

The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

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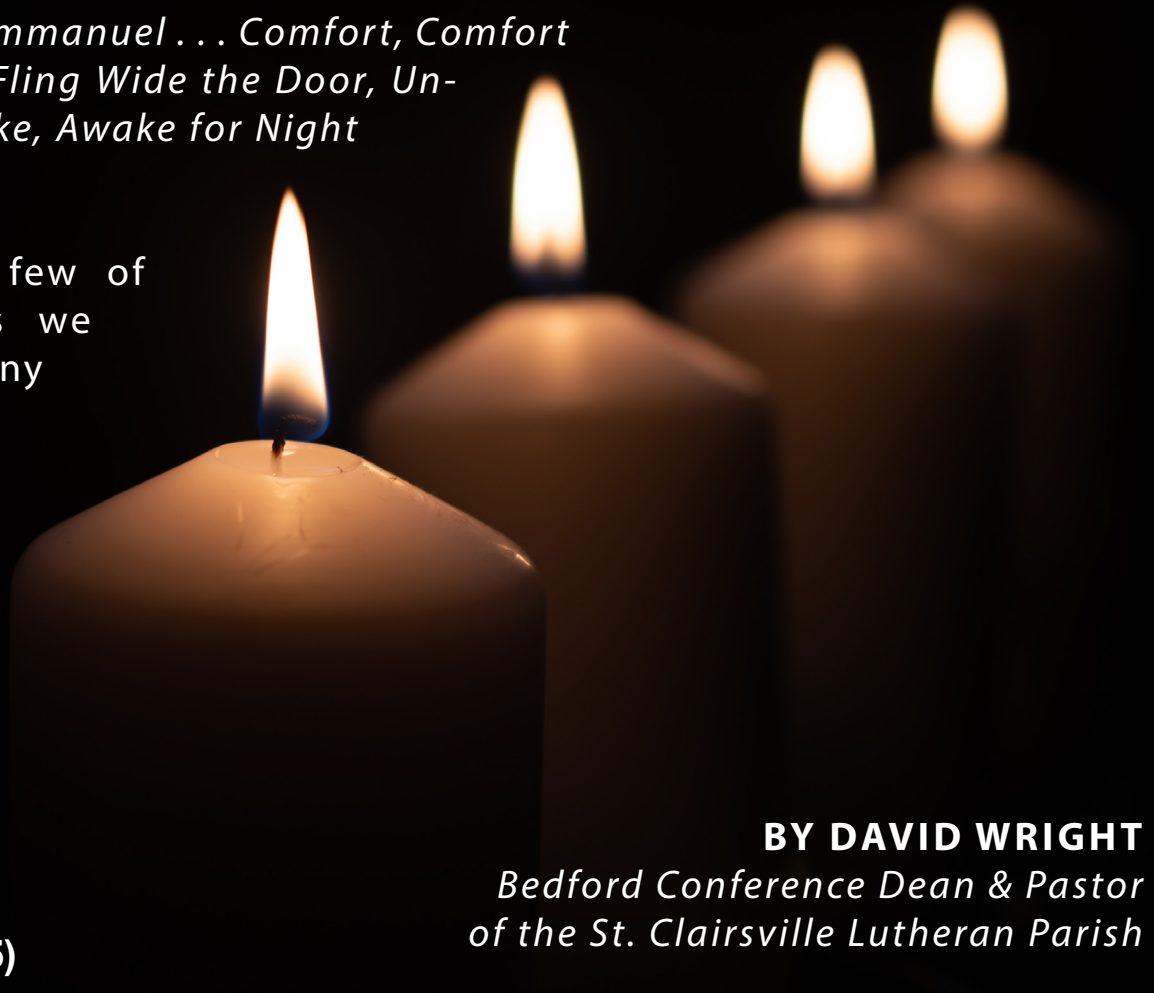
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The Joy of Advent Carols

*"O Come, O Come Emmanuel . . . Comfort, Comfort
Now My People . . . Fling Wide the Door, Un-
bar the Gate . . . Wake, Awake for Night
Is Flying ..."*

These are but a few of the Advent Carols we sing each year. Many folks consider them unfamiliar and unsingable — and maybe even a little strange. But that's never been the case for me. I love the Advent Carols.

