

The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

Digital

Volume 21, Issue 1 • www.AlleghenySynod.org • Winter 2026

[FOR MORE SYNOD NEWS,
CLICK HERE](#)



Bishop Shock Q&A

The Synod includes 97 congregations in Blair, Bedford, Cambria, Centre, Clearfield, Huntingdon, and Somerset counties.

The below is a question-and-answer feature with Bishop Kevin Shock as he takes office.

Q: When did you hear a call to consider becoming bishop? Was there an overwhelming emotion or sentiment that guided the decision?

(See SHOCK 1, Page 22)

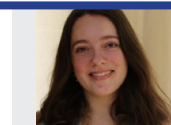


Photo by Pastor Marty Jo Irvin-Stellabotte

Interim Bishop Barbara Collins and Bishop-Elect Kevin Shock exchange notes in December as the synod prepares for the leadership change. Shock was elected bishop during synod assembly Oct. 31-Nov. 1.



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



MEET EMILY FROM PENN STATE
Learn how she expanded her faith on campus, Page 17

The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

is published bi-monthly by the
ALLEGHENY SYNOD OF THE ELCA

Bishop Kevin Shock
916 Hickory St., Hollidaysburg, PA 16648
Phone: 814-942-1042 • Fax: 814-941-9259
www.AlleghenySynod.org •
email: Office@AlleghenySynod.com

EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor Rick Kazmer

Copy Editor Courtney Kazmer

Email: r9remzak@hotmail.com

Note: The Office of the Bishop reserves the right to revise, cancel or reject any advertisement or editorial information.

SUBMISSIONS

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.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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.)

CONTACT US

Newsletter: r9remzak@hotmail.com
Michelle Bossler: Michelle.Bossler@AlleghenySynod.com
Bishop Pastor Kevin Shock:
kevin.shock@alleghenysynod.com
Director for Evangelical Mission Sue Ellen Spotts:
SueEllen.Spotts@elca.org



Allegheny Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Farewell

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The new year is upon us and my time with you is nearing its end. Well, my official time with you as your Interim Bishop is ending, but my love for this place will never come to an end – it's in my blood.



**Interim Bishop
Barbara J. Collins**

Together, we have made significant changes in the past 15 months, especially in regard to our relationships. Too often words are misspoken or misheard, misunderstood, or simply not said. Human nature then makes us question our relationships, challenge our relationships, or distance ourselves completely from people and places.

When I arrived, it was clear to see that relationships were broken and in need of healing. First, steps were taken to invite people to gather together. When folks gathered, they were welcomed, smiled at, listened to, and thanked for being part of this synod. Then came honest conversations, real feedback, and an openness to do better together. This work was done together, by many from across the synod territory, with God's Spirit leading the way. Relationships began to mend and trust in one another started to grow. Keep it going!

You have now elected someone to not only lead, but walk with you on this continued path of restoring relationships along with the rebuilding of structures that have a focus on mission – God's mission! Believe me when I say that there are great days ahead for the Allegheny Synod. May God continue to bless you on this path.

This time together has been a true blessing for me. I have met so many wonderful people who are passionate about being God's church for the sake of their communities.

(See COLLINS, Page 15)

Pastors Called



Photos from the Allegheny Synod Facebook page



The Synod welcomed two new pastors in November and December. Congratulations to Pastor Steve Koths on his ordination to Word and Sacrament at Shiloh Lutheran Church. Pastor Christy Harford was ordained and called to serve at Benscreek Lutheran Church and First Lutheran Church, Johnstown. Interim Bishop Barbara Collins presided over both ordinations.

Lutheran Letter Patrons

Thanks to these individuals and groups for their generous donations, which helped to make this issue of The Lutheran Letter possible.

PATRONS: Anonymous - Bishop Emeritus Gregory & Barbara Pile - Kirby & Susan Barclay - Pastors Jim & Rebecca West - Sandra Parker Hall & Dennis K. Hall - The Rev. Susan Mazer Winger & Mr. Larry L. Mazer

IN MEMORY OF: Jeff McCready by Mary Jane McCready - the Rev. Linda McElroy Thomas by Robert Thomas - The Rev. Robert G. Whisler - The Rev. Robert G. Whisler



Lutheran Letter Patron Form

If you would like to support the *Lutheran Letter* as a patron or make a donation, please complete this form and return it to:

The Allegheny Synod c/o The Lutheran Letter
916 Hickory St., Hollidaysburg, PA 16648

If you have any questions, phone 814-942-1042 or email Office@AlleghenySynod.com. Thank you for your support!

