

The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

Digital



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Bishop Shock INSTALLED



Bishop Kevin Shock was installed on Feb. 7 at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Johnstown. A new era has started in the Allegheny Synod.

Photos inside



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

TRAVEL STORIES
Page 6



The LUTHERAN Letter

TO INFORM, INSPIRE AND ILLUMINATE

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

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SUBMISSIONS

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

OUR MISSION

Inviting people to love one another.

OUR VISION

All creation living in harmony with Christ.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Articles for the Letter should be about 300 words or less and include applicable website or contact information.

Images should be as high resolution as possible, ideally 300 ppi at 3x5 inches (900x1500 pixels.)

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Allegheny Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Church is Getting Bigger

Those of us who are church insiders are all too familiar with the reality that the church as we know it is in decline.

We know the disappointment of empty buildings.

We feel the frustration of trying to maintain ministries with less money and fewer people.

We get wrapped up in the anxiety of increasing costs and clergy shortages. We long for the days when people simply showed up, sat in their pews, dropped their kids off at Sunday School, and put a little bit of their money in the offering plate.

Simply showing up was enough to keep our ministries humming, and those of us who have been really invested in the life of the church have benefited from the people who were less connected.

Then, they slowly stopped coming. Lives got busier; people moved away; work and other obligations crept into sacred weekend space.

Others things happened, too: no one called them when they got sick or lost a job; someone asked them to keep their kids quiet in worship; the pastor made a thoughtless comment about them; they were made to feel that their thoughts or contributions or identity were no longer welcome. For bad reasons and for good reasons, they drifted away from the institution.



Bishop Shock

(See BIGGER 1, Page 22)

Hymn Sing Brings Joy



First Evangelical Lutheran Church musicians in Altoona played for a Christmas carol hymn sing at the Lutheran Home in Hollidaysburg on Jan. 4. Musicians are Bob Houseman, Vicki Houseman, Claude Fabinyi, and Steve Ellis.

Submitted photo

Lutheran Letter Patrons

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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Some of the items donated to help community members in Bellefonte as part of the Reverse Advent Calendar project. Some of the faithful involved with the work are also pictured.

Submitted photos

Advent Project Invited Giving

By **ELISA OSMAN**

St. John, Bellefonte

Once again this year, residents and staff at The Oaks in Pleasant Gap, and members of St. John Lutheran Church in Bellefonte, partnered to participate in a “Reverse Advent Calendar” project.

All who chose to be part of the project received a December calendar with little doors to open. But instead of receiving something (like a little chocolate or trinket), people were invited to give something.

Each Advent calendar included a daily scripture to read with a devotion guide, a fact about hunger in our area, and a picture revealing an item to consider donating to our local food pantry. Throughout the month, items were purchased and stored until Christmas. Some people chose to donate money instead of in-kind items; these funds were designated to help provide heating assistance. Some people contributed by praying for feeding, assistance, and housing ministries. At the Christmas Eve service, we asked God’s blessing on all of these offerings.

The day after Epiphany, all gifts were shared with the Faith Centre in Bellefonte. The food pantry was excited to receive the items after having shelves depleted at Christmastime. Together, we filled an entire van full of food – there was not an ounce of floor space to be had (with some items needing to be stacked on top of others)! In addition to the in-kind items given, we contributed \$780 for heating assistance and \$280 to the food pantry ministry.

At a time when so many of our neighbors are struggling, this gift of love and generosity is an amazing testimony to the kindness and care of God’s people of all ages, and how we are sharing the love, compassion, and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ with others around us, so that they might experience God’s grace. †

THANK YOU, BISHOP COLLINS



Submitted photos

At left, interim Bishop Barbara Collins consecrating the Holy Communion at Bethany Lutheran in Altoona on Christmas Eve. Above, Collins and others from the synod at a "thank you" celebration at The Lutheran Home in Hollidaysburg. Collins' interim term as bishop has concluded.

Travel Stories

Pastors Reflect on Trips to Historic Places

John 1:38-39 - “When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi (which translated means teacher), where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’”

By PASTOR TED WILLIAMS

Ferguson Township Lutheran Ministry

I just returned from a trip to the Holy Land with a group of mostly clergy and two bishops.

This was my first trip to the Holy Land and it was a life-changing experience.

