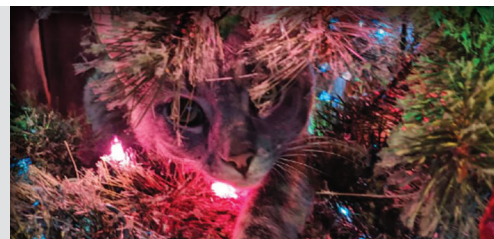


The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

Digital



The Holiday Edition

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Staff photo by Courtney Kazmer

The Somerset County Courthouse Christmas tree shining brightly during the 2019 holiday season.

THE SEASON OF ANGELS

PASTOR NANCY HOOVER

Grace Lutheran Church, Johnstown

When did you first hear the Good News? The good news that those shepherds heard so many years ago — that a child had been born, a child from God, a child that would save the world, that would save you?

Did you first hear about Jesus when you were a young child from your mom or dad, from a grandparent? Did you first learn about Him in Sunday School from a teacher you still remember? From a friend? From a sermon? When you were very young or older?

(See **ANGELS 1**, Page 9)

More than anything else, I would say that this time of pandemic and the associated unrest that it brings has caused me to reflect and wonder. ¶ I wonder if we as a people and culture have become so engrossed in the idea that our identity is associated with what we do, that we lose sight of who we are? ¶ After all, we believe in a God who chooses to be identified as I am, a state of being. Current events have called us to be still, to let go of what we believe must be, and to trust in others, leaders, doctors and scientists, for the well-being of others. I wonder if we truly believe and put into practice the things we confess. (See **FARON**, Page 5)

PASTOR FARON JOHNSON

Saint David's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Davidsville



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

The LUTHERAN Letter

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OUR MISSION

Called by God to be one in Christ: we worship, grow in faith and serve all people.

OUR VISION

Because Christ is here... We are actively engaging in God's work and sharing the Gospel as the Holy Spirit increases the followers of Jesus 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.)

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It's Important to Keep Things in Perspective

Dear friends,

May God's grace and peace be with you.

A few weeks ago, I read an article from the Religion News Service entitled, "The Pandemic at six months: Welcome to the disillusionment phase".

The article talks about the phases of recovery in times of disaster. The article states how when a disaster strikes (and this pandemic is a disaster) there is an initial burst of energy as people are trying to cope with the new situation. Following this there is usually an outpouring of altruism as those impacted care for community and neighbor.

Once the situation begins to settle there comes a "honeymoon" phase where people tend to become optimistic.

People feel they will get through the challenge they are facing. However, around six months after a disaster begins people find themselves in the disillusionment phase.

This is the time when we start to realize we are running a marathon and not a sprint.

We face the reality that the impact of the disaster is not going to just miraculously vanish. We realize that this is going to take longer to get through, and, that things will not be "normal" for a long time.

Unfortunately, this disillusionment phase can bring about increased anxiety, depression and substance abuse. It seems that we humans can push through for about six months, after that we hit a wall. Our emotional reserves get worn out. We are seven months into this pandemic. We have adjusted to so many

changes. We have kept our heads above water, but after a while we get tired.

We are very much in the midst of this disillusionment phase. I, like most people I speak with, am ready for this to be over. I long for some sense of normal. I want to be able to meet with people in person, to hug my friends, and to worship without worry. I suspect you find yourself in a similar situation.

If you find yourself in this situation that is OK. You are not alone.

We are all feeling the strain of life under this virus.

Part of what is going on is grief. We don't want to be in this situation. We grieve for what was. We want to go back to normal, but we know that things may never be normal again. As we saw the world change after 9/11, COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on how we do things moving forward.

It is OK to not like this situation and wish it was better. The good news is that this disillusionment phase doesn't last forever.

The experts say that after this time of sadness comes a phase of reconstruction.

This is the time when we realize that we are in this for the long haul and we are to be about the business of rebuilding. There is energy and hope that comes with it.

Hope is around the corner. We are going to get through this.

