

The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

Digital



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Celebrating 20 YEARS

Pictured are Assistant to the Bishop, Pastor Traci Marriot, Bishop Kevin Shock, and synod office manager Michelle Bossler. They are looking at a copy of the first Lutheran Letter.



Photo by Pastor MJ Irvin-Stellabotte

Bishop Emeritus Pile Reflects on The Lutheran Letter's milestone, **Page 8**

A Note From the Editor, **Page 28**

Calvin Institute Spotlights Rural Churches

Shepherd's Hoffman Featured

By JOAN HUYSER-HONIG

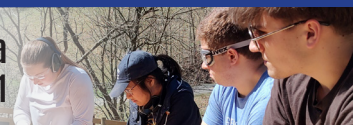
(Editor's note: This is part of a story about rural ministry published by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. It is being republished in The Lutheran Letter with permission.)

(See **RURAL 1, Page 4**)



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

Spring Break with a purpose, **PAGE 21**



The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

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

Hours: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday to Friday
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EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor Rick Kazmer

Copy Editor Courtney Kazmer

Email: r9remzak@hotmail.com

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

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CONTACT SYNOD STAFF

Office Manager Michelle Bossler:

Michelle.Bossler@AlleghenySynod.com

Bishop Kevin Shock: kevin.shock@alleghenysynod.com

Director for Evangelical Mission, Deacon Sue Ellen Spotts: SueEllen.Spotts@elca.org

Assistants to the Bishop: Pastors Marty Jo Irvin-Stellabotte: pastormartyjo@gmail.com; Tyler Graham: rev-tgraham@outlook.com; Traci Marriott: revtracimariott@gmail.com; Deacon Alicia Anderson: ara2psu@gmail.com

Go Tell It Initiative Director John Kratz: director@allegheny-synod.com



Allegheny Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

What is Old, and What is New

In this 20th anniversary edition of the Lutheran Letter there is a picture of a few of us looking at the first edition.

If it looks like I'm having fun, I am! In that first edition are pictures of beloved people when they were a little younger and, in some cases, still on this side of Christ's eternal life.

The clergy and laity were writing about events happening in congregations throughout the synod and about items of interest to Lutherans in these hills and valleys.

The church and the world looked significantly different in the time of that first edition. When it was published, I was just about to graduate seminary and was looking forward to a call here in the Allegheny Synod. For me, the prospect of public ministry was new and exciting.

For many of us, the church was still flourishing.

Maybe it was not as big or full as it had been, yet it was still big enough that we could safely ignore some of the declining trends that were happening.

Since the day that I perused those yellowing pages of the first Lutheran Letter, I've had the opportunity to see some other relics of the past.



Bishop Shock

(See MEMORIES, Page 28)

WE are LUTHERAN

Ultra-marathoner Scott Lantz Details Grueling Races



Scott Lantz at the Rabid Raccoon 100 in Beaver Falls. READ THE STORY ON PAGE 6.

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

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RURAL 1

(Continued from Page 1)

Rural populations are declining in many parts of the United States and Canada. This change has pushed many denominations and congregations to find new ways to provide preachers and pastors for rural churches.

Most land in the U.S. and Canada is classified as rural. But only a small share of the countries' people live there – about 15% to 18% in Canada and 20% to 24% in the U.S. You might picture a rural church as a small building with a tall steeple in the middle of farmland. But most rural residents are not farmers.

Many rural congregations have declining membership and tight budgets. Many cannot afford a full-time, seminary-trained pastor. And, just as rural communities differ, there's no single way to lead or pastor a rural church. The rural Allegheny Synod is an example of this type of region. Lay leader Ben Hoffman, from Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Karthaus, was recently featured in a story discussing rural contexts, rural pastoring models, congregational engagement, preaching and worship planning, and recommended resources.

Hoffman, who is also a business analyst for information technology at Penn State University, lives with his family of six on a 180-acre farm.

Hoffman said that his part of the synod is mostly very small communities with a few larger communities

sprinkled in – much like the rest of the synod. The top employers are Penn State (an hour's drive from Karthaus), local schools, and health care facilities. There's little agriculture, a few small-scale manufacturers, and a few coal mines. Two local correctional facilities recently closed.

“The population is older because there's been a lot of younger brain drain in the last 25 years,” Hoffman said. “My wife and I wanted to stay here, so we commuted to Penn State for 11 years, but now work from home. Our area has a bit of a rural hopelessness feel, but not as bad as in West Virginia or eastern Kentucky. Our quaint rural towns have some unexpected homelessness and drug problems.

“Our area is 90% to 95% white, other than a few little pockets of people of color. The local Lutheran congregations are more conservative than the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) as a whole and are a bit more educated than the surrounding population. When I served the Clearfield church after its pastor retired, I had some physicians and a lawyer in the congregation.”

The Allegheny Synod includes 97 churches in seven counties. Many are in transition between pastors. About 60% of ELCA congregations average fewer than 50 people in worship, and 45% of all ELCA congregations can't afford a full-time pastor.

(See RURAL 2, Page 5)

RURAL 2

(Continued from Page 4)

The synod cooperated with Faith+Lead of Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota) to create free online training for people to become unordained authorized lay worship leaders (ALWL). Many ALWLs have retired from other jobs, while some, like Hoffman, still have another job. Other ELCA synods follow a synod-authorized minister (SAM) model for unordained lay leaders without seminary degrees.

“The ALWL model is evolving in our synod, which is being proactive in seeing the future as lay-led,” Hoffman said. “I served twice a month as pulpit supply for a year at St. John Lutheran Church in Clearfield, the county seat of Clearfield County. There, I worked with the congregation to plan services that flowed well for Christmas Eve and Easter. Some lay leaders end up serving the same congregation regularly. In my first 15 months, I served as an ALWL in eight ELCA congre-



Hoffman

gations and as a guest speaker in two non-ELCA churches.