Our trip was in solidarity with Christians that live in the Holy Land.

We often do not think of Christians living there, but there is a sizable population, most of which are Palestinian.

The Palestinian Christians that hosted us in Bethlehem were amazingly hospitable.

(See HOLY LAND 1, Page 7)



Submitted photo

Pastor Scott Schul and his wife, Linda. “We rode camels at Giza, in the shadow of the pyramids. It was one of my favorite experiences!” Scott Schul said about the photo.

Egypt: The ‘Other’ Holy Land

By PASTOR SCOTT E. SCHUL

Gracie Lutheran, State College

When you think of Egypt, what comes to mind? For most people, it’s pharaohs, pyramids, and deserts teeming with camels. Indeed, I saw all those things during my pilgrimage to Egypt in January, as I traveled alongside a group of ELCA pastors and teaching theologians from across the United States.

(See EGYPT 1, Page 16)



Submitted photos

At left is the Mount of the Beatitudes. Above is a Dead Sea Cave near Qumran.

HOLY LAND 1

(Continued from Page 6)

We were immediately made to feel like part of the family. We developed many new friendships that we will continue in the future. The trip was not just about touring the Holy sites, but also entering a relationship with our siblings there.

We often heard “the war,” and “complications” as we traveled with both Palestinians and Israelis. I don’t have enough space to unpack both of those terms, but there is a lot of meaning in them.

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We spent five nights in Bethlehem exploring the sites nearby, including the Jordan River, where we did a remembrance of baptism service. We visited Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and ended the day by floating in the Dead Sea.

We spent a lot of time in old Jerusalem to include worshiping at Redeemer Lutheran Church and visiting the markets. It looked like something out of a movie with the vendors trying to sell things to us. All the sites held such deep meaning, but one in particular struck me. The Western Wall (Wailing Wall) is the remains of the Second Temple that was destroyed by Romans in 70AD. I was surrounded by both Christians and Jews praying. I was overcome with emotion as I prayed for peace while touching the wall.

This moment brought me to tears with the feeling of God’s presence in that moment.

(See HOLY LAND 2, Page 8)



Pastor Ted Williams, second from left, at The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Submitted photo

HOLY LAND 2

(Continued from Page 7)

We spent most of our time near Jerusalem seeing the many sites that are named in our Gospels. This included Via Dolorosa, or the Way of the Cross: the path Jesus took to his execution and burial. We visited the Mount of Olives and Garden of Gethsemane. Many of the places we stopped at we did a brief worship service and sang. Saint Anne's church near the Pool of Bethesda was an amazing place to sing. The sounds reverberated long after we stopped singing.

The last few days were spent in Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee. We visited many of the sites of Jesus' ministry in Galilee to include Capernaum, Magdala, Cana, Mount of Beatitudes, and of course, took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. We had a communion service on the sea and

learned to dance the Hava Navila.

I foresee that this trip will change how I approach scripture in the future. After having seen and touched many of the places named, I have new insights into first century life.

It was not all sightseeing. Two restaurants that we ate at were so much fun.

The first was lunch at The Canary Restaurant, where we were dressed in traditional clothing and taught traditional Palestinians dances.

We also had dinner at Cheers Restaurant in Bethlehem. We did karaoke and played games and danced with our Palestinian hosts.

I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to have visited the Holy Land. I would love to take a group tour back in the future. If you are interested in a trip, please let me know. "Come and see." †

'We See You'

By **DEACON SUE ELLEN SPOTTS**

Director of Evangelical Mission

"We see you."

Those were the words of Presiding Bishop Curry as he came to the close of his sermon at Bishop Kevin's installation. He wanted us to know that the churchwide expression of the ELCA sees us, knows we are here. He named the many ways we in the church see each other: synod to synod, congregation to synod, leaders to lay people, youth to elders, churchwide to congregation.

The next day, Sunday, the lectionary called us to let our light shine before others so that we will be seen doing work that gives glory to God.

All this has me thinking about seeing and being seen. To see and be seen is central to the mission of the Church. We are called to see what is going on around us in the world; to take note of the hungry, the lonely, the hurting.

Jesus did not spend his ministry inside the walls of the temple, waiting with the congregation for people to show up. Jesus walked on the road and took note of who he saw along the way. He saw people with needs and people who he invited to join him.