(See ADVENT, Page 5)



BY DAVID WRIGHT

*Bedford Conference Dean & Pastor
of the St. Clairsville Lutheran Parish*



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

**INSIDE: Holidays on the Penn State
Campus, PAGE 6**



The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

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Inviting people to love one another.

OUR VISION

All creation living in harmony with Christ.

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Allegheny Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

A Strong Finish

Great News as We End the Year

Grace to you and peace!

In this, our end-of-year combined issue, I want to wish each of you a very happy Thanksgiving, a meaningful Christmas, and a peaceful New Year. I hope you will be able to spend time with family and friends and be renewed and refreshed.

As we approach the end of another year and look forward to 2024, I want to share some exciting news with you about our synod. If you follow the Allegheny Synod's Facebook page or subscribe to news updates from our website, you know that we, along with the Upper Susquehanna and Northwestern PA Synods, have received a very generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Back in March of this year, a group of writers from all three synods convened to put together our program proposal titled, "Go Tell It In The Mountains." The program will guide, teach, and support both lay and ordained preachers on the territory of the three synods.

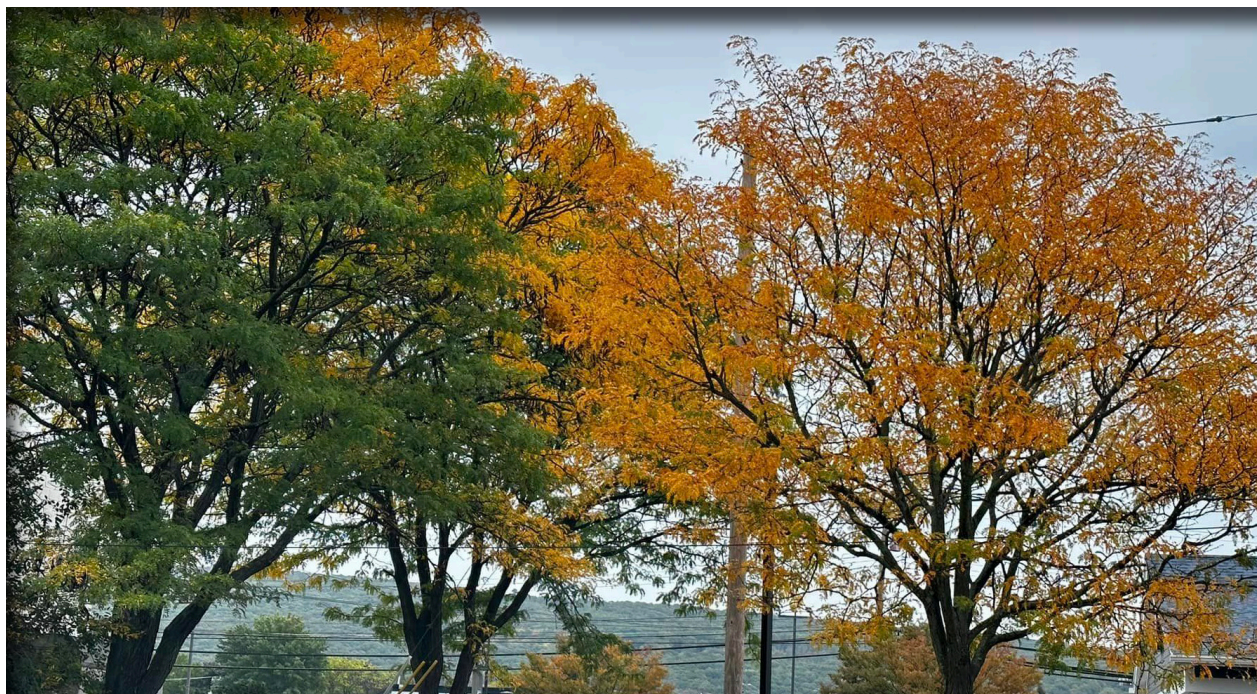
The program is being funded through Lilly Endowment's Compelling Preaching Initiative. The aim of the initiative is to foster and support preaching that inspires, encourages, and guides people to come to know and love God and to live out their Christian faith more fully. Our program seeks to expand the role of preaching to encompass education and outreach using modern communication tools to prepare worshipers for Sunday's message, engage listeners beyond Sunday morning, and empower all to serve.