“If churches have fellowship before or after worship, I attend, because I really want to talk with them. We ALWLs may be their only interface with the wider church. When you serve more regularly, you get to know them and can address issues.”

The Allegheny Synod pays ALWLs an honorarium and mileage. ALWL responsibilities have grown, so Hoffman is advocating for them to be put on either the synod payroll or a congregation’s payroll if they serve it regularly.

“Taxes aren’t withheld from 1099 forms so can result in an expected tax

burden at the end of the year,” he said. He’s also leading an initiative in Clearfield County for churches to join to call a full-time pastor to be put in rotation with lay leaders.

Most churches Hoffman serves have between 20 and 40 worshipers on a Sunday, though there can be as many as 110 to 130 in larger churches on Christmas and Easter. Some churches are in areas with no broadband internet. Hoffman has preached in two that haven’t had a pastor for decades and feel adrift.

“Many congregations are aging, with declining membership and finances. They are 15 to 30 miles away from the next church and feel alone,” Hoffman said. “I preach about being a Gospel witness to help folks rise out of hopelessness. I’ve been president of my local church council, am on the local cemetery board, and just finished a term as township supervisor.”

(See RURAL 3, Page 7)

'Every Marathon is an Adventure'

By RICK KAZMER

Editor

Altoona runner Scott Lantz discovers a new story on every run.

Lantz, 47, a member of Geeseytown Lutheran Church, is a competitive, long-distance runner.

"Every marathon is an adventure; every ultramarathon is an epic adventure. Also, there is something enjoyable about crossing the finish line after you just suffered to get there," Lantz said by email.

He has participated in some grueling runs, including a 100-mile event, which he said was the hardest. He finished that one with nine minutes to spare before disqualification.

"I hadn't slept for 37 hours. My body was a complete mess. But then one of the people from the race placed a buckle in my hand and I started to tear up," Lantz said.

Some inspiration from his pacer, who joined him at mile 91, helped to get Lantz over the top.

"At mile 94, I was behind on time and he gave me a speech: 'This is the last lap! If you leave this course with anything left in the tank you're wrong!' I started running again," he said.

Lantz's training is usually about five to 10 hours a week. His wife, Amy, often comes for support at the aid station to help keep her husband in the race. When Amy didn't go along on a 32-mile run, Lantz said he near-



Submitted photo

Scott Lantz and his running buddy, Savannah.

ly cramped up and pulled out of the ultramarathon.

"I almost fell out," he said.

For Lantz, running became a life-changing hobby. He served in the Army, but afterward gained some weight and hit 306 pounds. At 5 feet, 8 inches in height, he knew the scale reading wasn't healthy, and he started experiencing health problems.

He lost 114 pounds with diet and exercise.

"I started running again and took it to ridiculous levels," he said.

(See LANTZ, Page 7

LANTZ

(Continued from Page 6)

Lantz and his wife have three cats and two dogs. Their husky, Savannah, is his running buddy. He started attending church when he was 9 and enjoys sunrise services. His favorite Bible verses are John 3:16 and 3:17, which are inspiring during the toughest stretches of endurance racing.

As for racing, expect Lantz to continue hitting the circuit.

“I like it because every race has a story,” he said.

your earliest memory of going to a Lutheran church?

SCOTT LANTZ: I remember going to Lutheran when I was 9. My mom took us to a Brethren church before that.

TLL: What would you say to someone looking to attend a Lutheran church for the first time?

SL: Give us a chance, you might find a family you belong in.

TLL: What have you been praying for the most lately?

SL: I feel it’s always most important for me to make sure I thank God for everything he has given me. †

WE ARE LUTHERAN

THE LUTHERAN LETTER: What’s

RURAL 3

(Continued from Page 5)

ALWL has provided Hoffman with the ability to serve congregations in meaningful ways.

“I can distribute communion with

elements that have been pre-consecrated by an ordained person – sometimes six months earlier. We lay leaders use different language for communion than ordained ministers do. Although ELCA advised in the 1980s that communion should be weekly, many congregations celebrate it only on first Sundays and feast days,” Hoffman said.

The Calvin Institute’s story included other rural lay people with insight from their experiences at congregations from around the country and in Canada. Their stories can be read [here](#). †

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CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

‘Wherever it is read, The Lutheran Letter is making a difference’

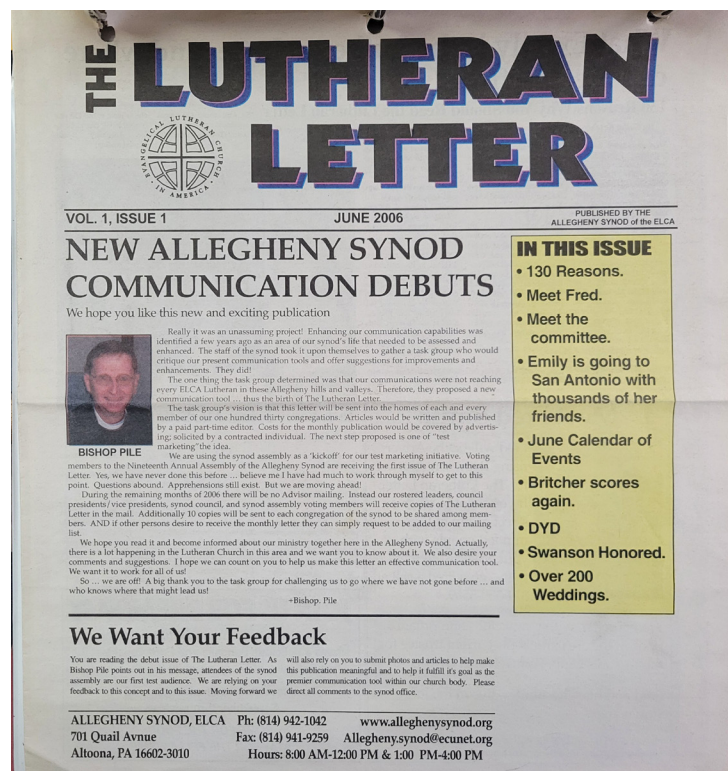
By BISHOP EMERITUS GREGORY PILE

When I saw the name Rick Kazmer in my inbox, I paused. Opening the email, the words, “This June, The Lutheran Letter will be celebrating 20 years” jumped out at me.