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

I would like to purchase a Patron Listing for (check one):

☐ one issue for \$20 ☐ three issues for \$50 ☐ six issues (one year) for \$100

By _____

In Memory of _____ by _____

In Honor of _____ by _____

☐ I would like to make a Donation to the *Lutheran Letter*: \$ _____ amount



FOOD & CLOTHING

People line up before a
distribution.
Submitted photo

Bethany Tackling Basic Needs

By **TERRY KOCH**

Bethany Lutheran Church, Altoona

Bethany's Clothing and Meal Giveaway takes place on the fourth Saturday of every month.

We have been serving our community in this way for more than three years.

This has become a wonderful ministry for our church to provide to our neighbors.

We provide clothing and a cooked meal each month to anyone who comes to our church during the designated time.

The numbers of people we serve has grown from the very beginning.

The first month we served 35 people.

After several months, the number grew to 60, then 85, then 100, to our current av-

erage of 120 people each month.

We reached an all-time high of 156 at our August giveaway, which included back-to-school supplies for students in addition to the usual clothes and meals.

The meals require a lot of planning and preparation. The clothing is sorted and organized.

On the Saturday of each giveaway, many volunteers, some who aren't even Bethany members, come together to make this happen.

Thanks to all who help make the clothing and meal giveaway the huge success that it is.

This ministry is a way that Bethany "Loves God and Loves Others!" †

MORE PHOTOS FROM BETHANY



Submitted photos



More photos of community members and volunteers behind the food and clothing events at Bethany Lutheran Church in Altoona.



Wanted: Singers for 2026 Lenten Ecumenical Choir



**Rehearsals: Sundays, 2-4 PM beginning February 8
at Grace Lutheran Church in State College, PA
Event: Wed., March 25 at 7:00 PM**

Singers of all levels and worship traditions are welcome.

Explore. Discover. Share the joy.

Join us for a faith journey expressed through great music!

I Believe: Songs of Faith, Hope, and Joy a Lenten Musical Meditation

Wednesday, March 25, 2026 at 7:00 PM



Grace Lutheran Church

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



featuring:

Credo (Antonio Vivaldi) with organ and strings
A Little Jazz Mass (Bob Chilcott) with jazz combo
I Believe (Fred Onovwerosuoke) with percussion
Laurel B. Sanders, Director



A scene from the benefit concert at Grace, State College, that helped to feed community members.

Submitted photo

Benefit Concert for State College Food Bank Yields Generous Support

By **LAUREL SANDERS**

Director of Music and Arts Ministries, Grace Lutheran Church

On Nov. 9, Grace Lutheran Church hosted the concert “Celebrating Creativity: Music of the Church, Court and Cinema” to benefit the State College Area Food Bank.

[Click The Ad For More On Thrivent](#)

thrivent



Andrea K. Paul

RICP®, CLTC®, FIC
Financial Associate
412 Allegheny Street, Suite 103
Hollidaysburg, PA 16648
814-695-3496

27193 R6-20

The program honored music over more than 900 years that was made possible by three institutional patrons of the arts: the Church; the royal courts (including music of the theatre and dance); and the film industry (cinema). Musicians included Celestial Sounds choir; Nittany Brass; The Fair Winds V; and pianists Victoria Petrosky and Serena Tian.

Generous giving resulted in \$3,016 in financial donations and 593 pounds of food and toiletry items.

Thanks to the choristers and instrumentalists who offered an afternoon of beauty and fun while helping our neighbors in need! †

WE are LUTHERAN

Skelly Retiring Following Long Career of Helping Others

By **RICK KAZMER**

The Lutheran Letter Editor

Psychologist Robert E. Skelly has made a career of helping people to wrestle with life's struggles.

The key to healing, he said in a recent email detailing his career, is validating self worth.

"I enjoyed discovering with them strategies that assisted them in normalizing and making sense of their 'pain' and shifting their thinking," he wrote.

At 73, Skelly, a Lemont resident and member of Zion Lutheran Church in Boalsburg, is retiring after more than 40 years in the profession.

His career has led him to working with couples, other adults, children, and even at correctional institutions. For 35 years his practices were faith-based, with offices housed in a church.