Right now it is hard. If you are finding it especially hard, don't think you are the only person who is struggling.

Many of us are. Reach out to friends, colleagues or family in this time.

(See **BISHOP**, Page 3)

BISHOP

(Continued from Page 2)

Talk about what you are feeling. Reach out to your pastor or deacon, they are there for you. If you are struggling, please don't sit in the silence of pain and hold it yourself. God has placed people around you to walk with you in this time. It is hard on all of us, but we will get through it together.

Please know that I am praying for you. In the midst of this pandemic we are also dealing with change coming in our country and in our synod. Perhaps these transitions are adding to your stress and anxiety in this time. I would invite you to join me in praying in these months as we move forward. Even in the midst of this time of disillusionment our Heavenly Father hears us and listens to our prayers.

I have found that when I feel out of control, the best thing I can do is turn to Jesus and ask him to lead me, guide me and remind me that he is in control no matter how things look in this world.

By the time you read this, we will either be about to have, or have just had, a major election in our country. I would first ask you to join me in praying for our country. Pray that God will raise up the

people who will best serve God's purpose in this world. Pray that God will shape our leaders to be people who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Pray that the Holy Spirit will transform the hearts of those who lead to be true servants who put the needs of others before themselves.

Pray that our leaders will follow God's directive to care for the most vulnerable and those our Lord Jesus calls the "least of these among you who are members of my family". Join me in praying for our country that no matter who is elected we might come together in unity.

We have so much divisiveness right now. Rather than trying to work together for the good of all, it seems that our leaders can sometimes oppose something simply because the other side likes it. Pray that God will work to bring us together. Together for the sake of our country, but also for the sake of this world in which the U.S. plays such a vital role. May God lead us always forward. I also ask you to pray for the transition we will have in our Allegheny Synod.

We will be calling our next synod bishop at our assembly in June 2021. It is im-

portant that we are praying about this call as a synod. We have formed a Synod Prayer and Discernment team that will help us keep this process until our assembly.

The team is sending out monthly prayer resources to our leaders and congregations. These include prayers for the assembly for use in worship, and prayer resources for individuals. I ask you to please keep the call of the new bishop in your prayers this year. Pray that the Holy Spirit will walk with us in the Allegheny Synod. God already knows who the next bishop of the Allegheny Synod will be. We are invited to be part of praying for the transition, for our next bishop and for those who will be listening to the guidance of the Spirit when we reach the time of the election. Please join me in praying for this process and for our synod. We continue in this unusual time, but God is with us and always will be. Let us pray together knowing that our Lord hears us. Let us pray together, because when we turn our hearts to our God we are blessed even as we ask for God's blessing.

