstandings of how we got to where we are. It helps to share with each other our understanding of our congregation's story, especially as these memories shape our life together today.

We also have our origin stories as God's people. These stories we retell when we gather in worship or Bible study. They also shape our understanding of how we live with each other and in the world. This is The Story we have to tell to the world. When we listen with open minds, and share together what we hear, we may come to new understandings of what God is calling us to be and do.

I am eager to hear your stories ... as God's people in your congregations and in your communities. I invite you to share your understanding of your story with each other, and with me. Together we may come to deeper understandings of how to share and live the Easter story in ways that bring new life to our congregations and the world.†

Geeseytown and Newry Start Exciting Projects for Food and Clothes

By **PASTOR MARTY JO IRVIN-STELLABOTTE**

Geeseytown-Newry Lutheran Parish

Geeseytown and Newry Lutheran Churches both have long histories of reaching out to help the local community. Whether collecting canned goods for food banks, school supplies to help students as they head to the classroom in the fall, or sharing blankets and quilts with teen and women's shelters and Lutheran World Relief, both congregations have a strong sense of community as they work together as a parish to share Christ's love.

When the Allegheny Synod invited congregations to apply for Congregational Vitality Grants to help expand existing ministries or develop new ministries, the councils of each church wholeheartedly supported the possibility of receiving funds to begin new ministries. However, since both congregations were relatively small before the pandemic and, like most churches, even smaller after the pandemic was over and have a core group of older volunteers, it was important that the new ministries not require a large number of members to operate.

The two councils brainstormed and, based upon available space and resources, decided to begin a food ministry at Newry and a clothing ministry at Geeseytown. Once the applications were completed and funds

awarded, task forces were formed at both churches to finalize how the ministries would be structured.

Because Newry supports the Claysburg Food Bank, members were aware that food insecurity existed in the region, but the church did not have space to begin its own food bank or the number of volunteers needed to run a monthly soup kitchen. The church decided to begin a monthly "Meal in a Box" ministry that kicked off last fall, in which boxes or bags of nonperishable food are distributed to those in need on the last Saturday of each month.

The food is purchased from grant funding and also received from donations from the congregation and local businesses; boxes are filled during craft class or after Bible study, when members are already at the church and available to help. Fliers are posted in the community and the event is shared on social media to help get the word out about the giveaway.

Since the food ministry began, an average of 25-30 boxes are distributed each month and three volunteers greet recipients, record where they are from, family size, and provide them with their box of food. A number of individuals continue to return each month and mention that the food helps them with the rising cost of purchasing grocery items.

(See PROJECTS, Page 11)

World Religions Day

Spreading the Seeds of Faith at Penn State

By **DEACON ALICIA ANDERSON**

Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State

Earlier this semester, we marked World Religions Day on the Penn State campus.

Staff and students from various campus religious groups set up display tables inside the main entrance of the Hetzel Union Building-Robeson Cultural Center for a few

hours. Religious groups ranging from Orthodox and Evangelical Christian groups to Muslim and Jewish groups had signs and giveaways.

As students streamed by, heading to classes and meetings, getting lunch with friends, or in search of some badly-needed coffee, I smiled and greeted them.

(See PENN STATE, Page 14)

PROJECTS

(Continued from Page 10)

Geeseytown has a large area of the basement that was not being utilized, so the council discussed ways to provide a secure and welcoming space where individuals in need of clothing could access new and gently-used clothing and personal care supplies for themselves and their families. Clothing collection began during the summer and grant monies were used to purchase hanging racks, storage bins, and toiletry and personal care items such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, body wash, laundry detergent, and new socks/underwear.

The Sharing Closet opened in November after some minor repairs to the basement area and received coverage in the local media. Approximately 50 people visit the closet each month, which is open the first Saturday morning of the month. Donations of clothing for all ages and house ware items continue to be donated throughout the month by members, friends, and community members. Several volunteers from the parish help at each event by greeting visitors, answering questions, and keeping the clothing areas neat. Attendees have mentioned that they were able to find clothing to help friends and family members who lost everything, or who are homeless. It's especially heartwarming when children show up and find a toy or stuffed animal that they love; in December, one little boy was so excited to find a pair of slippers that he could wrap to give his grandma for Christmas.

We are so grateful for the Allegheny Synod's grant funding that allowed us to begin these ministries so that we can continue to help share Jesus' love to our neighbors! †

IN DECEMBER, ONE LITTLE BOY WAS SO EXCITED TO FIND A PAIR OF SLIPPERS THAT HE COULD WRAP TO GIVE HIS GRANDMA FOR CHRISTMAS.