Skelly – or Bobby, Bob, or Dr. Bob – attended The King's College, Illinois State, and Virginia Tech.

"Therapy is a relationship of mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual belief in the opportunity for life-giving change and growth in positive self-regard. I have discovered the joys, challenges, and rewards of learning how to be and continuing to strive to be a ser-



Dr. Bob Skelly

vant-leader person and therapist," he wrote.

Skelly grew up on a dairy farm in south-central Pennsylvania.

An active 4-H participant, he planned to continue the family dairy business, but God had other plans, which became clear with an unlikely cause: a car accident.

The early 1970s accident left Skelly considering life's deepest meanings.

(See SKELLY 1, Page 10)

Lessons from Father Arrupe

“Grant me, O Lord, to see everything now with new eyes ...” – Pedro Arrupe

By SUE ELLEN SPOTTS

Director of Evangelical Mission

Pedro Arrupe was a Jesuit priest. He was born in Spain, and that is where he entered the Jesuit order. In 1932, the Spanish government expelled the Jesuits from the country.

Father Arrupe went to Japan. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, he was arrested and accused of espionage. He was imprisoned in solitary confinement. At Christmas, some people risked their own arrest and came caroling outside his window, singing songs he had taught them.

After being released from prison, he went to live in a town near Hiroshima. That is where he was on Aug. 6, 1945, when the atomic bomb exploded. Arrupe set to work treating people.

Later, he was in Latin America leading Mass among some of the poorest people.

Arrupe was moved by the attentiveness and respect with which the people celebrated the Mass. His hands trembled as he distributed communion, watching tears fall from the faces of the communicants. After Mass ended, a man invited Arrupe to his home, where they watched the most beautiful sunset Arrupe could recall.

The man explained that he was so



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

grateful for what Arrupe had brought to the community and he wanted to share the only gift he had, the opportunity to share in the beautiful setting sun.

Reading about him, I am struck by how many times Arrupe was open to seeing things in new ways. Forced to leave his home, he was open to a new culture. Despite being accused of being a spy, he could see the people of Japan as neighbors and work to heal them. In Latin America, he saw the Mass through the eyes of people who he could have seen merely as poor. He saw the sunset as a gift, because sharing it as a gift is how the man also saw it.

New eyes turned occasions of loss or hurt or grief into new opportunities to share or experience the presence and love of God. Out of this experience, Arrupe wrote this prayer:

“Grant me, O Lord, to see everything now with new eyes, to discern and test the spirits that help me read the signs of the times.

(See NEW EYES, Page 18)

SKELLY 1

(Continued from Page 8)

“Ultimately, I concluded God was calling me to serve others, not dairy farming ... I see farming as a different way of serving others and creation. Initially, I believed God was calling me to ordained ministry. Freshman year I took an intro psychology class, enjoyed the science and study of human behavior, important to pastoral ministry,” he wrote.

“Eventually my call shifted to mental health care, which evolved over the course of my career into a clinical perspective that included openness to integrating faith, spirituality, and psychological dynamics as they relate to wholeness and wellness for the client.”

Often, discussion’s about faith came at the request of the client.

His goal is to help his clients acknowledge personal battles, struggles, and injuries.

Self-understanding, self-compassion, and self-confidence are key.

“Understanding, embracing, and loving our inner, frightened, and wounded ‘child’ paves the way for each of us to accept and nurture that child, and shift attention to the promise of God’s steadfast love as a means whereby love can ‘cast out fear,’” according to Skelly.

Among the most challenging situations was dealing with couples, especially when one person didn’t see a need to change behavior.

During the years, Skelly has had a unique opportunity to apply his expertise to help the synod by screening candidates for the Candidacy Committee.

When evaluating people in the program, he considers personal histories, personality, and spiritual gifts.

Part of the goal is to get “a picture that highlights strengths and challenges for ministry, while providing resources that enhance their potential for successful ministry with the people of God,” Skelly wrote.

Skelly suggested some key attributes candidates typically need, and some advice for anyone considering becoming a pastor.

A love for people is paramount, he said.

“Devotion to study of Scripture as interpreted through the teachings and actions of Jesus, and servant leader gifts – humility, compassion, devotion, resilience, faith, prayer, and trust,” he wrote.

Read about the calling as much as possible and praying often are other important tasks.