In Christ, Bishop Michael †

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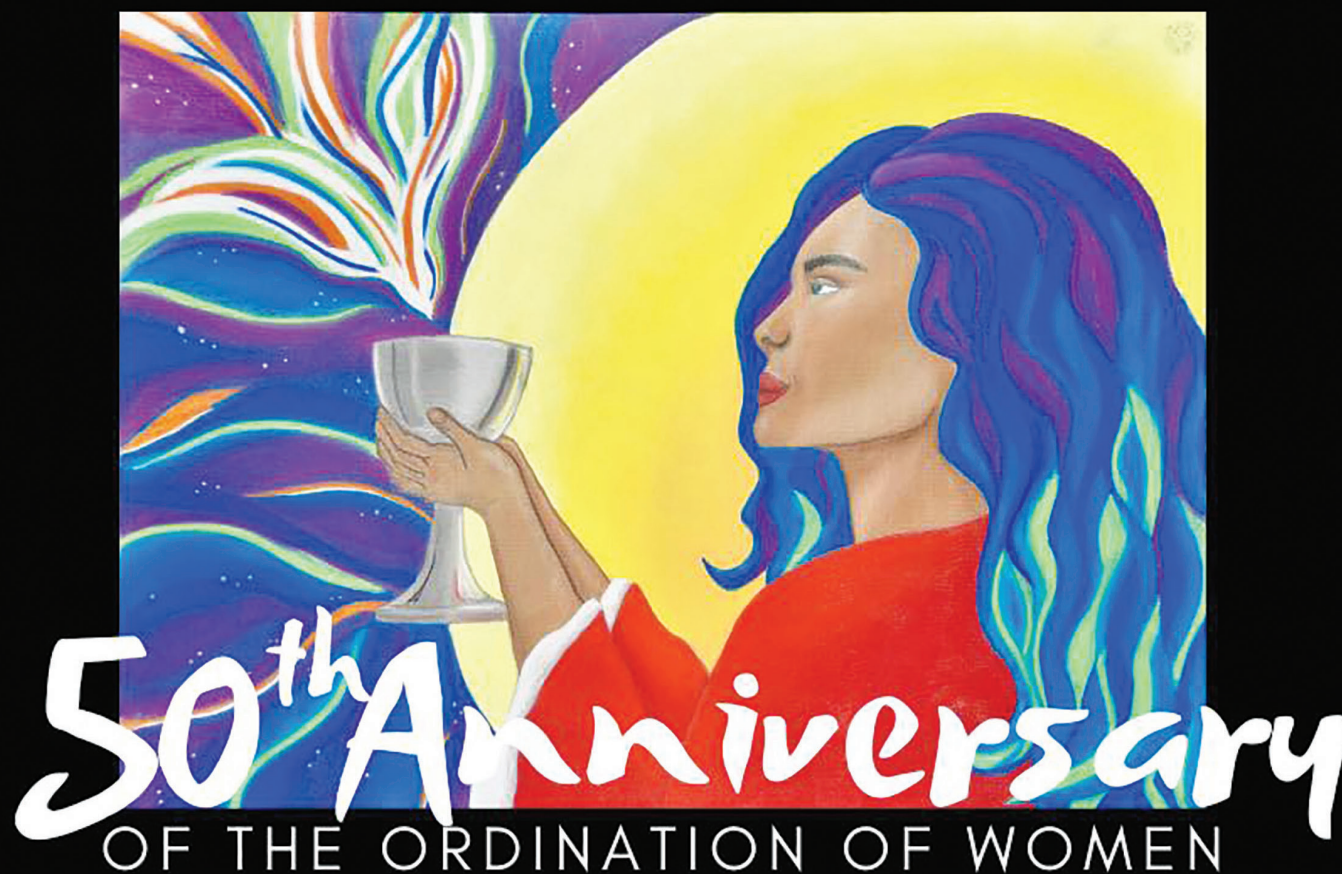
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Submitted photo

This is artwork created by Pastor Dena Gable as part of celebrations recognizing key anniversaries in the Lutheran faith.

Artwork Honors Women, Other Milestones in Lutheran Faith

PASTOR DENA GABLE

Lavansville-Bakersville Lutheran Parish

This work, titled “The New Covenant,” was created for the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Lutheran tradition in the United States.

This year we celebrate that milestone, along with the 40th anniversary of the ordination of a woman of color, and the 10th anniversary of the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people as ordained ministers in the ELCA.

The Lutheran Letter has been celebrating the ordination of Pastor Elizabeth Platz in each issue during the last year. She was ordained in The Lutheran Church of America on Nov. 21, 1970.

As we began planning for the anniversary, the synod anniversary



planning committee thought it would be appropriate to have artwork in celebration of the occasion to use at events and for publicizing the anniversary throughout the year. As an artist and a pastor, I embraced the opportunity to create this work as a meaningful reflection of the calling God has placed upon my life, and the lives of many women. It depicts the vibrancy of the Holy Spirit at work as a woman presides at Holy Communion, and the light that is reflected through the holiness of this calling.

I have a bachelor's degree in

fine art from Bemidji State University in Bemidji, Minnesota, and a master's degree from Wartburg Theological Seminary. I have been called to full-time ministry and that is where I dedicate my time, which means I don't spend a lot of time producing artwork. But being an artist is still an important part of my identity.