Wow, it could not be that long ago when a synod council-appointed Marketing Task Force proposed publishing The Lutheran Letter. But it is!

How did we get there? Well, my experience as a parish pastor taught me the importance of having direct access to the people with whom I was serving via weekly worship and a monthly newsletter. As bishop, communication entailed one mailed monthly packet, chocked full of program information sent to each congregation; and when I visited congregations or spoke to people across the synod, they lamented that they were unaware of any packets nor had they heard much from the bishop.

So ... staff and the task force critiqued the synod’s communication tools and ideas were discussed. Finally, Jeff McCready and his several cohorts on the task force (many of whom had newspaper backgrounds)



The first edition of The Lutheran Letter, featuring a lead message from Bishop Gregory Pile on the cover.

proposed sending a newspaper into every Allegheny Synod home, costs to be born by advertising.

That set us on a course of action. To make a long story short, since I have already used up half of the words our editor Rick granted me, a newspaper was born and was sent in bulk, monthly to congregations, for distribution, while we sought to collect addresses for all members of our Allegheny Synod congregations.

(See 20, Page 29

One Body: Stronger Together

“We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

- Romans 12:5

By DEACON SUE ELLEN SPOTTS

Director of Evangelical Mission

I have a story to share:

Last fall, the ELCA World Hunger program invited congregations to apply for grants to support their feeding programs.

In the previous year, 67 of these Daily Bread grants (\$500 each) were distributed.

Knowing that needs had increased, the staff hoped to award three times that amount this year. In the 15-day application window, 1,000 requests were submitted!

This was way beyond what had been budgeted.

So, the staff set to work looking for ways to meet the need.

They looked at their program and operations budget.

They committed any underspent categories to Daily Bread grants, curtailing travel and adjusting a video project.

They decided to make their annual planning retreat virtual so the funds for that could also be given for Daily Bread grants. Through these efforts, they were able to offer 670 grants. Still short of the



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

1,000, but much more than what initially looked possible.

Ten of those grants were received by feeding ministries in the Allegheny Synod.

Church budgets are mission statements. How we allocate the funds in our budget should

amplify the words that form our mission statement.

The way we spend our money should reflect the way we say we live out our faith.

“Offering” is the term we use for the money collected to fund the mission of our congregations. When we send some of our offering for the work of the synod, we call it “mission support;” offerings that specifically support mission beyond the congregation.

The synod, in turn, sends a portion of the mission support to the ELCA.

We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Last year, the Allegheny Synod shared \$164,229 in Mission Support for ELCA churchwide ministries.

(See BODY, Page 12)

Effective 4/1/2026



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The Lutheran Letter is a bi-monthly digital publication.

20-YEAR PATRONS

Special 20-year Patrons is a year-long opportunity, running through the May/June 2027 issue. Funding collected through this project will be sent to ELCA World Hunger work. **Email Michelle Bossler at Michelle.Bossler@AlleghenySynod.com to become a 20-year anniversary Patron, or mail this form to the Synod office**

Go Tell It Initiative Updates

By **PASTOR JOHN H. KRATZ**
Initiative Director



**Pastor
John H. Kratz**

Go Tell It IN the Mountains is thrilled to announce that our new resource, the Preacher to Pulpit app, is now available to all Allegheny Synod congregations.

This platform facilitates efficient scheduling for congregations in need of leadership.

Congregations are listed by conference with all available dates and times.

Once a request is submitted and uploaded to the app, registered users can complete scheduling in just a few clicks.

The app allows Pastors and Lay Leaders to easily manage their own schedules, saving congregations valuable time!

For congregations without a designated person to submit information via email, we remain available by phone to input details.

Congregations will also continue to receive print versions of fulfillments via postal mail.

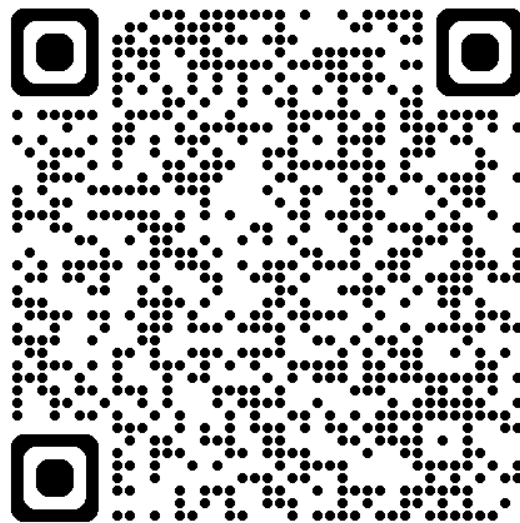
The Pulpit Supply section is located at the top of the Go Tell It website.

We encourage Pastors and Lay

Leaders to register on [our website](#) to explore these features and begin scheduling.

Please note that access to scheduling is limited to Pastors and Lay Leaders. Scan the QR code to connect to the Pulpit Supply App!

As a reminder, congregations should submit specific requests to Susan Glad at susieglad@gmail.com. †



Scan the code to download the app



**Here's what you want
in a sermon, Page 14**



The mission support we send to the ELCA comes back in part to support the mission of individuals and congregations in the Allegheny Synod, writes **Sue Ellen Spotts**.