At his own church, Skelly has led adult Sunday School, served as a lay reader, and in other roles for service, in addition to some synod-related roles.

Skelly is married to Deacon Alicia Anderson, the student ministry leader at Penn State. He mentioned Jessa Anderson-Reitz, step-daughter; Luke Hanson, son-in-law; Nina, granddaughter; and Mara Anderson-Skelly, daughter, as family.

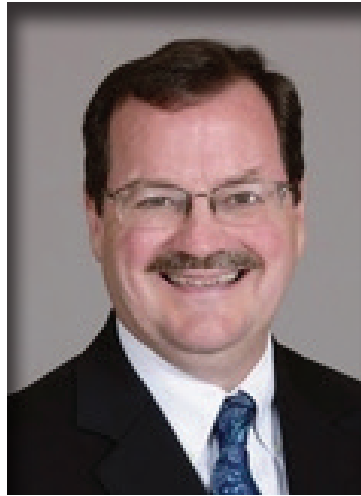
What will he miss most in retirement?

“Meeting with people one-on-one and the reward of witnessing them gain improved self-understanding, self-acceptance, and confidence to manage life struggles in a self-fulfilling way,” Skelly wrote.

(See SKELLY 2, Page 12)

Go Tell It Initiative Key Dates

By PASTOR
JOHN H. KRATZ
Initiative Director



Pastor
John H. Kratz

The GO Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative has been pleased to partner with The Allegheny Synod Authorized Lay Worship Leaders to create a quarterly series of meetings for all ALWLs.

These meetings have led to the formation of a Lay Ministries Task Force, work on creating a digital tool for connecting preachers to pulpits, and formation of a comprehensive proposed Lay Ministry Guide for the Synod.

Throughout all this work, we have been blessed with cooperative relationships, strong synod office support from all synod staff, and fruitful results.

One challenge, though, has been the implementation of the digital app to connect preachers to pulpits. Due to these challenges, I intentionally delayed the launch of this app until after the holidays.

Therefore, at 3 p.m. Jan. 25, we will have a Zoom-only review of this Preachers to Pulpit app.

We will review how preachers register on the app, how congregation information is noted within the app,

how assignments are modified and whom do we call when this technology stumps us!

Every ALWL, retired pastor, and other preachers who ever fill-in as worship service preachers should attend this online event.

The full Zoom invite with passwords and call-in options is listed below. See you Jan. 25 for the start of an exciting new venture.†

Preachers to Pulpit App Training

3 p.m. Jan. 25 on Zoom.

Zoom meeting link: <https://zoom.us/j/93123570786?pwd=NbM1bVawC-odtLQvm7H6djYSOSWjCgP.1>

Meeting ID: 931 2357 0786

Passcode: 545310



WE are LUTHERAN

Is looking for people to feature!

Know someone in your congregation who is doing unique things, has a cool hobby, or is making a difference? Email contact information to Editor Rick Kazmer at **r9remzak@hotmail.com**.

WE ARE LUTHERAN

SKELLY 2

(Continued from Page 10)

THE LUTHERAN LETTER: What's your earliest memory of attending a Lutheran Church?

BOB SKELLY: Sunday School, Vacation Bible school, and sitting with family in the balcony during worship.

THE LUTHERAN LETTER: What would you tell someone considering attending a Lutheran church for the first time?

BOB SKELLY: Keep coming until the order of service becomes familiar, inviting and uplifting. Some of us are a little shy and stiff and eventually we will become your faith family – warm, inclusive, and uplifting.

THE LUTHERAN LETTER: What are you praying for the most lately?

BOB SKELLY: Continued health and opportunity to serve God and God's people. That I and the body of Christ would more deeply embrace the examples and commandments of Jesus to love your neighbor as yourself, feed the hungry, care for the sick, welcome the foreigner/immigrant/stranger, reach out to the outcasts of society, and be generous in doling out love, acceptance, and inclusion – no matter the person's gender, race, nationality, faith or non-faith, relationship orientation, degree of physical and intellectual prowess, societal and financial status, and politics. Why: because each person has within their self the image of God and "Every person you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind always," a quote widely attributed to Robin Williams. †



Photos from Christ Lutheran in Claysburg's annual Baby Shower for Mary. Ninety people attended, donating items for children in need.