Bishop Paula Schmitt

(See BISHOP 1, Page 14)

Scene of the Edition



The colors of the season were evident outside of the Allegheny Synod office in Altoona in early October.

Photo by Bishop Paula Schmitt

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WE *are* LUTHERAN

Engaging Young People at Grace in Johnstown

BY RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

A Johnstown teen represents the fulfillment of a goal for many churches in the Alleghenies — having engaged young people as part of the congregation.

Raeshon Mickens, 19, is passionate about her involvement at Grace Lutheran Church in Johnstown. And, according to Raeshon, her faith was passed down from her mother, Shirley Clark. Shirley has been a Grace member her entire life.

"I just love the church the way it is right now!" she said in an email about her experiences at Grace.

She was baptized with her siblings, Raymond Mickens (her twin), Taevon Sitton, Tayona Sitton and Takyah Sitton. She attends church with her good friend, Dylan Stephens. She has two dogs, Ace and Ariel.

Raeshon is involved with a blanket-making project at the church, helping people keep warm.

"They are made for people who need them. I also helped to shop for items for our Food Pantry," she said about her work at the church.

She considers a project that sends greeting cards to people in nursing homes as a good example of successful outreach.



Raeshon Mickens

"Sometimes we have visited them. Some people aren't fortunate enough to have someone with them for the holidays," she said.

Sometimes the outreach is simple, but of high impact.

She gives Bibles to friends who don't go to church.

Raeshon is a member of the church council, and a young adult representative to the Synod Assembly this year. She credits her pastor for creating a strong church community.

(See MICKENS, Page 5)

Remember in Prayer

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

NOVEMBER

Week 1: Zion Lutheran, Meyersdale

Week 2: Evangelical Lutheran, Duncansville

Week 3: Trinity Lutheran, Somerset

Week 4: St. Mark Lutheran, Snyderstown

DECEMBER

Week 1: First Lutheran, Johnstown

Week 2: St. Matthew Lutheran, Martinsburg

Week 3: St. Paul Lutheran, Pine Grove Mills

Week 4: Moxham Lutheran, Johnstown

MICKENS

(Continued from Page 4)

"Our Pastor, Nancy Hoover ... would help the world if she could in any way. She's a great pastor and an even better friend," Raeshon said.

For fun, Raeshon enjoys learning new things on YouTube.

"There are good Christian things on YouTube that I watch, too," she said. †

FAITH MATTERS

The Lutheran Letter: What have you been praying for the most lately?

Raeshon Mickens: I've been praying that God blesses my friend, Caleb in Heaven. (He was innocently shot and murdered a few months ago.)

TLL: What's your first memory of experiencing the Lutheran faith?

RM: My first big memory was when I got baptized at age 9, on March 17, 2013.

TLL: What's one message you have for anyone considering attending a Lutheran church?

RM: You won't regret it and it will be like a second family to you. The people there care about each other.

Mark Your Calendars

**Saturday
June 15**

Allegheny Synod Assembly 2024 will be held Saturday, June 15, at the Blair County Convention Center. More Details to come.

The Holidays on Campus

By **ALICIA ANDERSON**

Lutheran Campus Minister at Penn State

Advent and Christmas have a unique feel on a college campus. Sure, it is a time of preparation and anticipation, but most of the focus and energy goes into preparing for end-of-the-semester projects and final exams and anticipating semester break with time away from deadlines and assignments for a few weeks.

At Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State, our weekly mid-week worship service uses the traditional texts for evening prayer. The songs we share each week tell the ancient story of an angel announcing to Mary that she will give birth to the messiah. We sing Mary's response accepting the responsibility and praising God for empowering those who are vulnerable and powerless while humbling the powerful and privileged. Though we sing these themes each week, we unpack them more fully when Advent arrives.

The students probably can identify with Mary; she is young and bewildered and facing a new challenge. Typically, these young adults are just beginning to embrace adulthood and its responsibilities. They do not feel privileged or powerful. Yet, in the world context, they are. Soon they will finish their studies and move into careers and fully adult lives. They will be in positions of leadership and power.



One of the gifts that campus ministry gives these young adults is an awareness that God treasures the vulnerable and powerless, walks with the isolated and unable, and is always near.

(See COLLEGE, Page 8)

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ADVENT

(Continued from Page 1)

They have always been among my favorite hymns.

Perhaps my maternal grandmother had some influence there. She's the one who first began to teach me to play the piano. "Wake, Awake for Night Is Flying" was one of her favorite hymns. Perhaps it rubbed off on me.

The Advent Carols are both quiet and contemplative as well as joyous and celebrative.

As such, they reflect the dual nature of the Advent season — a season filled with both contemplation and anticipation.

As we gather for Worship each Sunday in Advent, we look back to the Old Testament prophecies for our First Readings.

Through the prophets, we hear God's promise that the Messiah is coming — that God knew what the ancient Israelites were experiencing in the midst of their daily lives and gave them hope of salvation. We contemplate what this meant to ancient Israel — especially when they were exiled from their home land.

Yet we also find our lectionary readings each week filled with the promise of the Last Day.

We read and hear words of hope, promise and anticipation. Our attention is not solely focused on the past, but is also pointed ahead to the future — to that day when sorrow and sighing will be no more — a time of

glorious, unspeakable joy.

Advent reflects our daily existence in the 21st century world, too. We live in the here and now. We know we have a past and remember it — sometimes with fondness, sometimes with regret.

We can't transport ourselves back and pretend that our personal history hasn't happened. We also know that we have a future.

We look forward to that future with hope and anticipation. We plan for what lies ahead. We don't know exactly what it may be or when we may encounter it, but we plan for it. Thus, we live with a foot in both camps — the past and the future.

In the life of the Church, we do the same thing.

We live in the tension between the already and not yet. Particularly during the Advent season, we remember the past and anticipate the future. We remember the promises God made to his people that the Messiah would come. And he did — in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

We also look forward to the fulfillment of Jesus's promise that he would come again. We don't know when that coming may be, but we plan for it. We get ready.

During the weeks of Advent, if the Advent Carols seem a little unfamiliar, look at their texts.

See how they relate to the Readings. Notice how they recall the past, but anticipate the future. †

Churches, Business Step Up for Students

By PASTOR DICK HENRY

St. Matthew, Marklesburg, and Zion Lutheran, Petersburg

Sometimes, our Lord Jesus blesses our congregations with unexpected outreach mission supplies from very unexpected sources.

Recently, this happened at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Marklesburg, and Zion Lutheran Church in Petersburg, when these two churches were beginning an outreach of school supplies to children living in poverty.

Their families could not afford to purchase supplies after other outreach programs, such as stuff the

buses, were depleted. Teachers and their aides told us this usually happens within two months after school starts. Children living poverty really need help with additional school supplies.

We decided to pack old shoeboxes with basic school supplies and give them to teachers, teacher aides and guidance counselors who knew the children and families who need these school supplies.

In addition, we will also give them to different agencies, such as local fire companies, police departments, and the Red Cross.