I typically work in oil paints, but sometimes use other media. This particular work is pastels.

I connect to the arts community as a member of the Somerset County Artists Association, a talented group of amateur and professional artists.

The original work was to be displayed at Laurel Arts in the Somerset County Artist's Association Member Show Sept. 15-Oct. 22. †

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: Christ Lutheran, Dubois

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



Somerset County Churches Continue to Help Community During COVID

By **RICK KAZMER**

The Lutheran Letter Editor

Pastor John Barichivich had only been with Friedens Lutheran Church for a handful of months when the COVID-19 crisis started.

But the disaster provided Barichivich and his congregation with the opportunity to start a food program that he said will likely continue after the pandemic has passed.

"The economic need is going to (remain) when the government says COVID is done with," he said.

The church has implemented a drive-thru food donation service under the church's portico.

People who need food drive through and pick up what they need.

Barichivich said people also drive through and drop off donations.

Church members, other community members and even the Dollar General

across the street from the church have helped with donations.

It is available around the clock daily.

"I do know it is well used," Barichivich said.

It's part of a myriad of church-based projects that have popped up around the county during the pandemic.

For New Centerville Lutheran Parish stitcher Debora Rose, making masks for friends and family aligned with her passion for sewing.

"I do enjoy sewing," she said, adding that she has made about 100 masks. Most of them are white.

But she also made some Pittsburgh Steelers and Penn State face coverings.

Rose also sews quilts for Lutheran World Relief, an organization that helps people around the globe, "regardless of race, religion or nationality," according to the group's website.

Rose said each mask takes about 30 minutes to complete. She has another

100 nearly complete.

"I think the need has pretty well been met," she said, noting that an extra 100 are ready in case demand should pick up.

Back at Friedens, the church is also helping to fill the void for children through a backpack meal program.

On Thursdays parents can pick up a meal pack for their kids to help get them through the weekend.

Pop-Tarts, macaroni and cheese and other food that is easily prepared are part of the packages.

Parents drive up to the kitchen area and the food is given to them there, Barichivich said.

The pastor said he is proud of how his congregation has stepped up to fill a need that he feels will be around for a while.

He anticipates being able to help.

"As long as the need continues," he said. †

FARON

(Continued from Page 1)

We are taught to love our neighbors as ourselves. Would we wish our neighbors to put us in jeopardy? Would we wish to become ill? And if not, it would seem that we would not wish to be the cause of anyone else's suffering.

The story of Cain and Abel has God asking Cain where Abel is located.

Cain replies with a question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And yet some would say the rest of the Bible says that we surely are the keepers of each other.

We reach out to friends and neighbors in charitable acts to clothe and feed others. Perhaps the challenge of this time is that it is so counterintuitive — for we protect others and care for others in a time of pandemic in what we do not do —

not going out unless it is absolutely necessary, not going out without a mask, not exposing ourselves to large gatherings.

It's difficult, for we are asked to put our lives on hold, to forego all the things we would want or regularly do as a way of loving and caring for others.

Yes, this time has been and continues to be a challenge for many, for we are asked to do more than proclaim love, but we are asked to live out that very love by letting go of living our lives in the way we choose. It reminds me of Jesus stating, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Loving our neighbors reflects the love that we have for God.

This is a time of trust, a time of patience, a time of caring and a time of love. This time with God is not lost. †

Christy Harford is Returning to the Classroom After Three Decades

RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

Christy L. Harford's path to seminary was driven by both interest and necessity.

The member of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Westmont is studying in the Theological Education for Emerging Ministry (TEEM) program at the United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg.

She started her interest in the Discerning Your Discipleship program. It is now called the Ignite Program.

"I began that program to learn more about the Bible and the history of the church. My congregation was also without a minister at that time and I thought that would be a way for me to assist with worship services. After meeting and becoming friends with one of my DYD classmates, we began to discuss the possibility of attending seminary. I knew in my heart that I wanted to be a pastor, I just didn't know when. When I started to supply more frequently at Trinity-Sidman, I knew that the Holy Spirit was guiding me and through prayer, talking with my pastor, and my family, I knew in my heart that this was the right time," she said.