Photos from Christ Lutheran's Facebook page



Church Collects Donations for Vulnerable Children Annual Baby Shower a Success

By THE LUTHERAN LETTER

The Christ Lutheran Church congregation in Claysburg had another successful Christmas Tea/Baby shower for Mary.

The well-attended event was held on Nov. 30.

Photos show organizers and participants enjoying fellowship while helping

a great cause.

More than 90 faithful attended, donating items for Keystone Family Alliance, a Christian organization that helps orphans and vulnerable children.

"Everyone did a fantastic job putting this together. Thank you to all who attended," the organizers posted on Facebook. †



Submitted photos



Scenes from Trinity's holiday festivities.



By THE LUTHERAN LETTER

Trinity Lutheran in Juniata held holiday events that featured music, Santa, donations to help furry friends in the community that need some help, and fellowship in Christ. For the program, musical performances of popular Christmas songs were enjoyed, featuring a chorus of youngsters, and other musicians. †



Submitted photo

This quilt, created by Paula Nihoff and signed by staff and synod council, was gifted to interim Bishop Collins during the synod assembly this fall.

COLLINS

(Continued from Page 2)

I have experienced kindness in ways that reflect the Appalachian culture so dear to me. You have gifted me in ways in which my “homecoming” has been more than memories, it has been a full circle of my

life. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Shalom,

Bishop Collins ... aka: Barby Nein, BJ, Barb †

Feast of Abundance

Williamsburg Effort Just Kept Growing

(Editor's note: The Stewardship of Life Institute at United Lutheran Seminary awarded grants to congregations by random drawing. Several Allegheny Synod congregations were chosen. This is how one of them used the grant. More stories will be published as details are provided.)

By **PASTOR JOHN KRATZ**

Williamsburg Lutheran Parish

The Williamsburg Lutheran Parish was blessed to receive the Feast of Abundance \$1,000 grant to use in community connection.

This was a generous gift and one that the parish took to heart. It was decided to use these funds in cooperation with an existing community event rather than to do an isolated event. The parish became part of the Williamsburg Christmas Parade, Tree Lighting, and Santa visit event for the local community.

Our goal to begin was simple: offer free hot dogs, chips, and water to everyone who came.

In addition, everyone who brought a donation to our food bank would be entered for a chance to win a children's bicycle.

Well, that didn't last long as the church kept growing this community connection. The Children's Sunday



Submitted photo

A scene from the Williamsburg festival.

School created a float for the parade with the theme of "Be the Light."

Special shirts were designed and given to all the parade walkers. Glow sticks and candy were given out by all the children of the church to people along the route.

The hot dog station grew to include lighting and signage and shared over 250 that night (with chips and drink).

The bicycle raffle grew to four bikes to allow people to submit names for the bike of their choice.

A car's back seat was filled with boxes of cereal for the food bank, and many cash donations came in.

It became clear that this gift would keep on giving as plans are in the works for next year already! †

Stories from Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State

By **DEACON ALICIA ANDERSON**

Campus Minister, Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State

Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State has begun a new storytelling project.

Each month, we are sharing the story of a student or alum of Lutheran Campus Ministry on our website and social media. Of course, we've gathered and shared information from students and alumni in a variety of ways before. This new approach is designed to tell the story in a new way – to help the folks who have been impacted by Lutheran Campus Ministry tell their story and show the ways their lives have been touched by their connection.

Here's one story.

Through a combination of advanced placement credits and lots of hard work, Emily Beauregard managed to complete her degree at Penn State a year early. In just three years on campus, she faced some difficult times, including adjusting to college, coping with a cousin's death, and dealing with an ongoing illness. Finding support and community at college was not easy at first.

"As you randomly meet people around campus freshman year you don't know if they share your values," Emily said.

Eventually, another student talked to Emily and a friend about Luther-

an Campus Ministry. There, she found others who shared her faith and values.

"It was just awesome that first night," she said about Thursday night worship.

Coming to college, Emily hoped to grow in faith. Finding Lutheran Campus Ministry was key.

"I feel like this group allowed me to grow more in my faith and gave me more purpose throughout the week to think about God's word. I loved the sermons so much. Now, I am much closer with God and Lutheran Campus Ministry was a catalyst."

Emily truly realized she'd found her home that first year when a group from Lutheran Campus Ministry volunteered at the Penn State Arboretum Pumpkin Festival.

"I thought, 'I love this. It's definitely going to be part of my college journey.' It was so simple and fun helping with the pumpkins, then just having dinner together and talking with everyone who was there," she said.