BODY

(Continued from Page 9)

And here's where we realize what Paul was explaining to the Roman community: the mission support we send to the ELCA comes back in part to support the mission of individuals and congregations in the Allegheny Synod.

In addition to the world hunger grants, our mission support makes it possible for the ELCA to:

- Build Christian communities in the United States.
- Grow the global Lutheran Church.
- Strengthen and sustain the ministry of the whole church.

What does this look like? It looks like discernment and educational opportunities for leaders (clergy and lay). This summer there is a church-wide rostered leader event, which will include time for assistants to the bishop to meet. What a wonderful opportunity for this synod's new assistants to network and learn. Youth gatherings for all youth, opportunities at Lutheran seminaries, colleges, and universities (do you know anyone attending one of these?) are also possible because of this.

And the support is realized through me – because DEMs are funded through the ELCA.

Globally, it looks like missionaries around the world. And it looks like Bishop Kevin taking greetings from the Allegheny Synod to our companion synod in Kenya as they install their new bishop – the first female Lutheran Bishop on the continent of Africa!

And it looks like resources for lay leaders; social messages to help us explore how our faith relates to the realities of the world; and resources for faith development, discipleship, prayer, stewardship, and worship. It fosters our ecumenical partnerships through which we share pastors among denominations. There are many places in the Allegheny Synod where we work cooperatively with our Methodist, or Presbyterian, or UCC, or Episcopal neighbors, to be a stronger witness to Christ's love in our communities.

We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

The whole body is stronger because of the generous mission support that you offer.

Thanks be to God!

(Editor's note: More news on the Daily Bread grants will be in an upcoming issue.) †

What You Need to Know About Assembly

By **DEBBIE GARRITANO**

Assembly Committee Chair

The 2026 Synod Assembly will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. June 20.

The theme of this year's assembly is "God is Doing a New Thing."

Just as the seasons change, our synod is changing. As spring comes, the air smells different – alive and expectant. After months of planning and waiting, we step back into the garden and remember what it feels like to be rooted.

Planting season asks us to settle in, pay attention, and trust that bright beginnings will grow into long-term loveliness. It reminds us that growth doesn't always mean moving forward, it can also mean growing deeper, right where we are.

Scripture tells us to let go of the past and embrace the possibilities

that lie ahead. Isaiah writes: (43:18-19) "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"

The Allegheny Synod is changing with Bishop Kevin Shock and the new staff assistants structure. After months of planning, we want to celebrate all the wonderful ministry that is going on with the synod through our congregations and partners in ministry. The Assembly will be an opportunity for everyone to be connected and to reconnect with one another so that we can continue to work together. We remember what it means to be rooted in our faith as we grow and prosper as a synod together. The biggest challenge organizing this assembly has been the short turnaround from the Bishop election in November.

(See ASSEMBLY, Page 14)

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.

The Survey is In

Here's What Congregants Want in a Sermon

By **JESSICA CLAYCOMB**

Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative

Thank you to everyone who participated in the 1st Annual Go Tell It IN The Mountains Initiative Sunday in February.

During the event, we asked people in the pews, congregants, to share what their hopes are for the sermon each Sunday. We found the more than 450 responses to be enlightening, and we wanted to share them with you:

- 1.9% focused on delivery style. Keep it short, tell more stories, or be entertaining fit in here.
- 3.5% desired it to be Inspirational – make it a “wow” moment.
- 7.9% did not respond to the question asked. Comments such as “no screens in the sanctuary” and

keep the service as it is fit in here.

- 8.6% desired that the sermon creates reflection for the week ahead. A thought for them to reflect upon throughout the week was desired.
- 14.1% desired to be challenged to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. To live more like Jesus fits in here.
- 15.4% wanted the sermon to generate positive feelings. The desire to leave happy or be uplifted fit in here.
- 20% desired to learn more about the Bible as their primary goal. Education and understanding the scriptures was their primary goal.
- 28.4% desired the sermon to apply the scriptures to daily life. Note: there were two thoughts mentioned in the sub-notes.

(See SURVEY, Page 15)

ASSEMBLY

(Continued from Page 13)

It has caused us to be more focused and to pay attention as we settle into the new season of the Allegheny Synod.

We encourage everyone to attend – visitors and voting members. It takes each and everyone of us to make it grow. Come join us at the assembly on June 20 and be a part of the new beginnings that will grow into long-term prosperity!

Jeremiah writes: (29:11) “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” †



SURVEY

(Continued from Page 14)

One noted a desire for such applications to be non-political and the other noted a desire for it to be more politically pointed. Most simply wanted the sermon “to apply to my daily life.” But, clearly, the political climate was on the minds of several respondents from different congregations.

Reflections from the Pastor John Kratz, director of Go Tell It IN the Mountains:

In reviewing the notes and sharing of so many parishioners, I was genuinely blessed to see the passion and desires of people for the sermon. There is a genuine desire to connect with the sermon time in worship. Secondly, I wonder if any preacher can accomplish the top four goals in one sermon? Sometimes the challenge of the Gospel stings and positive feelings fall short. Our sin and its consequences are painful and that reality needs to be addressed. Also, is it possible that a genuine reflection of the Gospel may always be seen as political to some? Does our mindset in entering worship affect what we hear in worship?

One joy behind all the notes: The Scriptures remain central! Throughout all was a noted desire for scripture-based preaching. This may seem obvious except that I attended a worship service where the entire sermon series was based upon a book the pastor was reading, which did not have any specific scriptural or theological ties! The bedrock of scripture remains strong within our congregations. †



First Lutheran Church continues to hold Tuesday Noon Recitals during select months of the year. The recitals and luncheons are held free of charge thanks to generous donations and sponsors. On April 14, student musicians from Central Cambria, Forest Hills, Greater Johnstown, and Westmont played a variety of music to a crowded sanctuary. Photos by Rick Kazmer



A New Season Begins

‘There is a season for everything, and a time for every matter under the heaven’ (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

By **PASTOR TYLER J. GRAHAM**

Living Waters Lutheran Parish

These words from Ecclesiastes form the beginning of a favorite section of Scripture of mine, which speaks to the various ‘seasons and times’ that we encounter throughout our lives.