Submitted
photos

Morgan Stellabotte, at immediate left, and at far left in the left-most photo. She enjoyed the time spent in fellowship with her friends during The Weekend.

The Weekend's Lasting Impact

Morgan Stellabotte, 17, a member of Geeseytown/Newry Lutheran Parish, attended The Weekend Dec. 8-10.

It was the Synod's junior/senior high retreat, focused on fellowship, education, recreation, and music. She shared some reflection on the event with The Lutheran Letter.

THE LUTHERAN LETTER: What did you enjoy most about The Weekend?

MORGAN

STELLABOTTE: I really liked the crafts and all of the activities; the cookie decorating was my favorite!

TLL: What was the key message that is sticking in your head in the weeks following it?

MS: The importance of showing Jesus' love with one another.

TLL: As a young Lutheran, what are you most concerned about, or praying for the most lately?

MS: I'm praying for the people in my life. I pray for thankfulness and help and for peace and love throughout our world. My biggest concern is people who mistreat others and the lack of peace that exists in our world.

TLL: Anything you'd like to add?

MS: I really enjoyed it and would definitely do it again. I enjoyed it so much that I signed up for Snow Camp at Camp Sequanota. †

Mark Your Calendars

**Friday,
June 14**

**Saturday,
June 15**

Allegheny Synod Assembly 2024 will be held Saturday, June 15, at the Blair County Convention Center. More Details to come. The Worship service will be held Friday, June 14, at Zion Lutheran in Hollidaysburg.

ICYMI: SYNOD NEWS

These are some of the churches Bishop Paula Schmitt and Assistant to the Bishop Pastor Kevin Shock visited during the past two months, along with some other news of note from around the Synod.

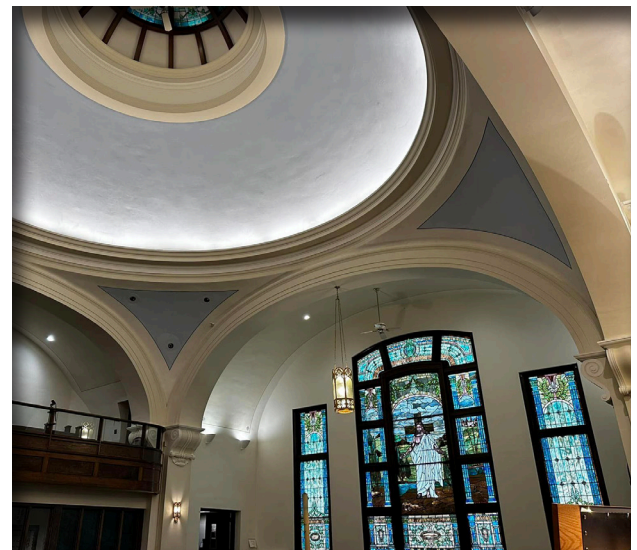
Bishop Paula Schmitt and Pastor Kevin Shock participated in an extraordinary service of rededication and unity at Brush Valley Fusion of Faith on Jan. 7. Brush Valley Fusion is the merger of two UCC and one Lutheran congregation in the Nittany Conference. Three congregations have become one. This has been a journey of faithful discernment and prayer. "These congregations now begin a new chapter in ministry together. We give thanks to God for their bold witness to unity and partnership," the post on Facebook reads.



Submitted photos



Pastor Kevin Shock, assistant to the bishop, worshiped God with the people of St. Paul's in Mundy's Corner in January. "Some of you may wonder where Mundy's Corner is. It's 'up the mountain' from Altoona, west of Ebsenburg, where the wind always blows and the snow often flies. The people there are used to it, though. Thanks for the necessarily warm welcome!" Shock posted on Facebook. Below left is St. David's Lutheran Church in Davidsville. At bottom right is Moxham Lutheran Church.



PENN STATE

(Continued from Page 11)

While most smiled back and walked on by, intent on their next commitment, some students stopped to look at the displays, choosing stickers or fliers offered at our table or others.

A few stopped and asked why these groups were there that day and followed up with questions about faith, religious practice, and what we teach about God.

These are some of my favorite conversations with students. Of course, I find it deeply rewarding to talk with the students I see regularly who are connected with Lutheran Student Community and Lutheran Campus Ministry.

We talk about faith, Lutheran theology and practice, and how our understanding of God shapes the ways we live our lives.

The questions and exploration in those conversations are enhanced by the relationships we build together through their time on campus.

Talking with a student who is just walking by and asks for information about our faith community is something very different.

This may be my only conversation with them. Some of the students who stop by the tables have no background at all in faith or religion. Others have walked away from the faith context they've grown up in because they've felt judged or rejected or seen as unworthy. Others are re-evaluating their childhood faith and looking around to see what other belief systems are out there.



