CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE INSIDE

How the pandemic impacted worship, and other news



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May/June 2020

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

Volume 15, Issue 3 — www.AlleghenySynod.org — May/June 2020

MEET FAITH. created by **Allegheny Synod** youth to stomp out mental health stigmas.

STOMPING OUT STIGMAS

Grace Church, Synod Youth Part of Mental Health Awareness Effort

BY RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

Marisa Vicere's story is one that's familiar to many people in the Allegheny Synod and beyond.

In 2012 her sister, Jana Marie, died by suicide.

Vicere could have lingered in depression herself.

But instead she chose to take action to combat mental health concerns, forming the Jana Marie Foundation in State College shortly after her sister's death.

"The foundation harnesses the power of creative expression and dialogue to spark conversations,

build connections and promote mental well-being among young people and their communities," she wrote in an email describing the effort.

Her project is having an impact in the synod as well.



Submitted photo

Allegheny Synod youth, during a recent youth event, paint the (See STOMP, Page 14) pieces of their Stomper.

Hey, Siri, Do We Need a **Break?**

BY RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

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

Somerset counselor Mary Onstead once considered putting a basket outside her office door. Her intent was for clients to put their cellphones in it for safekeeping until after their session.

(See **PHONE**, Page 13)





May/June 2020 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.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES Articles for the Letter should be about 300 words or less and include applicable website or contact information. Images should be as high a resolution as possible, ideally 300 ppi at 3x5 inches (900x1500 pixels.) Send files to LutheranLetter@AlleghenySynod.com.

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It's OK to Say 'This is Hard'

To the Saints of the Allegheny Synod,

to you in the time of COVID-19 and the stay-at-home hardest of times. order, which is in place across the state.

flecting on this time, I have been reminded again that God's promises are true. Jesus Christ is with us.

That sounds very simple, but when we encounter trouble, we sometimes forget Jesus is with us and that he will get us through to the other side of our troubles — even a global pandemic. This is a new thing for most of us. God has led his people through countless trials and tribulations — whether it was wars, plagues or persecutions, which the early church faced, God brought his people through. We will get through this because God promises to never leave us.

In my devotions this month I have been reflecting on Isaiah 43:1-4. In this passage God tells the people of Israel that God will stand with the people no matter what happens. God tells them — and us — that when we pass through the waters and the rivers of life, God is with us. When we pass through fire we shall not be burned. God makes this promise of presence and protection, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (Isaiah 43:4). God consistently stands with, leads and cares for the people. God promised the children of Abraham they would be his people forever. We are grafted into that promise in our baptism and made children of God. Time and again God has been faithful and has delivered the children of God from danger; whether it was the Exodus, or the Babylonian captivity, the early persecution of the church, or the manifold dangers that have come to this world — God has brought us through and will continue to do so because he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

I have never seen God wave a magic wand and make all problems go away. Our God is not like the fairy godmother from Cinderella — though sometimes we wish that to be true. We have a God who gets into the thick of what is going on in this world with us, a God willing to get his hands dirty while walking alongside us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us peace in the midst of the struggle and the strength and courage to keep going even when we don't feel we can. God does that by enacting the Holy Spirit in our siblings in Christ to help carry the burden. The gift of community is powerful in this time, even though it is best to be apart. We are strengthened, supported and prayed for in the body of Christ. That doesn't mean it will always be easy. It does mean that we are never alone.

The God who made heaven and earth is with us, May God's grace and peace be with you. I write this and God gives us each other as a gift and a balm for the

From our synod office we have seen time and again This is a unique time for all of us. As I have been re- the way you, the people of God, are caring for each other and being the church in this unusual time. Many of our congregations have been sewing masks for local hospitals, first responders and nursing homes. A number of our congregations and individual members are sponsoring porch pantries to help neighbors who may be in need of food or other supplies. Across the synod we have been hearing about congregation members taking time to call and check on other members — whether they are homebound or just in need of some conversation. In other instances, congregation members are making sure those who can't get out have the groceries and the essential items they need. That is what being the church is all about — living out your baptismal call to care for each other in the midst of this unusual situation. I thank God for you. I thank God the Holy Spirit is using you to care for each other. This is a difficult time.

> Wonderful, hardworking people are the cornerstone of the Allegheny Synod. We have seen difficult times before: the steel mills closed; the railroad made changes to their operation; the coal mines ceased operation, and the lumber industry moved on. Even in the face of those challenges, our people stood strong. There is a certain strength in us that compels us to put our nose to the grindstone and push through to the other side of whatever is difficult at the time. I think you know people, who when hardship comes, they are going to do what needs to be done. It is a testament to their character and their commitment. You may be one of those people. Over the last month I have spoken to several therapists who have said that it's very important to stop for a moment, take a breath and simply acknowledge that this situation is tough. None of us have experienced something like this before. Our daily routines have been upended. Some of our friends and family, and maybe you, have been furloughed from jobs. We worry that our friends and family may contract the virus. In this uncharted territory, the healthiest thing we can do is admit "this is hard." In simply acknowledging the challenges, some of the pressure we are feeling can be released. I guarantee your friends and colleagues are thinking the same thing. The reality is we are all doing the best we can in an unusual situation. When we realize we are doing our best with a situation that has turned our world sideways, it brings some relief.

(See **FAITH**, Page 3)

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News of note From the BISHOP'S DESK

Good News on the Can Challenge

Allegheny Synod congregations surpassed the 40,000-can goal for this year's food drive.

For 2019-20, the total collected was 40,432, according to the synod office. The food will help a lot of people. Over the last five years the synod has collected 263,327 food items.