The community was there for her in hard times, too.

"When my cousin passed away so early in that year, it was such a hard time. The first time I came back to worship, I felt very supported. I'll always remember that," Emily said.

(See EMILY, Page 18)

NEW EYES

(Continued from Page 9)

“To relish the things that are yours and to communicate them to others.”

This prayer could just as easily come out of many of our experiences today. It can inspire us to understand our mission and our church’s place in the world in fresh ways. It encourages us to let go of our assumptions of how things should be; not to consider our mission through the lens of how we have always done things.

The phrase I find most striking and most challenging is “help me read the signs of the times.” This really is at the heart of discerning our mission, of listening to where God is calling us. God always calls us forward – through the present into the future. Our mission is never behind us. As our world changes, we need to read the signs of the times. Seeing things with new eyes will help.

This prayer also reminds us that we don’t do these things for our own sake.

The last petition in this prayer instructs us to cherish what we know of God and announce it to the world. The world needs us to communicate boldly the love and grace of God made known through Jesus. This is our focus in Epiphany – shining the light of Christ’s healing and restorative love into the world’s darkness.

I hear three things in this prayer:

- Continue to learn and be formed in the faith, in the story of God and God’s people so we can share it with others;
- Pay attention to what is happening around us, listening for where the Spirit calls us to take this love;
- Let go of assumptions of how things should be and open ourselves to seeing new ways of being God’s people.

I invite you to join me in this prayer and in this adventure in mission. Let your light shine! †

EMILY

(Continued from Page 17)

When Emily was in the hospital the next year, Lutheran Campus Ministry students made get-well cards for her.

“The other day I found those cards and they reminded me of how much support I had from everyone and how grateful I was to have that in my life,” she added.

Your generosity to Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State makes it possible for students to grow in faith and find community that helps them through the challenges life throws at them during college. †



Emily
Beauregard, a
student at
Penn State.

Submitted photo

Calvary, Supporters Navigate Challenges to Send Crucial Supplies Abroad

By GLORIA REED

Mt. Calvary Lutheran, Johnstown

The Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Johnstown blanket project continues to help the community in unique ways.

Again in 2025, this endeavor was overseen by the church's women's group, which has successfully navigated challenges during the last couple of years. In 2024, the big challenge was finding a new site for the ingathering. Thankfully, Newry Lutheran in Blair County was gracious in allowing us to use their parking lot. In 2025, the big problem was finding a way to get the donated items from Newry to the Lutheran World Relief warehouse in St. Paul, Minnesota. LWR supports the project.

The Brethren Church, which owned the site of the warehouse in New Windsor, Maryland (which we had delivered to for years), had decided to close in mid-November, making the site inaccessible. After contacting LWR, it was their decision to send our donations directly to Minnesota, and they would make the arrangements for a truck to do the pickup at Newry. LWR asked that all the conferences in the synod bring their items to Newry. In the past, Laurel Highlands had delivered to New Windsor directly, but they graciously agreed to bring their items to Newry. With the exception

Pallets Full of Hope

What exactly was in the 21 pallets? Here's what was sent abroad to help people in need:

- Baby Care Kits - 1;
- Fabric Kits - 5;
- Blankets - 144;
- School Kits - 515;
- Personal Care Kits - 983;
- Quilts - 1690

of the truck arriving 3 1/2 hours late, all went smoothly. Once the truck arrived, 21 shrink-wrapped pallets were loaded, filling up the entire floor space of the 18-wheeler!

In addition to these items, some congregations sent funds to LWR to cover the cost of shipping their items to national and international locations.

Many community members, businesses, and volunteers contributed to this project, with time, treasure, or sewing expertise. We, of the Allegheny Synod, can be very proud of the generosity and dedication of our congregations. We are reaching out to God's children who are in desperate situations through no fault of their own, and sending our love. †



“Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit.”

By PASTOR JULIE HOLM
Brush Valley Fusion of Faith

Let’s look forward for a new heart, installed by God our divine maker, that might reach out in compassion, trusting in God’s grace, writes Pastor Holm

Psalm 51 is a solid go-to verse during Lent, and it is a prominent part of our Ash Wednesday service in the Revised Common Lectionary. The poem of confession traditionally is understood as being David’s words after the prophet Nathan confronted him over the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. They reflect profound penitence and confession.