She expects to graduate in 2025.

Harford is the daughter of David and Rose Harford

"I am an only child, but I have numerous cousins that I am very close to. I grew up in a close-knit family and I am lucky to have their love and support," she said.

Becoming a pastor is a second career path for Harford. She has an associates in arts degree. She has been a medical assistant for 31 years.

She said that she thinks her past experiences will be helpful when she becomes a pastor.



Christy L. Harford

"I think my experience will help me because I work with people on a daily basis, offering comfort to those who are sick, comforting the grieving and also the joys of having children present in the office," she said.

She said she is nervous about returning to school, as it has been more than three decades since she last studied in a classroom setting.

But Harford said that she is looking forward to the education.

"I know I said I was nervous about returning to school, but at the same time, I cannot wait to return to begin to learn so much more about the Bible, ministry, theology and church history," she said.

She looks forward to the day when she will be at the pulpit, bringing the word of God to people.

She said she has plenty of supporters.

"I would also have to say the support and encouragement I have received from



HEEDING THE CALL

This is part of a series of features highlighting seminarians and their journey.

my family, friends and my home church has really helped in my discernment process," she said.

When she is not studying, Harford said she enjoys hockey games, both local and professional. Her family has attended local hockey

games for about 25 years, she said.

Her favorite Bible verse is Psalm 23. It reads, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

"This has been one of my favorites for many reasons. First, this was one of my grandma Meyer's favorites, so when I hear it I think of her. Second, it reminds us that God is with us always. He is with us no matter what we are going through and He will be with us to comfort us and love us always," Harford said. †



5ive QUESTIONS

with New Creation Preschool



Submitted photo

A scene from New Creation Preschool's drive-up graduation earlier this year. The new school year is underway.

Pastor Christine Roe, of the First Faith Lutheran Cooperative, and Doris Souder, of the New Creation Preschool, answered some questions about how the preschool held graduation earlier this year. There were around 40 kids enrolled last year. Roe answered the questions after talking with Souder and some other preschool organizers.

1: Can you describe the process of figuring out how to hold graduation during the pandemic? how did you arrive at the plan you made?

A: I had seen people have drive-by birthday parties during the pandemic, and I called Doris one day and shared with her the idea of honoring the preschoolers with a drive-up graduation ceremony for each graduate at their individual homes. Immediately Doris responded with an enthusiastic, "Yes!"

2: Can you describe how it worked?

A: Doris and Kim Stiles called each graduating family to arrange for the time we would come by their house. Initially I had thought 6-8 p.m. would work, but in the end we began at 5 p.m. and concluded the drive-up graduating ceremony by 9 p.m. There were four of us in one vehicle (Souder, preschool director; Stiles, preschool teacher; Karen Snowden Wood, preschool volunteer; and Roe) with each of us wearing a mask. I was the chauffer, Doris had the list of the graduates, and Kim and Karen helped to navigate our way around through several towns. We had gift bags filled up for each graduate. For four hours we drove around to each child's home. At each home we got out of the car, and each child was presented with their diploma and gift. We celebrated each child and their families with shouts and claps of joy for their achievements.

3: How did parents respond?

A: We honored nearly all 26 graduates. There were two or three who had plans and were away on this particular night. When we arrived at the homes there were parents who shared with us that their children had been waiting for us to come, looking out the window for us. All the parents expressed their appreciation for the drive-up graduation ceremony. We were greeted with smiles that lit up the night and melted our hearts! Some of the children shared gifts of individually drawn pictures, flowers, candy and large poster board signs welcoming us.

4: What was the biggest challenge?

A: About halfway through the night it began to rain, and the temperature dropped. So, we got wet and our shoes became drenched and muddy.

5: What's the game plan for the current preschool season?