Play canceled

Laurel Trinity Lutheran Church in Jennerstown has canceled the play scheduled for May 1-3 at the Mountain Playhouse because of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Apologies to everyone, but we've discussed it and feel this is the best for everyone," Carol Barnick, one of the organizers, wrote in an email about the annual performance.

Faith

(Continued from Page 2)

Related to that, I want you to hear me say, it's OK if you are not doing OK. There is grief, worry and loss — that can strain the emotional reserves of anyone. The hardest thing about right now is the uncertainty. We don't know when life will return to what it once was and if it will ever be what it once was before. We worry about how this is going to impact our friends, our family, our communities, our churches.

Some people are able to face the challenges of the day and keep moving. But for others, the burdens of each moment may weigh on them more. That is fine. We are all different. I encourage you, if you are struggling, to be in touch with your pastor, with your doctor or colleagues with whom you can talk and who can support you. If you find the weight to be too heavy, contact a therapist who can help you sort out how you are feeling and give you strategies to cope. There is nothing wrong with you if you find this time to be overwhelming. It's not a sign of weakness. What we've been dealing with is hard. Even the strongest people I know have had some days when life is more of a struggle than usual. If you are having trouble finding a therapist, please reach out to me. We have the names of some very good people who are willing to work with you and help you through this time. There is absolutely no shame in needing a little help. I have found therapy to be helpful to me when the burdens of this call seem heavy. In this time or uncertainty, and with so much being up in the air, I have relied heavily on the support of colleagues and friends. We talk, we commiserate, we remember we are in this together. Please reach out to those networks of support that are around you. It makes things better.

Most likely those people you are reaching out to are strug-

gling with the same challenges. Keep doing the best you can. In this time of COVID-19, it feels like we are building a plane while we are flying it. Our leaders are having to adapt to this situation and figure out how to care for God's people and provide spiritual care and worship when we cannot be physically together. There was no course in seminary on how to do this. Your leaders have been doing a wonderful job of using the internet, telephone and sending cards and letters to keep in contact. I thank God for the ways they are working to care for us in the midst of this trying time. In spite of having to make abrupt changes in plans, we are still able to pray together, care for each other and worship together.

You, Allegheny Synod, are doing a great job. We all wish we could gather together for worship. We want to be able to have Sunday School and sing in the choir. We want this pandemic to end. But given the circumstances, we are staying apart for the sake of those most vulnerable among us. We are keeping our distance because this virus can be deadly to people 60 years of age or older, which is a large percentage of people in our congregations. We stay apart out of love and care for our siblings in Christ. We will get through this. There will come a time when COVID-19 and the Spring of 2020 is a memory for us. My prayer is that we can look back on this time and remember how God used this strange situation to teach us how to be the church when we cannot be together; that we remember God was with us and brought us through to the other side; that we saw how we could still care for those in need. We may not have done everything perfectly, but we are doing the best we can with the gifts God has given us.

May God bless you and keep you,

— Bishop Michael †

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The Lutheran Letter May/June 2020

Pilgrims Return with Fresh Perspective

BY RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

Friedens Lutheran Church member Megan Flower said her recent trip to Jerusalem was life changing.

She was among 42 people from the Allegheny Synod who traveled to the Holy Land in January. The synod includes churches and parishes in Somerset and Cambria counties.

The trip allowed Flower and the other pilgrims to tangibly experience the places they have read about in the Bible. Flower and Pastor Ron Miller, who was also on the trip, said the history and religious sites were impactful; however, the religious tensions in town are also palpable.

They report that the experience was moving from a spiritual standpoint. It has also caused them to question what they have learned as Americans about the religious and political conflict in the area.

"From my relationship with God, my understanding of Biblical stories, my relationship with my mom, my view of Israel/Palestine/ Jordan, my perception of American media — it has all changed. Specifically, with regards to Jordan ... I've been telling everyone that if they get the chance to go, go. It is safe, the people are incredibly friendly, and it is a beautiful country. It should not be overlooked by anyone pondering travel itineraries," Flower said in a written response to questions about her trip.

She was looking forward to seeing the Wailing Wall, also called the Western Wall, as well as



Submitted photo

Friedens Lutheran Church member Megan Flower takes a few steps into the Dead Sea.

the Holy Sepulchre. The Western around King Herod the Great's temple, which is where Jesus taught. The Holy Sepulchre is the church built on the site of Jesus' walked," he said. crucifixion.

the trip include images of a self, he said, is crowded. 2,000-year-old olive tree in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Je-sites, i.e., where Jesus was born or erything after this trip." †

sus was arrested the night before where he was buried, are known his death.

emotions from Flower.

"When I touched the wall of that synagogue (at Capernaum), I knew my Lord had been there. I was so overwhelmed by feeling his presence there. It still makes me cry. the Palestinian guide and bus The Church of the Nativity. To touch that spot just made me feel like this is why I exist. I am here because of this," she said.

Flower said she made the trip with her mother, who was especially impacted by the rock where Jesus is thought to have been placed after the crucifixion.

was incredible. She (Flower's the works. mother) actually kissed the stone and to see her do that just made tensions in Jerusalem. She said she me so overcome with awe. Again, it was that feeling of I am here, because He did this," she said.

Miller, of Trinity Lutheran Church in State College. Like Flower, it here, in the U.S., we are told to was his first trip to the Holy Land. He had a more pragmatic take on tinians are always at war because the excursion. He said he hopes to they're bad people. It couldn't be return one day.

"I was mostly looking to see Wall was part of the retaining wall how such a visit would affect my theology and view of the scriptures. It's amazing to actually be

Many places they visited are the competing religions in Jerusa- el there ... couldn't be further from ancient. Photos they took during lem were noticeable. The city it- the truth. We follow like sheep

for sure. Just not what I expect-These places solicited great ed. Still, seeing the country was amazing," he said.