Submitted photo
Deacon Alicia Anderson at World Religions Day at Penn State.

They each may phrase it differently, but each student is essentially asking the same thing: who do you say God is? And why do you think God matters in our lives?

In those brief interactions with students, there is no time for elaborate theology or fancy words. I must find ways to boil down ideas to make sense in our campus context.

I talk about God's grace, human sinfulness yet sainted-ness, serving one another, living in ways that lead to ongoing growth and reform.

My understanding of God and God's call leads me to try and find authentic responses that welcome more questions without judgment. I am certain that taking these questions seriously and responding lovingly truly matters. There in the middle of campus, we are spreading the seeds of faith. I believe that God will nourish those seeds and help them grow. †

Assisting One Another

Thoughts from the Assistant to the Bishop

By **PASTOR KEVIN SHOCK**

Assistant to the Bishop

In my role in the church, I have lots of discussion about, and get lots of requests for, the formula by which we can save/grow/build the church. I'm sure that no one has come up with a better formula than the one given to the early church by the Holy Spirit, which is described in Acts 2:42-47:

"The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplic-

ity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved."

Devoting ourselves to teaching, community, shared meals, and prayers isn't really a difficult formula to grasp. It can be, however, a difficult formula to apply to the church in our contemporary world. The church in Acts wasn't dealing with 60-hour work weeks or building up their 401(K)s, or youth sport travel teams, or email and text notifications. All of those things, and many more, that we take as given in our society, prevent us from devoting ourselves to teaching, community, shared meals, and prayers. We might pray every day for the people we know,



Pastor Kevin Shock

but many people can barely find time to share a meal with family who live in the same house, let alone people of other households.

We might go to church two or three times per month, and that is the extent of our exposure to the teaching of the Gospel. Our community might consist mostly of the people we bump into during the course of all the other errands we run and activities we are involved with.

The values of a modern, busy, individualistic society don't easily integrate with the values that help us to live as good news people who follow Jesus. Our society's way of operating doesn't include much time for learning, gathering, eating together, listening to God and others, and looking out for the needs of our neighbors. It's no wonder that assisting one another is far from our hearts and minds in everyday life, even in the life of the church.

(See SHOCK, Page 16)

BISHOP 1

(Continued from Page 2)

We need to ask questions that lead us into new ways of being and doing that will engage, equip, and connect people to faith.

The old questions were not bad; the old questions were for a time that has passed us. The new questions, if they are the questions that form our approach to ministry, will lead us to new insights and new learning. And, wrestling with the answers to those questions can be hard work.

One question that has been asked consistently through the years, and even more so in these days of declining church membership is, "How do we bring them in?" I have heard that asked as, "When will people come back to church?" Instead, we could ask, "How are we being sent out?" What is God calling me and you to do when we leave the church building on Sunday? How did the Gospel engage and challenge us to reach out?

(See BISHOP 2, Page 17)

SHOCK

(Continued from Page 15)

Maybe that's the formula people are asking about. How can we find time to devote ourselves to teaching, community, shared meals, and prayers when we have so many other things that demand our time?

I don't have the answer, at least not for others. I know that my family and I make decisions according to how we are called to live in the world, but our decisions can't be the same for other people.

A good way to start applying a holy formula to contemporary life might be to ask questions of yourself and your faith community.

To what do you currently devote most of your time? Does that devotion enable you to better share the love and good news of Jesus in the world? Is sharing love and good news important to you? Does your faith community spend more time discussing modern values like self-preservation or holy values like sharing everything we have with others?

How might you find, or create, more opportunities to share meals, build community, pray with one another, and learn from one another? How might you partner with other nearby congregations and faith communities to build goodwill and share good news?

I really think the early church was on to something, putting aside their devotion to themselves for the sake of the community in imitation of Christ. It didn't take long for devotion of self to enter back in and cause issues.

Nevertheless, I trust that the One who gave his life for the world in order to save us from sinful devotion to ourselves can lead us toward more faithful devotion to holy things and holy community. †

BISHOP 2

(Continued from Page 16)

In congregations fortunate to have a called pastor in place, sometimes people believe that being an evangelist is the pastor's job alone. Instead of asking when the pastor is going to do the thing we believe needs to happen in order for there to be change, we could ask, "What is my responsibility?" and "What is our shared ministry in this place?" How can the gifts you have been given support and strengthen the ministry of the congregation? Are you able to meet a need in the congregation with those gifts?

As we continue to look forward, a new question we can ask is, "What is God up to in our community and how can we respond to it?"