A: For the first time in 13 years New Creation Preschool will not be open for September. We are going to be reassessing in the fall. †

Home & Garden

Tales From a Decoration Addict

COURTNEY KAZMER

Lutheran Letter Home & Garden Editor



In February a friend of mine gave me a ton of Christmas decorations that she wasn't using anymore — and I mean a ton.

My eyes gleamed with excitement as I dug through each tote, box and bag as they were loaded into my Jeep.

I am a Christmas decoration junkie.

Rick's eyes, however, were not gleaming. He was wondering where all the stuff was going to go in our house.

When we brought all of it home I began to look at all of the treasures. Snowmen, wreaths and angels are just a few of the goodies inside the packages. It was like Christmas all over again.

As I am writing this, there are two more weeks left in October. So in a few weeks I will begin to decorate for Christmas 2020.

And what a year it has been.

I look forward to the cheer the holidays will bring.

I always decorate for Christmas during the first week of November.

Beforehand, visions of ornaments, garland and Christmas trees are dancing through my head.

I can't wait to create a holiday wonderland in our house this year. It's a good year to bring out some of the old, forgotten decorations that might have been sitting in your attic or basement for years.

If you don't have anywhere to put the decorations, I am sure there is a holiday ornament addict somewhere in your town who would be happy to add to their stash.

Merry Christmas! †



Staff photos by Courtney Kazmer

Above, and at right, some of the new editions to the holiday decorations.

ANGELS 1

(Continued from Page 1)

Or maybe you're like me and can't remember a time when you did not know the name of Jesus.

Most likely none of us heard the news from an angel in the sky like the shepherds did.

But whoever it was who first told us about Jesus, about the Christ child, that person surely was an angel to us, a messenger from God. When we hear the good news of Christ and realize what that good news is all about — that we are loved by the creator of the universe, no matter what, and that our sins, our wrongdoings are forgiven and forgotten by God, when we know these things, our lives change forever. Nothing is ever the same again.

The power of God begins to work within us, and miraculous things begin to happen within our hearts and minds and spirits. And that is the very reason that we must be like the angels, like messengers, sharing the good news, so that all the world might know that God has sent a savior, God's very own son, to help us through the bad times, to cure our illnesses, to comfort our grieving spirits, to take our hands and lead us up the mountains and through the valleys of life. And there is no better time to talk about the good news of Christ, the real meaning of Christmas, than right now, when the world needs a bit of good news. Just as someone long ago told us about Jesus, it's our turn now. And just as the shepherds

left the stable and returned to the hillside where they lived and worked and continued to proclaim the glory of God and His awesome gift to humankind, we, too, as we leave the comfort of a church building or the company of Christian friends, like the shepherds, we must re-enter the world and continue to proclaim God's Word. There will be times when we find ourselves living in the shadows of Christ's love, feeling that we are no longer worshipping at the cradle of his peace and safety, but straying off into the hillsides of loneliness and sadness. But just like the shepherds, we have a mission to share with all the world the wonder of Christ in good times and bad, happy and sad.

(See **ANGELS 2**, Page 11)

Wishing you
a Happy
Thanksgiving

and

An Advent filled with
Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace.

from All of Us at



alsm.org | 800.400.2285



Submitted photos

Here are some homemade cards and masks donated to ALSM residents.

ALSM Wants to Thank Readers

ALLEGHENY LUTHERAN SOCIAL MINISTRIES

The staff, the residents/clients and the board of trustees of Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries expresses our gratitude to each of you and the congregations of the Allegheny Synod.

Over the past several months, ALSM and our senior living campuses, The Lutheran Home at Hollidaysburg, The Lutheran Home at Johnstown and The Oaks at Pleasant Gap, and our community programs, have been touched by your kindness.

You responded to the call for assistance with your prayerful and financial support of ALSM. The handmade masks for the residents, the cards and greetings to residents and staff team members are all appreciated. Your support has been overwhelming.

You are a blessing to Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries. Thank you! †

God's Work. Our Hands.