> Miller said his biggest takeaway is God's creation, especially the mountains.

> He said he became friends with driver, who spoke frankly about the religious tensions in the area.

> "While they voiced no anger over the situation, they would speak about it in a matter-of-fact way," he said.

Miller plans to share his experiences with his congregation through sermon illustrations and "The holiest of ground, the ho- references. An Israeli or Palestinliest of places and to touch that ian-themed meal may even be in

> Flower also noticed religious found the local government to be oppressive in some ways.

"They want the Holocaust re-Also on the trip was Pastor Ron membered, yet daily they work to eradicate the Palestinians. And support the Israelis and the Palesfurther from the truth," she said.

"I left Israel completely disgusted with the way our national media has led this country to believe certain things about the Holy and walk where Jesus was and Lands. And similarly with Jordan — we're told it's unsafe, the king He added that tensions between doesn't like Americans, don't travwhatever CNN or Fox News says "Also, none of the original and don't question it. I question ev-

The Worlder eran Letter



YOUTH GATHERING Q&A

The next Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Youth Gathering will be held in 2021 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The gatherings are held every three years in a different city, including thousands of youth who join in fellowship and mission projects. The Lutheran Letter asked event organizers to provide an update on the next event. Here is some of what they had to share. More details will be published in subsequent issues.

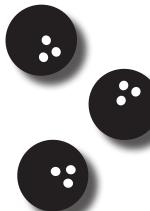
Q: What is unique about the location?

A: Minneapolis is home to bike and running trails that go on for miles, parks every six blocks, Prince's home and the 2021 ELCA Youth Gathering! Minneapolis is also known as a growing, diverse and Lutheran-dense city, nestled on the banks of the Mississippi River in the heart of the Midwest. It's the first time the ELCA Youth Gathering has made its way to Minneapolis and we can't wait to hear the rich stories from our neighbors in the Twin Cities!

FELLOWSHIP ON THE LANES



"Altoona, Johnstown, and Somerset saw over 200 people for Wacky Bowling this year! \$3,000 was raised for #CampSequanota! Thank you to all who came out and had a blast with us!" That was the message on the Allegheny Synod's Facebook page March 10, celebrating a funday of bowling to benefit Camp Sequanota. Some of the fun and games are pictured at left.



Submitted photos



STRIKE!







Results of the Bishop Transition Congregational Surveys

(Editor's note: This is part of areas: a regular report on the process of was set to happen in June during the Allegheny Synod Assembly. But it has been delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bishop Michael Rhyne is not seeking another term. He will continue to serve through the crisis.)

BY CASEY COLLEDGE

Chairperson of the Bishop Transition Task Force

I hope this finds you well and safe in this time of staying home and social distancing. The Bishop's Transition Task Force and I are praying for all of you and your families in this tough time. We wanted to give you an update on the survey that was sent out in December.

We have received back a number of surveys from congregational councils as well as rostered leaders about rating the Allegheny Synod in overall effectiveness in these key

- electing a new bishop. The election turing the life and mission of the church in the conferences and congregations
 - 2. Congregational support
 - 3. Synod-wide visibility
 - 4. Financial management

The regression analysis that was conducted showed that there is a strong correlation between the overall effectiveness of the synod and congregational support and a moderate correlation to overall effectiveness and financial manage-

We also received your feedback on what the top two priorities should be for the synod in the next six years. We evaluated the information and came up with the top 10 responses to that question. We have aligned them into four separate categories.

Evangelism & Stewardship

• Helping congregations with evangelism and stewardship.

- 1. Developing, facilitating, nur- mining vitality of their ministries.
 - Articulate a hopeful, gracefilled vision of Christianity that will tered leaders in the synod and ensupport and encourage increased participation in synod congregations.

Congregational support

- Helping congregations discern and develop gifts for mission.
- Long-term planning for congregational viability.
- Unifying and merging small, local congregations to encourage new life and growth.

Communication

- · Spread the message of what God is doing in the Allegheny Synod, not just to fellow Lutherans or church-goers.
- Firm, clear and effective communication

Leadership development

• Continue supporting semi-

• Assist congregations in deter- narians through programming, i.e. TEEM, and financial support.

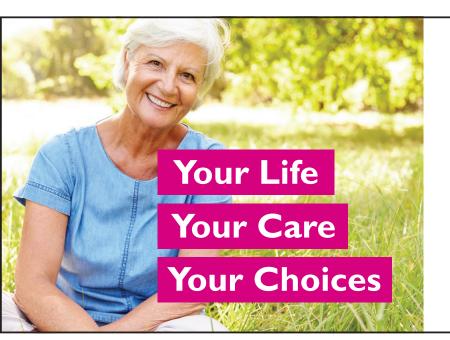
> Attract and retain gifted roscourage recruitment of pastoral candidates.

> We hope this information is helpful in the discernment process leading up to the new bishop's election.

We ask that you continue to keep the bishop election process in your prayers as the synod assembly has been pushed back due to COVID-19, so there is now more time for reflection, prayer and discernment on who we will call as our next bishop.

The task force looks forward to being with you at the conference meetings once they have been rescheduled to discuss the election process in more detail.