After a while, people began to ap-



Sue Ellen Spotts,
Director of
Evangelical
Mission

proach Jesus on their own to be healed or helped.

He had been seen and now people sought him. His light was shining, and people saw his work. We are called to be seen in this way; to be known as a Church that can heal and

feed and lift up those in need of love and healing and dignity.

Many of us take up a fast for Lent. The prophet Isaiah describes true fasting as working to end injustice, sharing bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into our house, and covering the naked when we see them (Isaiah 58).

A fast of seeing: the Gospel of Matthew echoes this when people ask Jesus, "when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" (Matthew 25) Jesus replies that when we see the least of these, we see Jesus. We are called to announce to the hurting people, "we see you."

Recently, 10 ministry sites in the Allegheny Synod received a Daily Bread Grant from ELCA World Hunger funds.

(See SEE, Page 21)

WE are LUTHERAN

Koch Taking Advantage of a Second Chance on Life

By **RICK KAZMER**

Editor

Bethany Lutheran member Terry Koch attended his first service at the Altoona church not long after his birth 66 years ago.

His mom likely didn't know that her son would later become an integral part of the congregation, with a three-decade detour.

"When I was 5 my family transferred to St. Paul, Altoona, because it was a block and a half from our house. I attended St. Paul for 36 years. When St. Paul closed, my family transferred to Bethany," Terry said by email.

Now, Terry wears "many hats" at Bethany. He was council president for six years, served a stint as treasurer, and is currently the technology coordinator. He programs the worship services on the sanctuary screens, and organizes the live-stream.

He also plans, shops for, and cooks food for the monthly clothing and meal giveaways. It's a community ministry that has grown as a vital service to folks struggling with basic needs.

"I enjoy all of the different things I do, but get the most out of the giveaways because I can live as Jesus



Terry Koch

taught us to be by helping, caring for, and feeding those who are in need," Terry said.

Terry and other volunteers are important to congregational stability. Bethany is without a called pastor, so behind-the-scenes

people help to keep the church "active and vibrant," according to Terry.

He is a former teacher at the Atonal Area School District, where he taught for 20 years before switching to counseling. He enjoyed working with kids.

"Watching my students learn and grow was a pleasure to see. I treated my students with respect and understanding and received that in return from them," he said.

Then, one of life's curve balls arrived.

Terry had to retire because of kidney failure.

He has a genetic condition that caused his illness. This barred relatives from donating an organ to him.

(See TERRY 1, Page 12)

Go Tell It Initiative Updates

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



**Pastor
John H. Kratz**

When I think about going to church, I've been asking myself, "What do I expect when I arrive?"

I suppose I look for the basics: good music, a meaningful sermon, and friendly faces. I'm not seeking perfection or a performance, no symphony-caliber music, no world-class oratory, and no greeters escorting me from the parking lot with umbrellas and pastries. So I've often assumed, I don't expect too much.

But then the question shifted in my mind to, "What do I bring to worship?" Do I bring attentiveness, openness, and a willingness to be shaped and changed by the proclaimed Word? Or do I bring a desire hoping primarily to be cared for and attended to?

Yes, I bring an offering but it is more than financial. I believe that a humble heart, a contrite spirit, and a mind open to growth are themselves gifts I can bring to worship.

The word "gifts" may seem unexpected here, yet, I believe it fits. We frequently encounter people who simply do not share these traits and in some cases, may not be able to

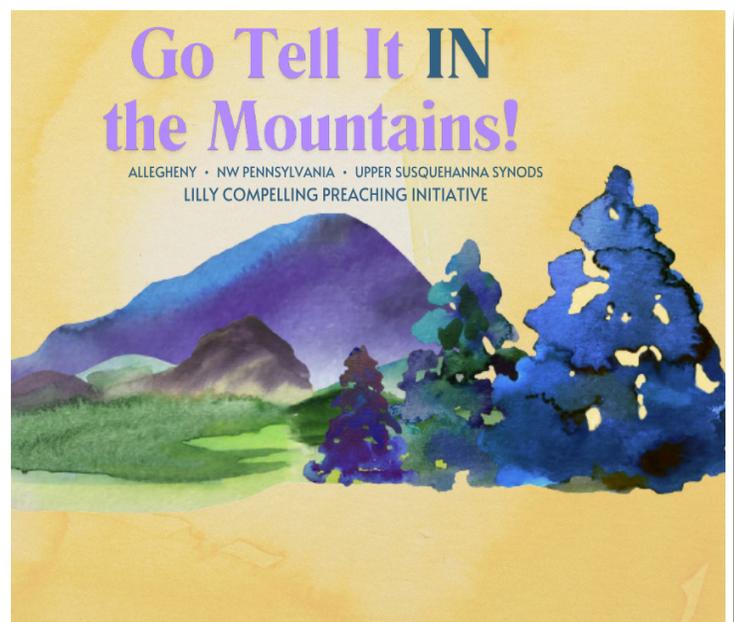
offer them at all!