(See SCHOOL, Page 9)

COLLEGE

(Continued from Page 6)

Whether they feel privileged or not just now, students have resources, opportunities, and options. As they leave campus, it matters that they have connected with Mary's story and can sing her song. They realize that the creator of the universe is continually inviting yet another unlikely person to be part of healing and transforming the world and all that is in it. These are powerful messages about God, themselves, and their neighbors for students to learn in these formative years.

This Advent, as we light the candles on the advent wreath on campus, students will sing that God empowers and comforts us in our vulnerability. They will also sing that God humbles the powerful and comes near to be with us. These lights will shine in the darkness this year and throughout the lives of our students. †



Submitted photos

Some of the school supplies donated for a project to help students in the Huntingdon area. A business and two churches teamed up for a great result.

SCHOOL

(Continued from Page 8)

Families suffering from home fires and the homeless also need these supplies. At first, we were hoping and praying that we could pack at least 10 shoeboxes to start this mission project.

Then, we received a blessing from a business that heard we were collecting and purchasing some school supplies for children living in poverty in the Huntingdon County area. We thought maybe their donation would be a box or two of school supplies. Well, we were totally surprised with a donation of nine boxes containing more than 800 different school supplies. These 800 school supply items were made possible through a generous, anonymous donation from one of these corporations, which enabled both churches to pack more than 30 shoeboxes with school supplies.

At first, what I thought would be a challenge turned into a very rewarding process of both churches working together. One church has packed 32 shoeboxes and the other around 31 shoeboxes. One teacher's aide in the Juniata Valley School District has already located a child who needs a shoebox. One member of St. Matthew Lutheran Church, who works for the Huntingdon School District, will be distributing a shoebox to every elementary school.

The corporation that donated these school supplies will have other items to share with those living in poverty in the Huntingdon area; this corporation only has two desires: to remain anonymous because of competition; and for the donations to remain local.†

The First Christmas

Newly ordained Pastor Laura Waltermire Shares Early Experiences; Excitement for Holidays

Pastor Laura Waltermire, a newly ordained pastor in the Allegheny Synod, is serving St. Mark Lutheran Church, Pleasant Gap. She has provided some insight on the beginning of her journey.

THE LUTHERAN LETTER: When did you start your new call? How have things been going so far?

PASTOR LAURA WALTERMIRE: I started my call at St. Mark Lutheran Church on Aug. 16, a week before my ordination, which took place on Aug. 23 at Messiah Lutheran Church in New Centerville. Things have been going well so far. I am settling in and getting to know everyone in the congregation in my few short months there.

TLL: What has been the biggest challenge since you started?

PLW: My biggest challenge is remembering that I don't need to jump in with both feet and do everything all at once. I can take things slowly and start doing it gradually over time as I get more settled.

TLL: What are you most excited about?

PLW: I am most excited about getting to know the people of the congregation better and walking with them to do the ministries they are passionate about. I am also excited to see where the Holy Spirit leads us in the coming months and years.

TLL: Are you looking forward to celebrating the holiday season at your new church?

PLW: Christmas is one of my favorite holidays because it is a time to spend with friends and family, so I look forward to celebrating the holiday season with the people of St. Mark and learning their traditions. I also look forward to adding new ideas to their traditions.

TLL: Do you have any plans/a special message?

PLW: As I sat and looked out the window, pondering these questions, I started seeing leaves changing colors and feeling a chill in the air, marking the signs of a change in the season on the calendar, and in a few short months, will usher out 2023 and enter 2024.

(See WALTERMIRE Page 13)

The Director's Take

News of Note from the Director of Evangelical Mission

By **PASTOR KEVIN SHOCK**

Assistant to the Bishop & Director of Evangelical Mission

In the last edition I wrote about the Allegheny Synod's new Mission Statement: Inviting people to love one another, and our new Vision Statement: All creation living in harmony with Christ. I'm proud of the engaged and thoughtful work that the Synod Council put into these statements, and my biggest fear about these statements is that they will spend more time in our recycle bins than in our hearts and minds, and mouths and lives. That has been the fate of so many mission and vision statements throughout the history of our church body.