Until then, may God's presence be with you, may He comfort and keep you and may the love of our Lord Jesus Christ fill you with peace. †



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Remember in Prayer

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

MAY

Week 1: Cedar Grove Lutheran, Cedar Grove Week 2: Spring Mills

Parish: New Hope Lutheran, Spring Mills; and St. John Union, Farmers Mills

Week 3: Trinity Lutheran, Sidman Week 4: St. Luke

Week 4: St. Luke Lutheran, Mt. Union

JUNE

Week 1: St. Paul Lutheran, Johnstown Week 2: St. Mark Lutheran, Pleasant Gap

Week 3: Trinity Lutheran, Johnstown Week 4: Mountain Saints Parish: St. John, Addison; St. Paul, Fort Hill; Mt. Carmel, Meyersdale; and Mt. Tabor, Garrett

In God's Name





Laurel Sanders is the music and arts ministry coordinator at Grace Lutheran Church in State College. She shared some thoughts with The Lutheran Letter on travel, philosophy and music.

Q1: What's your favorite hobby other than music?

A1: Traveling to places with interesting history and culture. When I was a teen, my parents committed to taking my brother and me through all 50 states before graduating high school, and we managed it inexpensively by camping. I love discovering what makes places unique



Laurel Sanders

(such as the Arboles cuadrados "square trees" in Panama and the Festival of the Radishes in Oaxaca, Mexico); looking for parallels and differences between cultures; and trying to make myself understood using bits and

pieces of various languages.

Q2: If you could pick one place in the world to travel to, where would it be and why?

A2: It would be Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Since I lived in Europe for 12 years and spent some time in South America, I would choose Angkor Wat because the culture, architecture and beliefs would differ most from my current experiences. I believe it is important to put ourselves in unfamiliar environments so we can understand other places and people. The only way to build bridges between people from different backgrounds is by making a sincere effort. After all, they too, are God's children and we are all temporary guests on this earth.

Q3: What are you most looking forward to at your church this year? Any big projects?

A3: This summer several high school students who sing in my 22-voice youth choir (Crossfire) plan to attend various music camps, including Lutheran Summer Music, and I have been blessed in working with them to prepare for these life-changing experiences. Our pastoral staff and I are lucky to have many talented teen musicians in our church and I have been working to ensure they have some performing experiences in our community, participating in concerts and recitals at our church and in area nursing homes. I also look forward to directing our 12th annual Lenten ecumenical concert next spring — a huge project, but one very dear to my heart. It brings people together from about 15 area churches and many denominations with the goal of praising God together through music.

Q4: What's your favorite part about Central Pennsylvania?

A4: The beautiful landscape, including parks that are well maintained and which have great places for hiking. I love the diverse tapestry of mountains, rolling hills, forests, lakes (even some with nice sandy beaches!) and some flat land, too.

Q5: What's your favorite Bible verse?

A5: Corinthians 13:4-8. It is summarized in verse 8: "Love never fails." It is like a circle — when our hearts are touched by God's presence, loving others becomes easier, and when we love others, we feel closer to God. The older I get, the more I think that nothing else really matters. **†**

CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

'Lo, I am with You Always, to the End of the Age'

PASTORS COMMENT ON PANDEMIC RESPONSE, OFFER GUIDANCE

BY RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Rockwood was among the first in the area to adjust common practice to meet challenging times.

When interviewed in early March for a story that appeared in the Somerset Daily American, Pastor Jim West and Vicar Rebecca West said congregation members were in the early stages of the social distancing guidelines that would weeks later become the norm.

"When this thing came up, I talked to another woman in the congregation about it," Jim West, pastor at St. Luke's, said at the time. He told her that "I feel uncomfortable passing the peace."

The congregation developed what they called a "holy wave," used instead of handshakes and embraces.

But the pandemic continued to grow, infecting hundreds of thouthousands worldwide. It will take waves. a while for societal functions, into normal.

It's often said that necessity technology. is the mother of invention, and



Trinity in Johnstown broadcast streamed their service from this morning. Bishop Michael is the guest preacher for the service.



Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church was live. March 15 at 8:54 AM ·

Photo taken from Facebook

Trinity Lutheran Church in Johnstown was one of the Allegheny Synod congregations streaming their services online.

services, to drive-by blessings to space on Saturday afternoon. I

Allegheny Synod congregations person with an iPad and our pia- membership," he said at the end of answered the call, from drive-in nist meet with me in our worship March, at the height of the "stay-

sands of people, killing tens of elbow bumps, toe taps and holy lead a 30-minute service based on what we would normally do on Pastor Ron Miller, of Trinity Sunday morning. Once completed cluding church functions, to return Lutheran Church in State College, he uploads the video to YouTube said the congregation made use of and forwards the link to our office administrator who emails the link "For worship, we have one and a copy of the bulletin to the

at-home" government guidelines.

On Monday nights the congregation was holding Bible study and other meetings via the online application Zoom.

At Grace Lutheran Church, also in State College, Pastor Scott Schul said the congregation has been re-examining practices that have been in place for more than a century as a result of the pandemic.

The approach has been broad, using phones and even radio broadcasts.

"As examples of tried-and-true methods, we have established large teams of lay members who are checking in on our members by telephone, with emphasis on those who are in the most vulnerable categories of health. We are also working with a local radio station to broadcast Sunday worship, while using newer technology like Facebook Live to stream two services every Wednesday and a Sunday evening night prayer service," he said in March.

Zion Lutheran Church in Everett made use of social media and a website to stay in touch with faithful. Pastor Kathy Popp said the effort is not just about Zion members. It's also about keeping in touch with others in the community, mainly by email, Facebook and other tools on the internet.

(See **RESPONSE**, Page 9)

CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

With Poor Internet Service, Brush Valley Relies on Phones

BY PASTOR JULIE HOLM

Brush Valley Fusion of Faith

In Brush Valley we have unique needs.