Our Synod is in a transitional time. We are not alone. Within our denomination and within many of ecumenical partner denominations, there are challenges that force the question, "How do we survive?"

Maybe a better question would be, "How do we serve?" In our serving, is there a need that the church can meet in the community? As an example, in a congregation I served, there was a local nonprofit that needed a site from which to distribute boxes of supplies that helped new mothers. The church's building had an ideal "drive-through" set up so that families could drive up to the doors and the box could be placed in the trunk without having to find a parking space, extract their child from the safety seat, walk through the building, and then carry both the box and the child back to the car. While not every church building has that same set-

up, there are ways to address needs that don't require a lot of effort, but make a huge difference to those who access the service. Building relationships with the people in the community where your congregation is located is one way to serve.

Can you think of a question that your congregation has asked for a long time and the answer no longer works in today's world? What new question could you be asking?

We are approaching the celebration of Easter and Christ's resurrection. How can your congregation be resurrected so-to-speak? What is one thing you can do in the season of Easter to demonstrate the new life that comes through our Lord's sacrifice on the cross? How can you make the reign of God more present in this time and place?

There are no "right" answers to these new questions that can be applied to all congregations. Every congregation needs to live with the questions, because it is only in living with them that new ways of being and doing church emerge. If you ask new questions there is no guarantee that you'll find the way to renew, revitalize, or redevelop your church. It may happen — and for that we would give thanks. But, you may just as likely discover that asking new questions takes you down a road to some other alternative that you hadn't even thought of before. What I feel confident about, however, is that asking these new questions will bring us closer to discovering what God is asking from us in this time.

(See BISHOP 3, Page 18)



**Whatever the future holds for us
and our congregations we will be
more faithful in the work we are
about right now.**

— *Bishop Paula*

BISHOP 3

(Continued from Page 17)

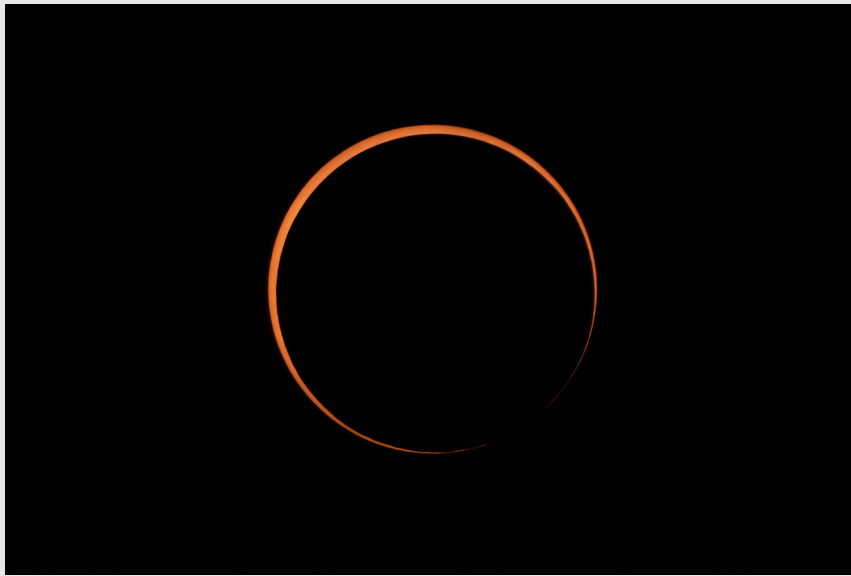
I also believe asking these new questions will help ensure that whatever the future holds for us and our congregations, we will be more faithful in the work we are about right now.

I hope that your celebration of Easter is joy-filled and that even in the midst of uncertainty, you will cling to the one thing that never changes — Christ's enduring love for you.

Cheering you on,
Bishop Paula †

BEFORE *you* GO

Look Skyward



A rare solar eclipse is set to happen on April 8, and it should be visible in the Allegheny hills and valleys.

People in some parts of the country will be able to observe the moon cover around 80% of the sun. It's a remarkable spectacle, last seen in the states in 2017.

It's also one of God's most unique creations — the sun and moon aligning in perfect overlap, even though such great distances separates them.

To me, it's always one of the clear indications of God's power of creation.

During the centuries, solar and lunar eclipses have often been heralded by soothsayers, mystics, and others as omens, sometimes of doom, sometimes not. Those are all, of course, misled interpretations.

I think it's a great time to look skyward (wearing protective glasses, as looking at the eclipse without protection can harm your eyes) and appreciate the great creation God has made for us, including the sun and the moon.

Every so often they work in tandem under God's guidance to put on a heavenly show.

Enjoy the eclipse.

— Rick Kazmer