Often read at funerals and memorial services, the passage, known as Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, contains 14 dichotomies that signify completion in Hebrew poetry; however, they provide me with a wise reminder of the movement of the seasons of our lives.

A reminder that we are each a part of something larger than the moment of time in which we find ourselves.

Some seasons are distinct – having specific beginning and end points – while others seem to overlap and may even blur into a larger season of life. I’m reminded of these realities as I write this note to you. The outdoor temperatures are getting warmer, flowers are in bloom, there is a marked greening within the landscape, and the smell of fresh-cut grass remind me that we are in spring and moving toward summer.

As we journey these final weeks of the Easter season and into the season of Ordinary Time, the Church

will note this change of season with green paraments and the scriptural focus upon the life and teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the evangelical mission of the Church in the world.

“Ordinary” time in the liturgical calendar does not mean common or routine, but rather comes from the word ‘ordinal’ meaning counted time and is reflected in our counting of the Sundays in this season after Pentecost (i.e. the eighth Sunday after Pentecost, etc.) While most of us might consider seasons in relation to climate patterns we experience, there is something within our human souls that needs seasons. This is why the liturgical calendar can be such a formative means to live out our lives of faith and relationships with Christ and one another.

As a whole, “the liturgical calendar exists to remind us that Christ has sanctified all of time, bringing us and the whole of our experience into the orbit of resurrection” and reminds us that “God has transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary by the power of divine grace.” The liturgical calendar takes seriously the Ecclesiastes admonition that there is a “time for every matter under the heaven.” It tells us that there is a time to repent, to be afraid, to anticipate, to be filled with hope, and to rejoice.

(See SEASON, Page 19)



Photo by Pastor MJ Irvin-Stellabotte

Ecumenical Service Held

First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Altoona, hosted an Ecumenical Lenten Taize Service on March 15 in cooperation with Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Roman Catholic Church. Bishop Kevin Shock preached and presided at the service, alongside Father Patrick Corrigan from Our Lady of Mt. Carmel.

What's a Taize Service?

A Taize Service is a contemplative service originating from the monastic community in France, typically characterized by candlelight, prayer, and meditative song. A reception followed with a time of fellowship and delicious snacks and cookies; it was a wonderful opportunity to worship and share fellowship with others in the local faith community.

Save the date and come enjoy
an evening of fun, food,
and fellowship!

Lutheran Day
at the
Altoona Curve



Sunday, August 16

Game begins at 6 pm

Watch for
registration details
coming soon!





SEASON

(Continued from Page 17)

That there is a time to speak and a time to be silent ... a time to work and time to rest ... a time to wait with Jesus at Gethsemane – horrified by what is coming ... and a time to be in the presence of the resurrected Christ and hear, ‘Peace be with you.’

At times, our lives can feel like a series of erratic moments without any sense of pattern or routine; life can feel fragmented instead of coordinated leaving us to feel disconnected from the larger context of our lives and within our relationships. The liturgical calendar helps to connect all of the fragmented moments and seasons into a pattern – to bring intentionality into our disconnected days and structure into the chaotic moments while creating meaning from them. And as we journey through the liturgical calendar of the church, we are made aware of two things: we are not in control and we do not travel alone.

We work ourselves to exhaustion when we urgently need a Sabbath, and we give up in despair when we need courage and encouragement to continue. The liturgical calendar, with ancient scripture read again by our eyes and heard by our ears, provides us with support and reveals to us that the Holy Spirit is already present and at work as we attempt to make sense of our lives and the world around us. God is in the midst of life. God is in the suffering, the joy, the confusion, and the certitude. God is with us.

What season of life are you experiencing? How do you perceive God to be at work in your life during this time? What might God be calling you to?

As we continue our journey together, as the Church and the Allegheny Synod, I invite you to once again read this text from Ecclesiastes while taking time to discern the Lord’s presence in your life and listen for God’s voice. In whatever season you find yourself, may your hearts and minds be guarded with the peace of Christ; may you be gifted with opportunities to deepen our faith, and may your lives be graced by the love and blessings of God. †

Easter Performances at First Lutheran



Submitted photos

Howard Bennett from First Lutheran Church in Johnstown and some other congregants organized a performance for Easter. "All went well," he wrote in an email with the above photos. Some of the performers (not in order) include Kerri Hostetler, Mary Blackford, Vicki Price, Carolyn Anderson, Jessica Boring, Stephan Griffith, Bill Hargraves, Joel Hoshow, Josh Rhinaman, and Bennett.

Save the Date...

The Weekend.

Allegheny Synod Youth Event
December 11-13, 2026

St. James Lutheran Church & Comfort Inn
Huntingdon, PA



Submitted photo

The spring break mission team from Penn State. They helped a lot of people during the trip to North Carolina.

Another Kind of Spring Break

By **DEACON ALICIA ANDERSON**

Campus Minister for Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State

You may think spring break means college students at the beach, but this March, Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State partnered with Wesley Penn State, Lutheran Disaster Response Carolinas, and Luther Rock Camp & Conference Center for an alternative spring break.

A group of six students and campus ministers traveled to the mountains of western North Carolina (Watauga and Avery counties) to help with clean-up 18 months after Hurricane Helene struck the area.

Our first project was preparing and pouring a concrete foundation under a small hillside barn. The storm had washed away the stones and soil supporting a corner of the floor.

We built forms, added stones and rebar, mixed and hauled concrete – all under the watchful eye of two cows and their calves. We were grateful for Jonathan Weant from Lutheran Disaster Response, who was our crew boss all week.