We are way off the beaten path and with only about 500 households in the valley — and half of them Amish — we don't have access to good internet.

I struggled a couple weeks with internet worship, and only one or two parishioners ever saw it. I have also been doing pastoral letters, trying to weave a little bit of a message in along with the

news every week.

But the best choice happened this last Sunday, the third since we've been sheltering in place. these times. It also means we are called to contin-I decided to try a phone conference worship. It ue to be a church! worked great!

lay, which messes them up. But we had most of the folks on the phone. There was a lot of positive feedback.

The following Sunday included a reading of the Passion.

The Key message is that we are still a church in them to the drop-off points. †

these times, even if we are not in our buildings.

That means God is still walking with us through

I've lifted up a couple of great options for ser-We can't do hymns because there is a slight device during this time: making CWS health kits and stocking local food pantries. These are things people can add to their weekly grocery trip, and that we can do without contact.

> Parishioners leave their donations at the church, I gather and disinfect them, and then take

Response

(Continued from Page 8)

County. It also includes Lutheran pastors and participants from multiple denominations. I think that is the beauty of it. It is a blend of Christian community and not just gether, we construct a thread of Christian knowledge by sharing. You can jump in at any time and follow the thread of postings from the beginning post. It is our shared beliefs."

Recordings are key for First Lu-dresses to her," he said. theran Church in Johnstown.

Congregation member George Fattman said the church normally records services for replay on Atlantic Broadband, the church website and YouTube.

March 22, Pastor Walter Startzel and TV engineer Rob Abele

recorded the liturgy. Rob also Grace members the story in Acts ernments were collapsing. "We created a Facebook group, plugged in a recording of Eli Kirk 27 and 28 of how storms at sea Zion Lutheran Church On-line Bi- reading the lessons and also pre- caused enormous fear and danger faithful woman in England known ble Study. This has grown to include viously recorded choir anthems. to Paul and all those who were to us as Julian of Norwich pon-'friends who tell their friends' so it First Lutheran's motto is 'Come, onboard a ship with him. In pan- dered the chaos that surroundextends well beyond our Bedford share the Spirit,' which can be ic and desperation, and with few ed her, and took her worries and done electronically as well as in other options, they ran their ship laments in prayer to Jesus. In recongregational activities."

> cess to technology. Miller said his them. But there, at a place now these words to her: 'All shall be church is taking time to call peo- known to us as Malta, they en- well, and all shall be well, and

ed a letter campaign be pursued. unclear if the Holy Spirit drove Christ is with us. This won't last to six to eight of our other youth but it's undeniable that the Spirit are blessed and we will continue to input of personal experiences and letters to our homebound. I will pected detour and drew out rich

> planned to offer meals to people to new and unexpected blessings who needed them.

for the future. These calamities and scripture. "Because there was no service are not unprecedented to God, he said.

"For example, I shared with the church was divided and gov- love to share." †

aground on an unknown island, sponse, Jesus offered her a most Not everyone, however, has ac- uncertain what perils awaited remarkable revelation as he spoke 'us Lutherans,'" Popp said. "To- ple considered to be most at risk. countered extraordinary hospital- all manner of thing shall be well.' "One of our youth suggest- ity, connectedness and love. It's What was true then is true now. She agreed to lead it. She spoke Paul and his companions there, forever. We have been blessed, we and they, with her, will be sending blessed and made holy that unex- be blessed," he said. Miller, an avid cook, also current storm to likewise lead us sanctuary.

"In the midst of all this, a very

For Popp, the pandemic has forward a list of names and ad- blessings from it. I am confident provided an opportunity to stretch that the Holy Spirit is using our the church's impact beyond the

"We believe that our mission is of hospitality, connectedness and outside our church doors - point-Schul said that he is looking love," he said, noting that he is ing to Jesus as our Savior with our at history to provide guidance trying to root reactions in history words and with our acts of love. I, personally, have never felt that we He noted the Black Plague of only serve the people sitting in our the Middle Ages that came when church pews. We have so much

CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

A Calming Message for Uncertain Times

BY PASTOR BECCA EHRLICH

Interim Director of Evangelical Mission/Assistant to the Bishop

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold," reads Psalm 18:2.

As I'm writing this article right now (end of March), the COVID-19 (a.k.a. the coronavirus) pandemic is spreading around our country and world. The state of Pennsylvania, per our governor's order, is almost completely shut down, and we are practicing social distancing and self-isolation to stop the spread of this (sometimes deadly) virus.

It sounds like the plot of a movie, but it's actually real life and we are living it. There is anxiety and



Pastor Becca Ehrlich

fear around contracting this virus and worry about ourselves and our loved ones getting sick.

And what makes everything even more difficult is that we have no idea how long this new reality will exist and what will happen when it ends. We know that this virus will

country and our world, but we have no idea what that will look like. It's easy to let the fear and panic rise up in us and dictate how we react.

In the midst of this uncertainty. we don't have to panic. We have a constant during the chaos: Jesus Christ.

He is our rock, our fortress, our stronghold. When everything else swirls around us and the ground beneath us feels like it's constantly shifting, Jesus is that solid rock. He gives us peace that only he can give. stand; We can hold on to Jesus as our rock when everything else feels unsteady. sand,

We live in a changing world, but "Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever." reads Hebrews

Jesus invites us to look to him and

change the future of our lives, our hold onto him when we are overwhelmed and fearful.

> Even though everything around us can change, he does not. He stays steady as a rock.