Recently, though, something else jumped out at me from these lines; the call of grace. David knows he cannot make everything right – that the evil he has done will live on in him and his family – and he calls out to the original maker to remake him, to refashion his heart. Later in the prophets we will hear God’s promise.

(See LENT , Page 21)

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put my spirit in you.” – (Ezekiel 36:26-27a)

LENT

(Continued from Page 20)

My granddaughter received a 3D printer for her birthday this year, and she is immensely enjoying fashioning all kinds of things with it – tools, beads, decorations, practical gifts. Her delight as a creator, I think, reflects the delight of the Great Creator, who created us and who is thrilled by the opportunities to work in collaboration with us to remake this broken world into the reign of God. God is the original maker, and the one who replaces our brokenness with a new heart: the strength and the love and the obedience to God’s Word to transform us from people who are stone-hearted, to people who are full of God’s compassion and Spirit.

One of the podcasts I listen to regularly has made me aware of how often God, and, in the Gospels, Jesus, is filled with compassion, has a heart of flesh toward those who are in need, and toward those who are broken. The original

languages refer to it as a movement in the gut, literally, that Jesus feels in his guts the compassion for the others he encounters.

Can we spend this Lent focusing on the graceful gift of compassion? Instead of just looking back at our failures and our brokenness, let’s look forward for a new heart, installed by God our divine maker, that might reach out in compassion, trusting in God’s grace, and following the example of Jesus, who felt in his guts this compassion?

Instead of just looking inward, let’s look outward, and let those gifts of God within us respond to the increasing need in our communities and in our nation. God has promised we would have a new heart, a heart of flesh. Jesus taught us exactly what a heart of flesh looks like in a human life, and the spirit fills us with inspiration and activation to make that heart active in the world around us. Amen. †

SHOCK1

(Continued from Page 1)

A: I thought I was first open to the call back at the 2021 Bishop's election, but I also thought the chance of being elected at that point was slim, so I'm honestly not sure how open I was. After serving in the Office of the Bishop for 3.5 years, the sense of call to the role of Bishop had diminished greatly for me. Then I witnessed the Spirit moving at Churchwide Assembly in August, at our Bishop's Convocation in September, and at other gatherings throughout the synod. Bishop (Barbara) Collins showed us a style of leadership that really resonated with me, and after much listening to other voices, a sense of peace entered into the discernment process. I knew that I would continue in ministry whether I was called to this role or not, and that peace was what allowed me to finally say I was open to the call.

Q: What are you most looking forward to in the role?

A: I'm most looking forward to meeting people throughout the synod and participating in ministry with them. It's exciting to learn how the body of Christ is moving in each of our ministry sites, and accompanying our clergy and laypeople in their ministry, in order to learn from them and encourage them, is a great privilege of this call.

Q: What do you think will be the biggest challenge?

A: One of our biggest challenges is managing resources. It has been said that we have limited resources in this synod, both financial and human resources. Although they are limited, they are not too

small. If we find ways to share ministry resources, our congregations can move beyond survival mode, if that's where they currently are, into thriving mode.

Q: What solutions to the challenges exist, or do they need to be discovered?

A: I'm not the person to find the solutions on my own. Those solutions will be discovered as we all have mutual conversation. I know that when we meet together to find solutions and to discern common ministry, the Spirit can open us to ways of being the church in the world that we never could have imagined on our own.

Q: Do you have any goals for the first 90 days?

A: A goal for the first part of my term is to continue the team building process that has begun under Bishop Collins. As we bring on staff and gather and equip more people on committees, ministry will begin to flow in a new way. All the people, both new and current, gathered around conference tables and computer screens, can then discern new goals that will help us live into our vision of inviting people to love one another. Together, we can share good news with one another and with our neighbors across the synod in exciting ways.

Q: In that regard, can you describe your vision for the synod office?

A: A shared vision of current leadership in the synod is that we would have clearer delineation of responsibilities and better equip people to meet those responsibilities. Our ministry overall can become much more effective, if that is the case.

(See SHOCK 2, Page 23)

SHOCK 2

(Continued from Page 22)

Q: What's the best advice you have been given so far as you enter this new stage of your service to God?

A: Several people have told me clearly that the best way to serve in this role is to be myself, to not try to become someone other than who I am. This call is an extension of my baptismal calling, and being the person God made me to be is why the Spirit called me through the assembly.