Too often, the voices being heard are those marked by arrogance, harshness, and demands.

Some of the greatest sadness I've seen comes from individuals or congregations unwilling to grow, to embrace change, or to acknowledge the shifting realities around them. Vulnerability, openness, and adaptability are indeed gifts from the living God that we may bring to worship God.

This spring, may we shift our focus from asking, "What do I expect from worship?" to reflecting on "What do I bring to worship?" In my own humble view, this echoes the heart of Psalm 51:17 "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

(See WELCOME, Page 20)



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**.

TERRY1

(Continued from Page 10)

But after five years of dialysis, Terry received a kidney from a generous organ donor. It's a bittersweet scenario.

"My cadaver kidney came from a young man out on the West Coast who died in an automobile accident. His heart and lungs could not be used due to trauma, but I received his right kidney, others received his left kidney, liver, eyes, and skin. I have never had contact with his family. I did write a letter to them, but it is up to them to respond, which they never did," Terry wrote. His transplant surgery happened on Oct. 17, 2020, at UPMC Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh.

"God granted me a second chance on life," Terry said.

The ordeal tested his faith. But he emerged stronger, and committed to prayer during four months of recovery.

"I've had many surgeries since my transplant. Multiple hernias, artery

surgeries, and aneurysm repairs have needed to be done, however, I am now 5½ years post-transplant and my kidney is doing extremely well. My kidney functions exceed what the doctors were hoping for. One of my favorite Bible verses is Philippians 4:13 - 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me,'" Terry said.

"I would repeat that every time I walked into the dialysis clinic for those five years. I continue reading the Bible, but have also read many other books on various topics. They all have strengthened my faith and helped me realize that I am the person God created me to be."

Terry is also a dog-lover. He has five dogs, including three golden doodles, a standard poodle, and a Maltipoo. They are a mix of dogs from breeders and rescues.

He also has a couple pets who have "passed over the rainbow bridge."

(See TERRY 2, Page 13)

Lenten Musical Meditation, at Grace

By **LAUREL SANDERS**

Director of Music and Arts Ministries at
Grace Lutheran Church in State College

Grace Lutheran Church invites you to their 2026 Lenten Musical Meditation “I Believe: Songs of Faith, Hope, and Joy.”

Led by Laurel Sanders, Director of Music and Arts Ministries at Grace,

this worshipful event is the 13th annual musical meditation the church has hosted.

Each year, approximately 50 singers from multiple churches and worship traditions (Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, nondenomination-

al, and more) as well as choristers from several area ensembles, come together to prepare and ultimately share a Lenten journey experienced through music.

The program will also include The Bells of Grace handbell choir, led by Sarah Rodgers.

(See **MUSIC**, Page 14)

TERRY 2

WE ARE LUTHERAN

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

TERRY KOCH: I’m not sure I remember my “earliest” memory; however, I have many memories from being a lifelong Lutheran. My mother told me that the first service I was present at is when I was 10 days old. Singing in the choir in grade school, being in Christmas pageants, Confirmation, etc. all stick out in my mind.

TLL: What would you tell someone considering attending a Lutheran Church for the first time?

TK: I share that as ELCA Lutherans we

are to love God and others unconditionally. Gender, race, orientation, social status, being an outcast, etc. Jesus taught us by example that we are to love everyone. I say, “come, visit, and stay.”

TLL: What are you praying for the most lately?

TK: For peace and kindness to return to our country and world. For those less fortunate who are hungry, homeless, abused, dealing with mental and addiction issues, that people would not be so judgmental of others and learn to love others for who they are. Like most others, I also have some more personal things I pray for daily.†



A scene from a previous musical performance at Grace Lutheran, State College

Submitted photos

MUSIC

(Continued on Page 13)

The event takes place at 7 p.m. March 25 in the church, located at 205 S. Garner Street in State College. There is no cost to attend.