> While we experience uncertainty about the future, we can sing with confidence:

My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteousness:

No merit of my own I claim, But wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid rock, I

All other ground is sinking

All other ground is sinking

— Lutheran Book of Worship No. 293/Evangelical Lutheran Worship

No. 596 🕇

Stepping Up

New Centerville Lutheran Parish members in Somerset County started making these masks to help community members stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. If your congregation is, or was, doing a special project during the pandemic, send the information and photos to Lutheran letter@ alleghenysynod.com. The information can also be mailed to the Allegheny Synod office at 701 Quail Ave., Altoona, PA 16602.



Submitted photo

Good Friday in an Unconventional Time

BY RICK KAZMER

The Lutheran Letter Editor

It was late in the afternoon on Maundy Thursday.

I was on the phone with Brian Whipkey, editor of the Daily American in Somerset. I am city editor of that publication. At 4 p.m. each day we discuss what will be in the next day's paper. Because of the pandemic, these conversations were happening by phone.

Typically Easter weekend is filled with services, ceremonies and traditions that lend well to photographs that mark how faithful recognize this crucial holiday.

Not this year.

We were hard-pressed to think of a Good Friday photo to put on our front page.

I decided to look through our church listings and randomly found Pastor Lee Gable's name. He is the pastor of the New Centerville Lutheran Parish. I gave him a call. He was a big help. Below is some of the quotes he offered as part of our Good Friday story that day, which was headlined "Light shines in the darkness." I think the comments are a comforting message as the nation continues to battle the pandemic:

Resurrection is on the horizon.

"In the darkness we look for resurrection," Gable said.

Although this is typically a busy time at churches, most congregations are not holding in-person services this Easter season to prevent the spread of the corona-

Gable said it's part of the new way we are loving our most vulnerable friends, family and neighbors.

"What are we willing to give up or do for the sake of our neighbor," he said, noting that people with compromised immune systems and other health problems are particularly at risk to the virus.

Many congregations are utilizing technology to record and stream services, so faithful can still worship.

"This is how we can love our neighbors right now," he said of social distancing.

Gable referenced John 1:5 when asked what people can draw on for inspiration during the pandemic.

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it." 🕇

Home & Garden

A Story of Refuse Resurrection

BY COURTNEY KAZMER

Home & Garden Editor

Have you ever walked or driven by someone's garbage, waiting to be picked up by the garbage man, and think "why are they throwing **THAT** out?"

Well I have.

I never had the nerve to ask them if I could have the assumed refuse. Until recently.

That's right, I raided my neighbor's garbage, with their permission, of course.

It was worth it.

There was a cute little wooden stand that caught my eye. I loved the spiral detail on the posts. I said to myself, "all it needs is a little tender love and care."

I decided I would paint it. I started by taking the top off and sanding it with a piece of light-grade sandpaper. I roughed the surface just enough to remove the old varnish, so the paint would stick.

I painted the stand a green color called dried mint.

This took about two or three coats to finish. Then I stenciled a flower, painting it with warm and inviting colors.

The project took me around three hours to finish. I really enjoyed the work.

This project cost me nothing, as I already had the materials that I needed. The paint was leftover from some other projects in the house. We had stencils from other crafts.

My neighbor even commented that she'd like to buy it back. I decided to keep it. It has inspired me to seek and purchase — or salvage — old furniture and give it new life. The "new life" project was fitting, as I completed it on Easter weekend. Let me know if you have any unique salvage projects that you'd like to share.



Staff photos by Courtney Kazmer

This is the finished stand, removed from curbside trash pickup, and in it's new home. our entryway.

How to bring new life to old trash

Find value in a discarded item and formulate a way to bring it back to life.





Get to work. Don't worry about messing up. The key is to have fun. Mistakes often lead to creative solutions.









Do some research on how best to execute your plan. Oftentimes, leftover sandpaper, paint and other craft-related items you have around the house will get the job done.



AN ABIDING PRESENCE

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

— From Saint Augustine's Confessions his life to God.

rized from literature available online on The Augustinians the Province of St. Thomas of Villanova website. This feature is part of a series of stories about people depicted on the tine was called to become a priest. stained-glass windows at the Church of the Abiding Presence in Gettysburg)

So far we have featured people important to the Lutheran faith who lived in the 1800s.

This issue's feature goes back many centuries further, focusing on a person who influenced many faiths.

lived for 75 years.

At an early age he pursued wealth and fame. His father was a nonbeliever. His mother was a Catholic.

He traveled to Rome and Italy teaching rhetoric.

He was baptized later in life, at age 33, when he embraced his mother's religion. It was then that he dedicated

Even though he had been living with a woman for (Editor's note: The following information was summa- years, and fathered her son, he devoted the rest of his life to celibacy.

It was in the town of Hippo, North Africa, where Augus-

He answered the call reluctantly and established a monastic life in the community. He eventually became a bishop. It was in that role that he pondered the separation from worldly concerns. He traveled often, influencing the religious community. He might be best known for his writings — producing more than 200 books and nearly 1,000 sermons and other works. He died in the year 430 in Saint Augustine was born in 354 AD in North Africa and Hippo with penitential psalms written on the walls of his room. Outside, Hippo was being sacked by vandals.

> After being moved a couple times, he was laid finally to rest in the Basilica of San Pietro in Ceil d'Oro, Northern Italy. **†**



Staff photo by Courtney Kazmer Saint Augustine of Hippo is one of many important people depicted on the stained-glass windows at the Church of the Abiding Presence in Gettysburg.



Photo courtesy the ELCA Archives



Pastor Elizabeth Platz is ordained by the Lutheran Church in America on Nov. 21, 1970. This is being published as part of the ongoing celebration of the first female Lutheran pastor in America. Platz visited the Allegheny Synod on Nov. 17 to share in worship and to answer questions from local faithful. She still serves God at St. Luke Lutheran Church in Silver Spring. Marvland.