I used to be one of those people who was just fine with tossing out mission and vision statements, because I had seen how unused and useless some had been. I feel much differently now, especially in my role in the Office of the Bishop and with the reality we face in the church and the world. If we do not know what our focus is or what we are about, it becomes much harder for us to live faithfully, especially in community. Some might say that our focus should be Jesus and nothing more. I agree! Our focus on Jesus is the



Pastor Kevin Shock

primary reason that our mission statement has at its core one of his two great commandments. The only problem with a reductive focus like the one above is that I can fool myself into thinking that I can focus on Jesus all by myself without ever practicing his love or proclaiming his good news to others. Such a life of faith runs the risk of allowing me to rely on my own faltering faithfulness than the steadfast and eternal faithfulness of Jesus. He calls us to intentionally and extravagantly love one another.

I recently had a long conversation with one of my longest-lasting friends, Pastor Nathan Pile, whom many of you know as the Executive Director at Sequanota. We were talking about issues in the church, as we often do.

We both believe that the church holds the mystery of solving the problems of division and lack of community in our society.

Therefore, we both wonder why some of the problems of wider society infiltrate the church so deeply.

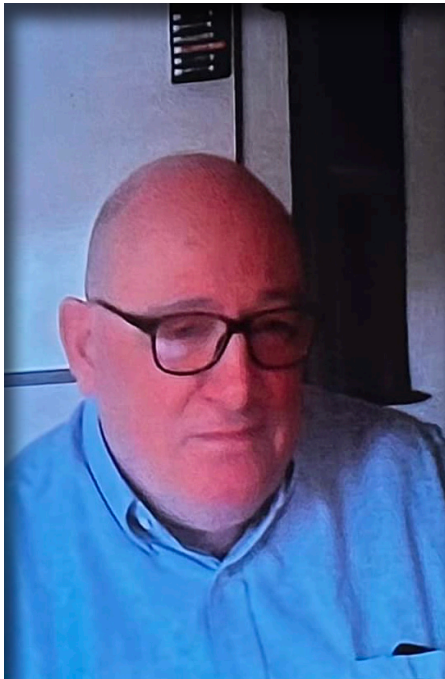
(See DEM Page 16)

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.



The Lutheran sanctuaries in Gatesburg and Pine Hall.



Congratulations to Steve Koths and Christy Harford on positive endorsement decisions from the Allegheny Synod Candidacy Committee. They are earning a Certificate in Theological Studies from United Lutheran Seminary. Both are part of the TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) program.



Above photos, Bishop Paula visited with St. James in Huntingdon Sept. 17 as the congregation celebrated 225 years of ministry — and the paying off of the mortgage. Congratulations on this significant anniversary.

WALTERMIRE

(Continued from Page 10)

These changes also mean a change in the season and the beginning of a new year in the church. This change marks a time for new beginnings and a time of rebirth. As I began, my call reflected on my journey and thought of all the new beginnings I faced and the excitement and fear that accompanied them. Through these new beginnings, I saw how I was reformed, but remained rooted in my faith, remembering who I am and whose I am. So, as we enter the change in the church season and the calendar year, remember Whose birth we celebrate, and with this birth, I also look for the rebirth and new beginnings happening all around and the Easter hope found in every rebirth and new beginning.

TLL: What's your favorite part of celebrating the Christmas season in the Lutheran church?

PLW: Advent and Christmas are some of my favorite seasons in the church. The season of Advent is a time to prepare by watching and waiting for the birth of Christ, and our celebration of Christmas, allowing us to celebrate the joys and sorrow that accompany Christ's journey. But it is the watching and waiting leading up to the Christmas season and celebrations that allows time to slow down and reflect on the changes that will occur for Mary, Joseph, and the whole world in anticipation of celebrating new beginnings and the birth of Christ knowing the Easter hope that accompanies this birth.†



Submitted photo

Pastor Laura Waltermire during her ordination.