Brenda Austin's serene handbell selection "Ah, Holy Jesus," sets a meditative tone for this year's musical journey and is followed by a men's ensemble chanting Richard Rice's setting of the "Nicene Creed," a nod to the 1700th anniversary of the foundational statement of faith shared by churches around the world.

Other featured music includes Bob Chilcott's "A Little Jazz Mass"; Antonio Vivaldi's "Credo" (with organ and strings); Fred Onovwerosuoke's English-language credo from his "Afro-Caribbean Mass"; and a second handbell selection, with several congregational hymns peppered in-between. The music progresses from quiet reverence to the dramatic unfolding of Jesus' life and ends with a celebration of God's boundless mercy. The Afro-Caribbean creed and Cathy Moglebust's African-influenced "Love One Another" conclude the journey as musicians and listeners celebrate God's promises fulfilled in the resurrection. The program will last approximately 75 minutes.

A community meal and brass prelude music precede the musical meditation, and ample parking is available in the church parking lot. Dinner is available from 5-6:15 p.m. in the church's fellowship hall (suggested donation: \$7 per person; youth 21 and under eat for free). Prelude music follows at 6:40, played by Nitany Brass. The Lenten Musical Meditation begins at 7 p.m. Free-will offerings are encouraged to defray costs, but everyone is welcome, whether or not they contribute.

Invite friends and colleagues to join area singers and ringers as they walk a musical journey of faith that leads us to the cross and prepares us for the full joy of the resurrection.

(Laurel Sanders is the director of the Lenten Ecumenical Choir and serves as Director of Music and Arts Ministries at Grace Lutheran Church in State College. For more information, email her at lsanders@glcpa.org, or call the church office at 814-238-2478.) †

Candidacy Updates



Penny Koontz



Ryan Custead



Anne Whitney

By PASTOR MARTY JO IRVIN-STELLABOTTE

Assistant to the Bishop for Communications

The Allegheny Synod's Candidacy Committee in January approved several candidates as part of the ordination process.

Penny Koontz was approved for ordination, and Ryan Custead and Anne Whitney were approved for entrance into candidacy. Koontz is currently serving as vicar at Good Shepherd Lutheran, Windber. Custead is a student at United Lutheran Seminary, and Whitney is a student at Wartburg Seminary. Congratulations to all three candidates! Please join us in praying for them as they continue the process toward ordination. †

More Photos from the Bishop's Installation



Submitted photos



Submitted photo

The Egypt travelers at an historic site. Another scene from Egypt is on Page 17.

EGYPT 1

(Continued from Page 6)

But as I made my way across Egypt - from the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, across the Suez Canal, into the vibrant capital city of Cairo, and down the fertile Nile River Valley - I came to the realization that Egypt has been a central place of formation and preparation for God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. One might even refer to Egypt as the "other" holy land.

For example, consider Joseph (of the coat of many colors). His journey into Egypt began as an exile into slavery due to his brothers'

jealousy. But God used Egypt to form, transform, and renew Joseph, so he could be prepared as a great leader who would save his people from starvation.

Another famous example is Moses. He was reared by Pharaoh's daughter as an Egyptian, but eventually embraced his Hebrew heritage, which set in motion a series of events (including a conversation with God through a burning bush in the Egyptian desert) which propelled Moses to leadership of his people and a long trek that would carry them to the threshold of the promised land of Israel.

(See EGYPT 2, Page 17)



EGYPT 2

(Continued from Page 16)

Jesus, too, had an Egypt connection. That's where his family fled to escape the massacre of children in Bethlehem, which Herod ordered shortly after Jesus' birth. Twenty-five sites in Egypt claim a connection to the Holy Family. Even today, the Middle Eastern nation with the most Christians is Egypt.

Egypt reminds us that we all need those places of spiritual retreat, refuge, and formation. Sometimes our "spiritual Egypt" may seem like an exile or a step back, but God uses those moments to prepare and transform us for ministry. How has God done that in your life? How is God preparing you right now for your next leap forward in your life of discipleship?