"There was always a chance the church would have said 'no' and slammed the door."

— Pastor Elizabeth Platz said this during an interview last year with The Lutheran Letter. The number of women pastors in the church has grown greatly, including about 50% of the Allegheny Synod's roster.

Goodnight, Google

Tanya E. Zehner is the lead sleep tech at UPMC Somerset's sleep lab. She said electronics have a big impact on sleep.

"Exposing our brains to light from our devices promotes wakefulness and increases our mental activity. We need to prepare our minds for sleep and reduce our exposure to light before going to bed," she wrote in an email. "Light exposure

exposure of the sun and then darkness at night, sets our 'internal clock.' Research is showing that small amounts of light exposure from electronics is causing the brain to promote wakefulness. This can cause a reduced amount of sleep and studies are showing that people are not getting the proper amounts of sleep already."

She noted that word games and other func- environment works best for sleep," she said.

can alter our circadian rhythm. The natural light tions can help students and adults stay mentally sharp. But she added that those activities should be done earlier in the day. She suggests not using electronics for an hour before going to bed. "Wearing blue-blocking glasses or using a setting on the device to avoid the light can be helpful to get better sleep. Removing all electronics from the bedroom is also needed. A dark, cool, quiet

Phone-

(Continued from Page 1)

But the idea was nixed for a simple reason.

"I knew people would be unwilling to leave their phones," she said.

Onstead is a clinical social worker and counselor for Onstead Counseling Services.

technology change the way people communicate. "They would always be embarrassed if they forgot to turn it off," she said about clients from years ago. "Now they are more resistant to turn cellphones. it off."

Reliance on smartphone technology is a growing trend, just ask Alexa, Siri or whatever name your device goes by.

Reviews.org, an organization that researches home services and technology, recently surveyed 500 adults about their cellphone usage. They found:

- More than 65% of people sleep with their phone at night.
- About 32.7% of people spend more time on their phone than with a significant other.
- Nearly 90% of people feel uneasy leaving their phone at home.
- More than 65% of people surveyed check their phones up to 160 times a day.

The alarm clock industry may have taken the biggest hit, as nearly 80% of people said they use their phones to sound the morning bell.

"We all have some kind of a love affair with our smartphones. We pour our time, energy, and love into our devices, and isn't that a definition of love?" Tyler Abbott, Review.org's mobile and wireless expert, wrote in the study's conclusion. "As long as people don't look at their phones phones rather than talking," he said.

while driving and balance time between smartphone use and real-person interaction, there's no reason why we can't keep this beautiful thing going."

Onstead, however, has concerns.

She has noticed that people are losing com-During her 30-year career she has noticed munication skills, including making eye contact and reading the emotions and facial expressions of others. It's especially noticeable among people age 25 and under who have grown up with

> "They don't have the skills to interact one-onone," she said.

> Another alarming trend Onstead notices is that people rely on text messaging for serious communications.

> "Like whether the marriage will survive," she said, adding that it's still important to have person-to-person talks for important topics.

> Dan Rupert is the director of children and youth ministry at New Day Inc. in Johnstown. He said that for some kids smartphones are crucial to existence. "They are serious when they say, 'This phone is my life," he said.

> The increased dependence has forced the organization, which offers Christian ministry and after-school programs to kids, to lighten cellphone rules. Ironically, Rupert said some kids end up feeling more isolated and alone, even after using social media and text messaging on their smartphones.

One example he noted was a time he was driving four kids to an event. All four were on their smartphones.

"I said, 'You guys are all sitting here on your

In the Somerset Area School District, high school Principal Scott Shirley said cellphone use is restricted to certain areas and for educational purposes. He acknowledges that the technology will only become more prominent.

"Smartphone functionality and app capabilities will continue to advance moving into the future. Codependence with a smartphone has a wide range of pros and cons. Critical thinking skills are necessary to compete in most advanced job fields. It's easy to join the negative talk regarding cellphone use, but you need to be mindful of the increased productivity that can be generated from interactive use," he said in an emailed response to a question about how smartphone reliance impacts education.

He said parents should limit time on the devices at home.

"Regardless if the child agrees with your supervision," he said. "The biggest issue we see in school with inappropriate use deals with explicit posts and/or photos, especially on social media apps."

Onstead and Rupert noted that the technology has benefits as well. It is often convenient for quick messages, especially for parents checking on kids. Rupert said that during certain ministry events, some kids will follow the lesson on a Bible app.

But according to Reviews.org, more than 75% of those surveyed consider themselves to be "addicted" to their phones.

Onstead worries about the long-term communication consequences.

"That's the price we pay for being always available," she said. †

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Stomp

(Continued from Page 1)

The foundation and Grace Lutheran Church in State College applied for a Mental Health Ministry Grant from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to implement educational programming about mental health.

The work at Grace is underway with programs for school-age children. The grant was for \$10,000.

Grace senior Pastor Scott Schul credited a church team for assembling the grant application that secured the funding.

two simple but important directives," he said in a letter describing the effort.

The first was that the money should be said. applied to youth mental health needs.

"Because youth are among the fastest skills to help. growing demographic here at Grace and one of the most at-risk segments in our society," he said.

The second directive was that the work's benefits extend beyond Grace's walls, and into the synod.

Schul reports that those directives have been met.

taken place throughout the synod and the Stomper Project figure that our youth built during the Allegheny Synod Youth Event hosted at Grace are two of the many tangible fruits of this grant," he said.

The foundation's Stompers Project is an effort to stomp out the stigma that often surrounds mental and emotional health. The foundation worked with 115 youth throughout the synod to educate them about mental health.