BISHOP 1

(Continued from Page 2)

Three goals have been set to achieve this purpose:

- Ordained and lay preachers will be equipped to utilize traditional and non-traditional techniques, including different modes of delivery to develop skills and practices that will communicate the Gospel message in a compelling way.
- Aspiring preachers will be recruited and engaged in a variety of compelling preaching strategies that educate, empower, and support competency in their ministry.
- Existing members of congregations and new community audiences within our three Lutheran partner synods will respond to compelling preaching opportunities and events by integrating the Gospel message into their attitudes, actions, and ministries in daily life.

Part of the proposal for the grant includes employing a program director. The writing team is finalizing the job description for that new position and will publicize it soon. The program director will be a shared staff member in the three Synods as they direct and monitor all the pieces of the program.

You also probably know that along with the Upper Susquehanna Synod, we are working toward another shared staff position. We have held interviews for a shared Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM). The de-

tails of that call are being finalized with the ELCA and the candidate, and we hope to announce and welcome our new shared staff person in the New Year. This is another exciting part of our ministry together.

With the call of a shared DEM, Pastor Kevin will transition to being the full-time Assistant to the Bishop. In the past few weeks, our staff has been discussing who will be the primary contact person from the Office of the Bishop for the different pieces of ministry we do. We've come up with a "working model" for this; meaning, this is what we think we will do, but if it doesn't seem to be working, we will make changes. Because of the way both Pastor Kevin and I work, we both know what's going on in all the categories, but each of us will have specialties, so to speak. Don't be surprised if you hear from one us: "I'm not the primary person for that." You may be referred to the other. Neither of us is trying to skirt whatever question we are being asked; we are trying to set healthy boundaries for our time, and because we trust each other's gifts, we allow each other to lead in our areas of responsibility.

Our shared DEM will have primary responsibility for: Congregational and synodical "right sizing," which means that person will help us discern what things we can let go and what things we need to nurture. It could be buildings, personnel or programs.

(See BISHOP 2 Page 15)

BISHOP 2

(Continued from Page 14)

The shared DEM will work with new ministry starts. I sometimes hear that our synod is not a place for new ministry. That's not true. We have the capacity to start new ministry. I think we haven't tapped into that capacity in a while. This new staff person will help us be open to what might be possible. Congregational partnerships or realignment of existing partnerships also will be a focus for the shared DEM, as well as being attentive to other grants that might support ministry in our synod.

Some of the work that Pastor Kevin will now do will overlap with the shared DEM through leadership. Pastor Kevin's main responsibility will be leadership and leadership development. Those categories include: Candidacy, mobility, transitions (vacancy and interim), first call theological education, lay worship leaders, and bishop's convocation. He also will continue to be involved in congregational and synod vitality and the Reconciliation Team.

We have a gifted group of leaders who have formed the Faith Formation Team and taken the lead on ministries for our synod's youth and young adults. They have done a mission trip, planned a synod youth event (The Weekend), written a wonderful devotional book titled "The Book," which will support the programming at The Weekend, and are looking toward the National Youth

Gathering.

What will I be doing? I sometimes joke, "Everything else!" That's not entirely true. I will continue to support our Sunday supply coordinator. I will remain part of the candidacy committee, attend and support the programming for first call theological education, help to plan bishop's convocation, and assist with transitions. I will continue to be a member of the Reconciliation Team. I am the primary contact for misconduct in our synod, disaffiliation requests, Portico benefits, partner ministries, our companion synod and constitutional questions. I guide the Synod Assembly Planning Committee and attend other committee meetings, including synod council. I am looking forward to convening the advocacy committee. I will oversee the program director for the grant and the shared DEM as well.

Our office manager, Michelle Bossler, in addition to her regular duties, assists us with background check reminders and some of the administrative details of the events we plan, including assembly and bishop's convocation.

As we live into these new roles and responsibilities, we appreciate your patience. We won't always get it right. I continue to be deeply grateful for Pastor Kevin and Michelle. They are a gift to our synod.