Egypt is the perfect place to consider these very personal and intensely spiritual questions. I encourage you to dig into your Bible and see for yourself how important Egypt has been in the story of God and God's people. Better yet, join me as I lead a group there from Jan. 14-23, 2027. Space will be limited to about 30 guests, so learn more, [here](#). Perhaps Egypt will be the setting of the next chapter in your story of faith. †

Bishop Names Roster of Assistants

By **PASTOR MARTY JO IRVIN-STELLABOTTE**

Assistant to the Bishop for Communications

As Pastor Kevin Shock begins his six-year term as Bishop of the Allegheny Synod, the Synod Council approved a staff structure of four quarter-time Assistants to fulfill the duties of the Office of the Bishop alongside him.

“There are advantages to this structure, one of which is keeping gifted clergy at their current ministry sites while adding their gifts to synod staff,” Shock said. “It is my pleasure to introduce your Synod staff and their positions.”

Deacon Alicia Anderson will serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Formation. She will oversee our synod’s candidacy process, work with people who are discerning public ministry, and coordinate educational events for lay people and clergy. She also serves as Campus Minister for Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State.

Pastor Tyler Graham will serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Transition. He will work closely with congregations who are seeking new leaders, clergy who are seeking a new call, and with deans to secure pastoral coverage for ministries in times of vacancy. He also serves as pastor of the Living Waters Lutheran Parish.

Pastor Marty Jo Irvin-Stellabotte will serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Communications. She will generate official Synod communications across all of our media, interpret ELCA communications for our Synod, and work with congregations to help them spread their news in our Synod and local communities. She also serves as Pastor of the Geeseytown-Newry Lutheran Parish.

Pastor Traci Marriott will serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Life Together. She will work with others to match people’s gifts to ministry needs in our Synod, to encourage a healthy philosophy of stewardship for congregations and individuals, and to ensure that synod resources feed ministry well. She also serves as Pastor at St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Martinsburg.

In addition, Michelle Bossler will continue to serve as the synod’s office manager; Deacon Sue Ellen Spotts will continue as shared Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) with Upper Susquehanna Synod; and Pastor John Kratz continues as director of the Go Tell It IN the Mountains Initiative among Allegheny, Northwest PA, and Upper Susquehanna Synods. †

Synod
staffing
updates



Anderson



Graham



Irvin-Stellabotte



Marriott



Staying Connected to the Synod

By PASTOR MARTY JO IRVIN-STELLABOTTE

Assistant to the Bishop for Communications

One of the ongoing challenges in any faith community is communication – helping everyone stay in the know and keeping them informed of what’s happening.

We know that even when announcements are shared in our congregations on Sunday morning, printed in the bulletin, and shared on social media, important details can still easily slip by and we may even forget whether we heard or read something.

These challenges are faced by congregations as well as synods, because we are all busy and often experience information overload.

Between work, school, and family commitments, it can be difficult to keep up on what’s happening in the life of the church, the synod, and the ELCA. Plus, we all prefer to receive information differently. Some people prefer email, whereas others would rather read a printed hard copy of an announcement or story.

Some of us check our phones throughout the day for updates and scroll through social media for the latest news, whereas some feel overwhelmed by all the information and choose to not use technology as often.

As a synod, we want to be thought-

ful about how (and how often) we share information so that no one feels left out or disconnected from what is happening throughout our region.

Together, we are the Allegheny Synod – we are in community and we want to continue to build upon our vision of inviting people to love one another and sharing the good news.

One of the ways we seek to do this is through consistency in sharing announcements and messages by using multiple channels, so that news reaches you in the way you’ll be most likely to see it.

Here are some of the ways you can stay connected to what’s happening:

- [The Lutheran Letter](#), published bi-monthly, shares wonderful stories and photos of the good news happening throughout our synod. You may subscribe to receive this in your inbox by emailing office@alleghe-nysynod.com.
- Our new monthly e-newsletter, Synod Connections, provides important updates from the Office of the Bishop and event photos; you may subscribe to it on the synod’s website, alleghe-nysynod.org, under the [News/Events](#) tab.

(See CONNECT , Page 20)

WELCOME

(Continued from Page 11)

Jessica Claycomb Joins Go Tell It IN The Mountains

We are delighted to welcome Jessica Claycomb as the new administrative assistant to Director John Kratz at the Go Tell It IN The Mountains Preaching Initiative. Claycomb brings valuable experience that will strengthen our outreach efforts, support our mission, and enhance communication across the initiative.