Jonathan taught, guided, and encouraged us as we learned new skills (power tools!), worked through problems, and took on dirty and physically challenging tasks.

When the concrete mixing machine broke down three-quarters of the way through, I was impressed by how willingly everyone took a turn at the exhausting task of mixing concrete by hand. (We were so grateful when the mixer started again an hour or so later!)

(See BREAK 1, Page 22)

BREAK 1

(Continued from Page 21)

“The highlight of the trip was pouring concrete in the barn at Northfork Farm. It was really meaningful to hear their story about the hurricane. It was also fun to lift the heavy concrete bags into the mixer and see the cows,” Anna Penird, a senior heading to graduate school in geology said.

Mountain weather kept us from working outside when it snowed. Instead, our crew removed moldy drywall from a cabin that had flooded at Luther Rock Camp. The smell of mold and persistent dust challenged everyone, but working together to remove walls was exhilarating.

Swinging hammers into drywall, pulling out nails, and using pry bars on trim pieces felt productive and we could certainly see our progress. Fortunately, warmer temperatures let us spend our final day clearing fallen trees on a family’s property near the top of a mountain. They built the house themselves through three long years of work and had just finished and moved in a few weeks before Hurricane Helene.

The house was undamaged by the storm, but acres of hardwood forest were blown down since days of soaking rains had softened the ground before the high winds came. We hauled, sawed and split wood, eventually stacking a full dump truck load of firewood that was donated to a local woman to heat her home. It was physically demanding work requiring a lot

of teamwork while we enjoyed being surrounded by the beauty of God’s creation.

“I liked how on the last day we got to enjoy sunshine and spring breezes as we were gathering wood. Since it was cold and snowy the day before, we weren’t sure how nice it was going to be, but I’m so glad we chose to do work outside that day,” Matthew Olmstead, a graduate student studying acoustics in medical applications, said.

It was powerful to hear what people in the community went through in the storm. The homeowners, camp staff, and other people we encountered all had their own stories.

“I enjoyed meeting people and hearing their lived experience. It gave ... feeling to what it was like to live through Hurricane Helene,” Pastor Sarah Voigt, campus minister with Wesley Penn State, said.

Much of the urgent repairs have been done; there are lots of new metal roofs, re-built bridges, and restored creek beds, but Lutheran Disaster Response Carolinas expects the cleanup work to continue for 10 years. Clearly, people in the community are there for each other in the aftermath of the storm.

“I was really struck by the sense of community that the people here have. Even after these huge disasters they support each other and help each other get back on their feet,” Leah Chang, a junior nursing student, said.

(See BREAK 2, Page 23)



Submitted photos

Top left, the volunteers got a workout moving bags of cement. Top right, the team learned a lot of new skills while volunteering. Bottom, these unofficial supervisors were a constant presence.



BREAK 2

(Continued from Page 22)

The week was filled with hard work, learning new skills, ever-changing weather, beautiful mountain scenery, kind hospitality, and remarkable stories of how communities came together to deal with the storm and its aftermath. The group was changed by the work and by the people.

“A highlight of the trip was definitely getting to understand how they worked and developed stronger as a community to get through the challenges that arose from the hurricane,” Ayden Sivik, a first-year pre-vet student, said.

A variety of sources provided support to help make this trip possible. Working together sometimes means sharing the physical tasks, and other times means providing the resources. Thank you to the supporters who helped to make the hurricane recovery possible. It made a real impact on the community where served, and also on the students who participated. It was a week of intentionally being part of the Body of Christ, learning about ourselves, the world, and God’s love through 2026 Alternative Spring Break!†

Partners in Prayer at St. Mark

By THE LUTHERAN LETTER

During the season of Lent, St. Mark Lutheran, located along Snyderstown Road in Howard, had 19 people participate in being Secret Prayer Partners.

Each person who participated was given a name of another person who was participating.

During the month, they would pray for that person without the person knowing who was praying for them.

People listed their specific needs for prayer, so their partner knew their intentional needs and prayed daily for them.

The secret prayer partners also anonymously wrote cards and kind notes, and gave small gifts that encouraged and lifted the spirits of each participant through Lent.

It was fulfilling to know that each partner was specifically being prayed for each day by a secret church mem-



Submitted photo

Prayer partners Karen Barner and Grayson Bennett.

ber.

On Easter morning during the church's annual Easter Breakfast, secret prayer partners revealed themselves to one another, and the reveal included many hugs and words of thanks.

All participants felt blessed to have received daily prayers and to have had the opportunity to build new relationships among our members. Thanks be to God! †

How Can Christ Lift You in an Exhausting World?

Unique Speaker, Deacon Tackles Interesting Topic at St. Mark

By THE LUTHERAN LETTER

Join Deacon Marsha Roscoe, spiritual director, coach, and author of "Breathing in Christ: Experiencing Jesus in an Exhausting World," for a guided, grace-filled morning designed to help you slow down, reconnect, and rediscover a more life-giving rhythm.

The free event starts at 10 a.m. May 30 at St. Mark Lutheran Church (850 Snyderstown Road, Howard).

(See BREATHE, Page 25)

BREATHE

(Continued from Page 24)

The event is free. Books will be available following the event for a donation of \$20, with all proceeds supporting The Charles Bruce Foundation and its work with those experiencing homelessness. Cash, check, and credit card accepted.

Roscoe serves as Assistant to the Bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the ELCA, where she leads initiatives in spiritual wellness, leadership development, and communications.

She is the founder of Breathing in Christ, a ministry devoted to helping people reconnect with God, themselves, and their daily lives through simple, Christ-centered practices.

With more than 20 years of ministry experience, Roscoe brings an accessible and pastoral approach to faith and wellbeing, guiding others from exhaustion toward wholeness, one small, grace-filled step at a time.