Moxham Lutheran Church teamed up with the Johnstown NAACP and the Grove Avenue United Methodist Church CCW (Church and Community Worker) to host a voter registration event in Moxham on Sept. 12 to celebrate "God's work. Our hands." In addition to voter registration, there was an opportunity to speak with a census worker. Moxham Lutheran's Faith Community Nurse, Carol Harding, in conjunction with Saint Francis University nursing students, provided information on diabetes. The rest of the crew dished out the hot dogs for the community. Pictured are volunteers who helped during the event.

Submitted photos



First Lutheran Lands Well-Credentialed Organist

(Editor's note: This article was first published in the Somerset Daily American. It is being reprinted here with permission.)

THE LUTHERAN LETTER

The former director of sacred music for a large Illinois church has become the organist of First Lutheran Church in downtown Johnstown.

Matthew S. Sprinkle, who grew up here, said he left his position of seven years with SS. Peter and Paul Roman Catholic Church, Naperville, in a cutback related to COVID-19. He said this was an opportunity to spend some time back home with his mother.

"This is a remarkable opportunity for First Lutheran," said Howard Bennett, chairman of the organist call committee.

Sprinkle went to Greater Johnstown Vo-Tech and studied with Dr. Jeffrey R. Pannebaker when he was minister of education and music at First Lutheran.

Sprinkle has a degree in music from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a master's in Gregorian chant and choral music from the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. In 1994-95 he studied organ improvisation with Dr. Gerre Hancock at Juilliard School of Music in New York City.

In 1996 he became director of liturgy

"This is a remarkable opportunity for First Lutheran."

and sacred music for the Church of the Holy Redeemer, Kensington, Maryland. In 2000 he served as the interim director of liturgical music and organist at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

From 2004-12 he was director of sacred music at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, Avondale, Arizona. During that time he also was director of music for the Diocese of Phoenix. In 2012 he joined a staff of about 35 at SS. Peter and Paul. He was organist and choir director and held various assignments at the parish school. He also was artistic director of the parish concert series. He has composed or arranged numerous liturgical pieces.

In 2014 he led the parish's choir and Choral Scholars on a pilgrimage to Rome, where they made numerous appearances, including the Vigil Mass for the Canonization of Saints John XXIII and Paul II.

Sprinkle is a member of the Liturgical Music Commission of the Archdiocese of Washington.

He has lectured for that archdiocese and the dioceses of Phoenix and Altoona/Johnstown. He holds an adjunct position with Oberlin College in the development of organ students. He has numerous professional affiliations. †

ANGELS 2

(Continued from Page 9)

As we think back again to the time when we first learned of the Christ child and that person who shared the story with us, what did we hear? What did we see? Was the message in words only or also in deeds? Did they have stories about a child who would become a king, a man who walked on water, who fed a hungry crowd with a few loaves of bread and a few fish, someone who healed people, made them well again, who gave them peace, a righteous man who threw the moneychangers from the temple. Were there stories about a man who taught about the love of God and the love we should have for one another, who ate with sinners, and befriended the unwanted and unloved, a man who raised the dead to life again and who would himself die for the people he loved and then rise again through the power of God the Father. Aren't these the stories we heard from those who shared the good news with us? Even though our lives might not be what we hoped for, we need to trust God to help us through the grief and bring us back into the light of life.