I pray that your end-of-year is one of hope and joy. †

Bishop Paula

**FRIENDS, IT IS TIME FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD TO
RECLAIM OUR FOCUS, OUR MISSION, AND TO
REMEMBER WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE ARE ABOUT,**
WRITES ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP PASTOR KEVIN SHOCK

DEM

(Continued from Page 11)

The church also experiences division and breakdown of community, even though we claim to be centered in the One who unites us and who forms us into one holy community.

Pastor Nathan wondered aloud during this conversation whether people have forgotten what it means to be friends.

Of course, I have 800-plus “friends” on Facebook, but I consider most of those people to be acquaintances and little more.

Pastor Nathan also reminded me during our conversation that Jesus in John 15 names his disciples as friends. What could the church — and the world — become if we forced ourselves to see other people as friends, rather than enemies or inconveniences or annoyances?

What could we become if we held friendship as a higher value than our opinions or beliefs or our desire to control things and people?

Friends, it is time for the people of God to reclaim our focus, our mission, and to remember who we are and what we are about.

The leadership of the Alleghe-

ny Synod is confident that it will help us — and the wider world — to focus on inviting people to love one another.

Can you imagine what our world will look like when we arrive at all creation living in harmony with Christ? I promise I won't be offended if our mission and vision statements end up in your recycle bin or if you read them but don't take them to heart.

I pray, however, that you won't put Matthew 22:37-40 in the recycle bin and that you will take it to heart: “(Jesus) said to (the expert in the law), ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Not only do all the Law and the Prophets hang on these commandments, but also our life as the church and the future of our world.

Let's work at loving one another, friends.

Our well-being depends on it. †

BEFORE *you* GO

Autumn Scenes



That's my nephew, Ethan, in the above photo.

His first birthday was in August and he has been a bundle of energy on the family farm since he was born.

My wife and mother-in-law had their hands full trying to get the little guy to take a break from chasing leaves and fall critters for a quick photo. But, when they finally got him to settle in for a few seconds, it turned into a great autumn scene.

I couldn't help but share it with you.

Harvest season is one of my favorite times of year. In the stores, it sort of all gets mixed together in a HallowThanksChristmas smorgasbord of ghouls, turkeys, and Christmas trees.

Now, we can focus on the latter two. I haven't checked if Sirius radio has added their holiday channels yet. When they do, they will provide the music in our vehicles through December.

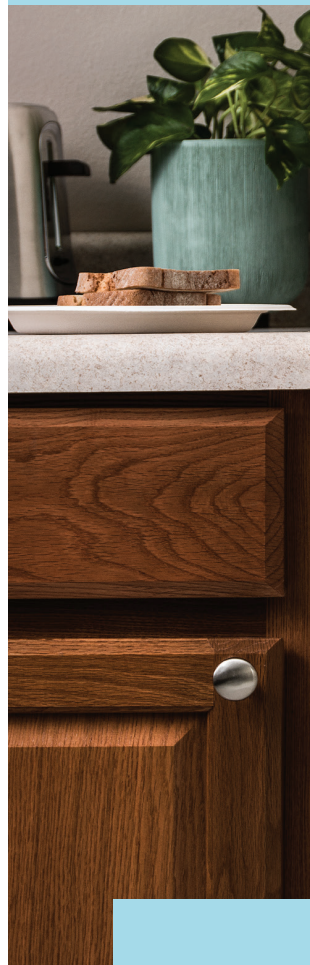
This time of year goes by fast, all jumbled together as it is. Remember to take some time to sit down with your pumpkins, like Ethan, and smile for the camera.

There's a lot to enjoy this time of year.

Thanks for reading,

— Rick Kazmer

In addition to paying interest, MIF Term Investments also pay it forward.



Lutheran Church of Christ the Redeemer in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Used an MIF loan to remodel the low-income apartments the church rents to Togolese refugees, thus making their new homes a whole lot homier.

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