To register for the free event, email stmarksnydertown@gmail.com. †



Marsha Roscoe

**The free event starts
at 10 a.m. May 30 at St.
Mark Lutheran Church
(850 Snydertown Road,
Howard)**

To register, email
stmarksnydertown@gmail.com



The Potato Paradox

Sweet and Savory; Sinner and Saint

By **PASTOR DAVID BOWMAN**

Zion Lutheran Church

A paradox is a logically self-contradictory statement that defies intuition, runs contrary to expectations, yet still contains an underlying truth.

In our denomination, we have a number of theological paradoxes borne out of Martin Luther's work, the most famous being Saint/Sinner and Law/Gospel.

Being simultaneously a saint and sinner is a paradox. We are fully sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. We choose ourselves over others. We create brokenness in our earthly and heavenly relationships. At the same time, we are fully saints who have been blessed and made holy by God. We are Christ's ambassadors on Earth who make up his body. Our lives bear witness to the work and glory of God. Likewise, our Lutheran lens for reading and interpreting scripture is also paradoxical. The Law is that which convicts us, pointing at our sins and condemning us. This drives us toward the grace and mercy revealed to us in the crucified and risen Christ.

The Gospel is God's message of promise, liberation, and life through the gift of grace.

Here, I bring you another paradox. The humble potato comes to us in multiple varieties of savory and sweet, equally enjoyed in their dedicated forms.

However, they are hardly ever brought together in a single, satisfactory dish. This recipe melds the paradox of spud together in a way that pleases the taste buds.

This sweet and savory dish serves well as a succulent side dish on your table. Happy cooking!

Sweet and Savory Potato Gratin

Serves 12

Ingredients:

- 1½ pounds medium Yukon Gold potatoes
- 1½ pounds medium red-skinned sweet potatoes
- 2 cups heavy whipping cream
- ¼ cup butter
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon parsley, minced
- 1 tablespoon rosemary, minced
- 1 tablespoon sage, minced
- 1 tablespoon thyme, minced
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt
- ¾ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1¼ cups (packed) grated Gruyere cheese (about 5 oz.)

Instructions

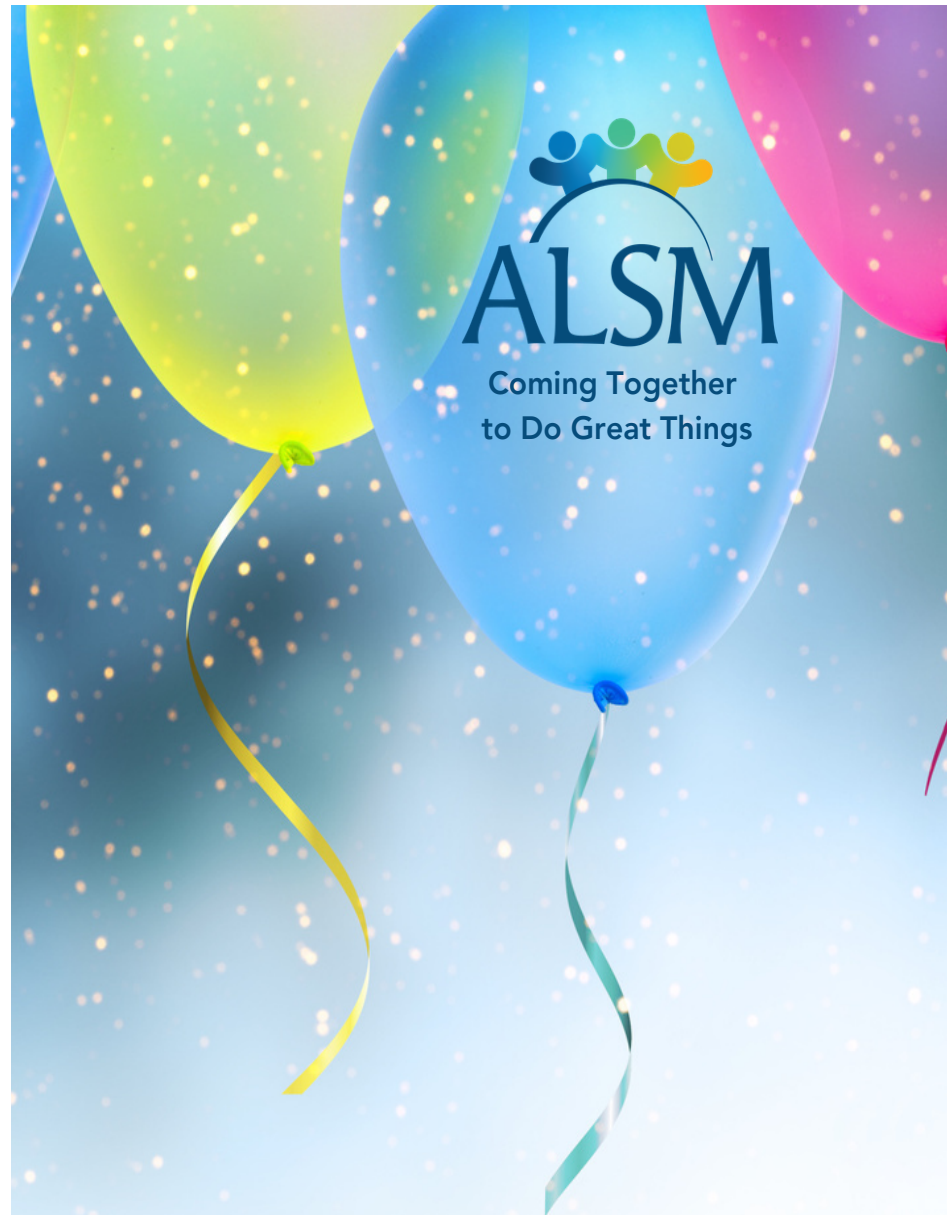
- Fill a large bowl with cold water.
- Peel and cut all potatoes into 1/8-inch thick rounds and place in bowl with water.
- In a medium sauce pan, combine cream, butter, and garlic; bring to a simmer.