The figure Schul referenced is a 6-foot, 4-inch statue of a person, called a Stomper. It signifies the effort.

Vicere said a large part of the project is learning about "Mental First Aid."

"Anyone, anywhere can be the one to

"Anyone, anywhere can be the one to make a difference in the life of someone with a mental or substance use challenge — if they know what to do and say."

"My charge to our team included just make a difference in the life of someone with a mental or substance use challenge — if they know what to do and say," she

The first aid program gives people the

She said the concept was developed in Australia in 2001.

Family, caregivers, teachers and others are key to the work of helping adolescents who are having a mental health or addiction crisis.

Course topics include anxiety, depression, substance use and disorders in which "Suicide prevention training that has psychosis may occur, among other con-

> "Each of the programs are a little different, but all are focused around sparking conversations about mental health and spreading available resources," she said.

> "We are all on a spectrum for our mental health, just as we are of our physical health, and as a society we must become more comfortable in talking about it."

> As part of her work since 2012, Vicere has noticed some misconceptions, trends and positive changes. She outlined some of them.

The biggest misconception

Vicere cited National Alliance on Mental Illness statistics noting that one in five org. †

adolescents aged 13 to 18 have or will have a mental health concern.

"When it comes to your youth it can be difficult to distinguish between what is typical adolescent behavior and when it might be something more," she said, noting that the projects described above teach people how to identify the warning signs.

Identifying the risks, dispelling the myths and learning how to take positive action to save a friend or a relative are keys to the program.

Social media's impact

Smartphone use is up, and likely to increase.

Vicere said there is a lot of research about the negative and positive impact the technology has on young minds.

"I think, in general, education is key to increasing protective factors and reducing risk factors in young people," she said.

"Knowing what is out there and how to have courageous conversations are great tools for reaching out to the young people in our lives."

Positive change

Vicere said she has noticed more people becoming involved in the mental health conversation since she started her work in 2012.

"As demonstrated by this grant, communities and organizations are coming together and making it known that no one is alone on their journey," she said.

"There is help and there is hope."

Anyone experiencing a mental health crisis should call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-8255. More on the Jana Marie Foundation is available at www.janamariefoundation.

Senate Recognizes First Lutheran

The Pennsylvania Senate has recognized First Lutheran Church in Johnstown on its 185th anniversary and rededication of its tower chime of 11 bells, which were installed in the early 1920s.

Sen. Wayne Langerholc Jr.

Walter Startzel.

al strength as well as compasof the Johnstown community, ture. exhibiting a tangible example of existence," he said.

First Lutheran Church was bished. †

BY THE LUTHERAN LETTER presented a certificate to Pastor organized in 1832. The first building was dedicated on As-"(First) has provided spiritu- cension Day in 1834. The present edifice was erected in 1922 sionate assistance for residents after a fire razed the prior struc-

> The majestic Skinner 3,000its teachings during its 185-year pipe organ was rededicated in November after it was refur-



Pictured are Leslie Shaffer. Myrtle **Stiffler and Melinda** Clay. They were honored for their continued musical work at Good **Shenherd Lutheran** Church in Windber.

Submitted photo

Great Music at Good Shepherd

BY THE LUTHERAN LETTER

Three women have been honored at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Windber for their music ministries.





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Leslie Shaffer has served for 42 years as choir director, in partnership with Myrtle Stiffler, who has served for 65 years as organist. Both Leslie and Myrtle served at the former First Lutheran in Windber before the 2007 merger of three Windber-area churches — First, Mt. Zion and Grace. Those churches became Good Shepherd. The two women have continued their work at Good Shepherd.

Melinda Clay has served 42 years as an organist. She served at the former Grace church, and has also continued her work at Good Shepherd.

A reception following the Nov. 10 service celebrated the faithful ministry and continued capable and inspiring worship leadership of these three musical talents. †



As I am writing this we are in the middle of stay-at-home orders from the government as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Boredom and depression are close companions for many during this time.

An editorial in the Daily American recently, I thought, provided some good context to the situation. I will do my best to paraphrase it in a few sentences.

Each generation has a great challenge to overcome. In many cases in the past, families were asked to send loved ones off to war, where they were likely to die. For us, we were asked to stay at home for a while to let a great disease pass by with as little impact as possible.

Is it hard? Of course. Watching jobless numbers and death tolls rise is not easy.

But it's also important to remember that God will provide. As the Bible says, bees and birds don't worry about where they will find food or clothing. Their maker provides. It is true for us,

For those of us with an ample supply, it's important to be God's tool to help provide for others in hard times. We will make it through this together. See you in the next edition.

— Rick Kazmer

Stay Connected

Synod news is also online. The Synod's Facebook page is updated with events and video messages from Bishop Rhyne. Find the Synod at Allegheny Synod 8C. For Twitter users, follow the Synod using "AlleghenySynod." Find videos from around the Synod on YouTube at Allegheny Synod, ELCA channel (www. tinyurl.com/synodyoutube).







God is at work in unexpected places. So are our loans.



Camp Agapé in Hickory, Pennsylvania

Used an MIF loan to add classroom space. Now, along with the pool which the campers love splashing around in, they have a place to learn Bible stories—proving yet again that God's work needs no vacation.

The Mission Investment Fund offers competitive rates and terms on loans to established and new-start congregations and ELCA-related ministries. And along with a unique understanding of the needs of congregations, we can offer you something more: the joy of knowing that the loan interest you pay helps fund loans to other ELCA congregations and ministries, like Camp Agapé. To learn more about our investments and ministry loans, contact us at mit also are or 977 894 3522

mif.elca.org or 877.886.3522.

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