Q: What Bible verse keeps popping into your head?

A: Leading up to the assembly, Ephesians 1:18-19 kept ringing out for me. My prayer for this synod is the same prayer that Paul had for the Ephesians: that our hearts may be so enlightened to perceive the hope, abundance, and power for good ministry that God has given us. Because of Christ's presence with us, we are able to accomplish more than we ever could imagine. (John 14:12). Since the assembly, as I have been traveling around the synod with a new perspective, the importance of our gathering has been made evident to me. For all the reasons we can find not to gather together, none is stronger than the reasons to gather together, as named for us in Hebrews 10:25: to encourage one another and to continue to cast a vision of the coming Day of Christ when all things will be made new. When we gather together as the church, we are made new. I have witnessed it firsthand.

Q: What's your advice to new pastors entering service?

A: My advice to new pastors is to hang

on for what the Holy Spirit is doing. Maybe secondary advice is to spend some time teaching people how to do ministry, rather than doing all the ministry for them. Building up a support network can free clergy to do some really fun and amazing things for the church.

Q: Is there a leader, secular or in the faith, who you admire?

A: I just listened to Jimmy Carter's audio book, "Faith: A Journey for All," and I was taken in by his descriptions of how faith has shaped his perspective and guided his decisions throughout the years. I'm also grateful for the example of one of my seminary mentors, Dr. Gordon Lathrop. Gordon has told people that, for all the joy his teaching and calling brought him, he would be glad to be the doorkeeper of a simple church building. You can tell that he means it, the way he honors people and makes space for them. Although he has done so much in the area of worship reform and is a brilliant church leader, he never expects people to defer to him nor comes across as important. I pray I can approach this call with the humility and servant-hood I have seen in Gordon.

Q: Anything else you would like to add?

A: We have spent so much time and energy in the church managing decline. The Spirit is pulling us into a way of spending some time and energy on seeking growth, not in a business sense or a numbers sense, but a spiritual sense. Our congregations and our communities hold so much potential and so much need for Jesus.

(See SHOCK 3, Page 24)

A Gift Idea for Next Year

Homemade Ornaments for the Holidays



Photo by Rick Kazmer

Some of the ornaments the editor made during some free time before Christmas. Details about the perils of the project are on Page 25.

SHOCK 3

(Continued from Page 23)

Focusing some energy on deepening our faith and discerning our ministry can serve as a beacon to so many people right around us who are not connected to any faith community and who are longing for some meaning and connection. I'm excited thinking about what our Lutheran witness can offer a divided and disconnected world that is right outside our doors. †

BEFORE YOU GO

Ornament-Making Perils

By the time you are reading this, you may have already taken down your Christmas tree and boxed up your ornaments for the year.

If that's the case, consider this column the nightcap for the holiday season.

I was feeling ambitious a couple weeks before Christmas and decided to dust off my scroll saw in the basement. I have some old barn wood and I thought it would work well to make nice, rustic ornaments. Courtney has various ribbons and other things that we thought would be perfect to decorate them. And as I started cutting them out, the creativity started to flow. Soon snowmen were holding signs, ornaments had pine cones, and flannel ribbon, and a nutcracker was made to look quite stately (my mom's words).

It was all going well until I cut my finger, not on the scroll saw (answered prayer), but on scissors I was using to cut something else. If you are squeamish, skip a couple sentences.

I instantly knew I cut my finger by that unique feeling of overlapping skin. It didn't hurt, but I could tell something was amiss. I looked at my finger and saw a triangle-shaped piece of skin flapped up. Surprisingly, it wasn't bleeding. I peeked under the flap, saw something white, and quickly pushed the skin back down. I quickly applied some ointment and Band Aids, and it seems to have healed quite well.

It was a deep cut, and I thank God it didn't hit a vein or go even deeper.

When I started cutting out the ornaments, I thought I'd make enough for our upcoming Rotary Club party – I'd need about 40. Well, the cut finger and slow progress quickly put the boots to that plan. I made six, and drew random winners for them. I thought I'd share a photo of them. The year will go fast, and you might need some ideas for a Christmas gift next year. A homemade ornament is unique, thoughtful, and something that can be enjoyed each year on the tree. If you are creative enough, you just need some basic craft supplies and a glue gun to make something nice. †

See you in the spring,
Rick Kazmer, editor