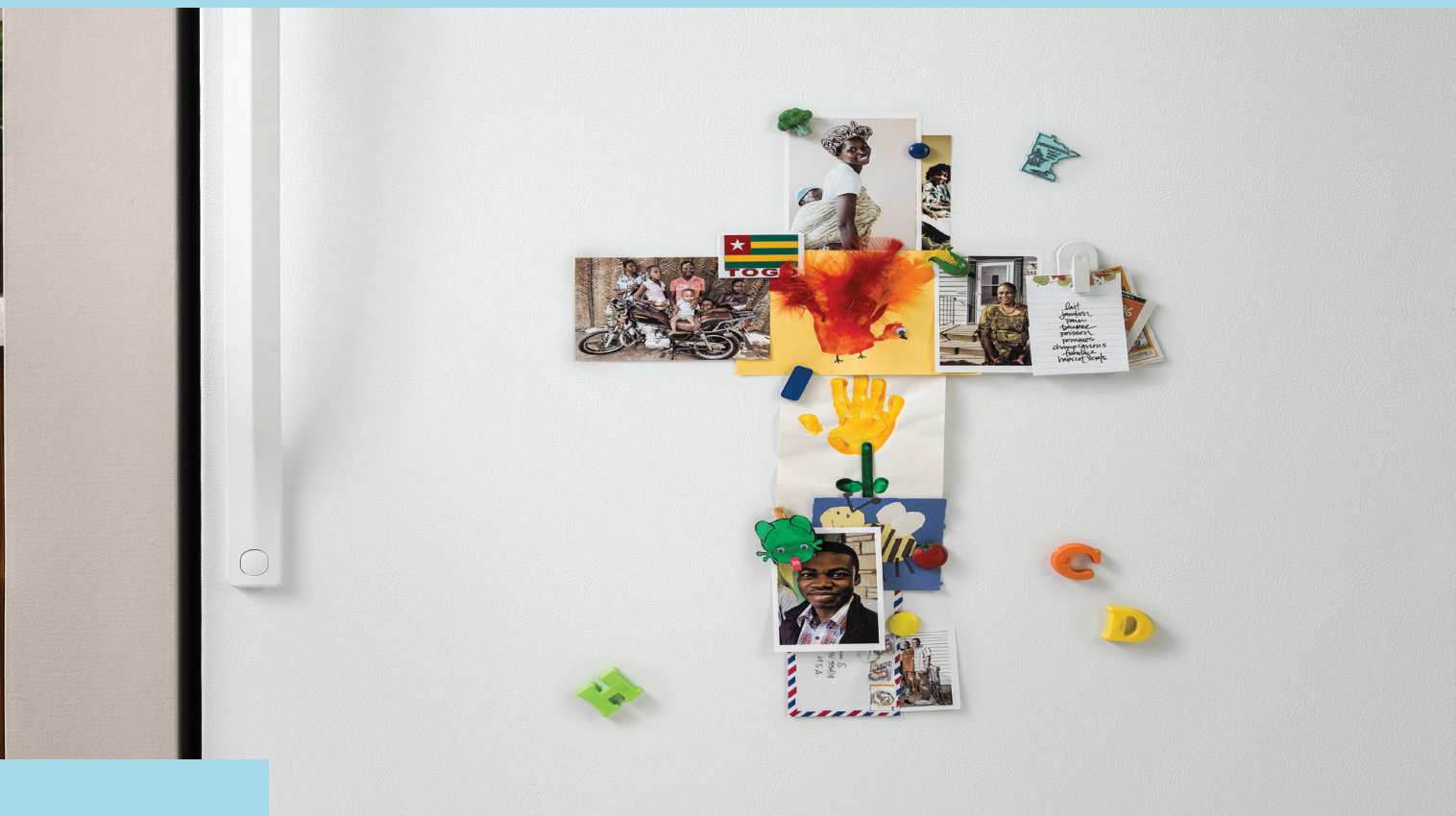
Let go of the fear and anxiety. Trust in the God who sent that child to be born in a manger to live among us so that he could understand first-hand how it feels to be lonely and hurting, uncertain and afraid. From the baby in the manger who saves us all, to the hosts of angels on high, from the humble shepherds to the three kings from the east, the story of Christmas is a story that forever warms our hearts and gives us hope, from the time we first heard it from the angels in our own lives even to this very moment. And years from now during another Christmas season far, far in the future, if someone should ask the question again, as we were asked just now — "When did you first hear the story of Jesus?" — what joy it would be if we, each one of us, would be remembered as those messengers, those angels, who told the story of the Christ child. †

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