(See POTATO, Page 27)

POTATO

(Continued from Page 26)

- Remove from heat.
- Mix all herbs in small bowl.
- Mix salt and pepper in another small bowl.
- Butter a 13- x 9- x 2-inch baking dish.
- Drain potatoes, then pat dry with kitchen towels.
- Transfer half of the potatoes to prepared baking dish.
- Distribute and spread evenly.
- Sprinkle with half of the herb mixture and half of the salt-pepper mixture.
- Sprinkle with half of the cheese.
- Repeat with the remaining potatoes, herbs, salt/pepper, and cheese.
- Pour cream mixture over the dish, pressing lightly to submerge the potatoes as much as possible. (This can be prepared up to six hours before baking. Simply wrap with plastic and chill.)
- Preheat oven to 400-degrees.
- Cover dish tightly with foil.
- Bake 30 minutes. Uncover; bake until top of the gratin is golden and most of the liquid is absorbed, about 25 minutes.
- Let stand 10 minutes and serve. †



Congratulations to the
Allegheny Synod
on 20 years of publication of
the Lutheran Letter.

Your partners at ALSM wish you
many more years of success!

MEMORIES

(Continued from Page 2)

One day, looking for a record of minutes from a bygone era, I found a scrapbook made after Bishop's Convocation in the year 2000. Remember scrapbooking? Who would have time for that today? There were even more youthful faces and memories of the beloved in those pages. I also celebrated with the people of Grace Bellwood their 150th anniversary. I delighted in sitting with Pastor Steve Lynn, a son of the congregation, at the luncheon while people visited with him, sharing stories and looking through old photo albums.

Now, most of us have thousands of photos on our phones, but we rarely have the time to organize them or share them with others in the way that sparks conversation like those old photo albums can. It's easy for me, and probably for any of us, to get lost in those "good-old days." The pictures and memories we keep paint a skewed picture of the past. The "good-old days" weren't always so good. There were struggles and disappointments in our lives and in the church back then, just like we have them today.

As fondly as I think about those early days in my first call, I can also remember the challenges and the feelings of inadequacy that I dealt with. We can long for the past in such a way that we look right past the good, new things that God is bringing forth for us. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells parable after parable in such rapid succession that I wonder how anyone could possibly

keep track of what he's saying. After he tells all these parables, he asks his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They reply, "Yes."

Ha! Sure, you do. Yet, it's what he says next that compels me to meditate on his words: "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new." What is old and what is new. Right after this teaching, he goes to his hometown where those who know him best resist his good news, are offended by his teaching, and think he's gotten too big for his britches. They are so focused on the old way of understanding God's action that they're unable to perceive the amazing, new thing that God is doing right in front of them. We, like the disciples, have been made stewards of what is old and what is new. It can be a good and holy thing to revisit the past. It can even inspire us in our ministry to remember the good things from back then. Yet, if we focus only on the past, we can easily miss the new thing that God is doing among us. In the same way, if we are only looking toward innovation and what we have never tried before, we can lose our rootedness in the fundamental ways God has formed us. God has always operated with what is old and what is new. God has given us holy treasure that includes both old and new.

May the Spirit open us to see the good in the old and in the new and to bring out of holy treasure that which serves the kingdom well today. †

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(Continued from Page 8)

That vision turned out to be more challenging than imagined, as some congregations were not willing to share their membership list with addresses. Added to that challenge was the difficulty in securing advertisements that were to cover costs ... because we were not sending The Lutheran Letter directly into enough homes. Individual persons began providing gifts to assist in publishing the Letter, but the challenges ultimately left us no choice but to reduce our numbers and send copies of the Letter to individuals with addresses and in bulk to congregations where we had no addresses. Later changes involved a move to bi-monthly distribution, and digital format.

This fluidity and ability to change, I attribute to the several wonderful editors with whom The Lutheran Letter has been blessed; sharing their gifts to enrich and enhance the publication. I thank God for each one of them.

Ultimately, my vision of the bishop having opportunity to share words of inspiration, providing information about synod happenings and celebrating together projects, programs, and ministry successes in congregations has come to fruition. Admittedly, we still have a way to go to achieve the Marketing Task Force's dream (mine too, if I am honest) to get The Lutheran Letter into every Lutheran home in these Allegheny hills and valleys. But guaranteed, wherever it is read, The Lutheran Letter, is making a difference. Thank you to all who have and are helping to keep the 20-year-old vision alive! †

The
LU | **HERAN**
Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

**Thank you, to our readers and
supporters for a great 20 years!**

Here's to two more decades of good news!

BEFORE YOU GO

Those 20 Years Went Fast

I first started working on the Lutheran Letter a couple years after its inception, now 20 years ago.

I worked for the Daily American at the time as a paginator and reporter/editor, a skill set uniquely suited to create the publication.

Since then, it has been a fun and inspiring project. I have helped congregations tell their stories, share events, and wins in the community. Pastors have shared stories from Holy Land travels and other experiences.

We had a series several years back that analyzed all of the images on the stained glass windows at the Church of the Abiding Presence in Gettysburg.

Issues dating to 2020 are available [here](#).

Around that time we decided to move the publication to a digital-only offering, as printing costs continued to increase. This offered some flexibility in issue size, and distribution.

The Lutheran Letter is designed to be printed on standard printers, so congregations can still print copies for readers who prefer a tangible experience.

The Lutheran Letter has been successful because there's a continued interest in reading good news, there are patrons and supporters, and because you keep sharing the good news from your congregations.

Here's to another 20 years, filled with news about how the Allegheny Synod and its congregations are completing God's work, improving lives, and helping more people discover the love of Jesus Christ. †

– Rick Kazmer, editor