This initiative by the Northwestern PA, Allegheny, and Upper

Susquehanna Synods of the ELCA focuses on developing skilled preachers and spiritual growth resources. We value effective communication and aim to spread faith through compelling preaching.

Her arrival marks an exciting step forward, and we look forward to the positive impact she will bring to our work.

Outside the office, Claycomb enjoys spending time with her family, hiking, exploring nature, and coaching high school girls rugby at Blair United in Hollidaysburg. †

CONNECT

(Continued from Page 19)

- The synod's website also has a [“News” page](#); important updates as well as information about partner ministries, upcoming events, and announcements may be found on that page.

We also share photos, upcoming events, and time-sensitive information on the synod's Facebook page: facebook.com/AlleghenySynod8c

Pastors and deacons may find information geared specifically toward them on the synod's website under the [“Resources”](#) Information tab, including continuing education opportunities and synod events and programs. Minutes from the monthly deans' meetings are also emailed to our conference deans for them to share with the pastors/deacons in their conference.

Email blasts are sent occasionally to congregations, rostered leaders, lay leaders, and individuals who have subscribed to receive news, regarding time-sensitive information. We're also building up our email and newsletter lists and encouraging everyone to sign up and stay connected.

We have a “dedicated” email address just for communication-related topics. If you have information you'd like us to share or if you or your congregation are doing some great things, we want to know! Drop us a line at alleghenysynodcommunications@gmail.com and we will be happy to share it! †



Important Assembly Details

By THE LUTHERAN LETTER

The 38th Allegheny Synod Assembly will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. June 20 at the Blair County Convention Center. This year's assembly is in-person only with no live-streamed option.

The theme is "God is doing a new thing."

Assembly is a time when faithful gather to join in fellowship, worship, and to conduct important synod business. The churchwide representative will be Pastor Sara Cutter, senior director for operational effectiveness in the Christian Community and Leadership Home Area in the ELCA's churchwide organization.

Opening worship will be at 9 a.m., and all are welcome to attend. Anyone who plans to stay for the rest of the assembly should register. Voting members should arrive no later than 8:30 a.m.

Congregations and pastors should watch their email in the latter part of March and/or check the [assembly section of the website](#) for the registration and event information, along with other key details. †

SEE

(Continued from Page 9)

These grants recognize and support the feeding ministries being done, seeing people in need and being seen feeding them, and shining their light so the glory of God is known and the love of God is experienced.

Who else in our communities needs to hear us announce in love, "we see you."

When we identify those people, those situations, we identify a starting place for our mission. And, when we are seen in mission, the love of God is seen. †

BIGGER 1

(Continued from Page 2)

Yet, they didn't drift too far. People who stopped showing up at church, or people whose parents stopped showing up at church before they were even born, are everywhere around us.

Some of them don't spend a lot of time thinking about God. Maybe they pray when a close friend is facing a crisis. Maybe they wish someone would pray for them.

It's not quite enough to make them want to sit in a pew on Sunday morning. There are many, though, who might want to sit in a pew on Sunday morning, but don't know where to go or how to start.

Many spend a lot of time thinking about God. Many put a lot of energy into loving their neighbors. Many pray often, but feel like they have to do it by themselves. There are so many people out there who are trying to build a life of faith without having a faith community.

How do I know this? Because they talk to me. They tell me things, because they have identified me as a safe person to talk to. They think I'm safe, because I have worked hard at listening without offering excuses or fixes.

Here are some of the things I have heard in the last few weeks alone: "It will take more than a couple of nice visits to church to undo decades of religious trauma growing up."

I totally understand that sentiment.

"I can't figure out why the people who are so nice to me on Sunday morning say such horrible things about other

people on Facebook."

That comment makes my stomach turn.

"I quit inviting my friends to church, because it seems like other people don't want them there."

I would probably quit inviting them, too. It's no wonder the institution of the church has been in decline.

So why do I think that the church is getting bigger? Because all of the people who made those comments to me sought out a religious leader for conversation. I know so many people who want a relationship with God, if not yet with the church, although many of them may want that, as well.

My heart was so full at my installation because of the people who showed up, and my heart was bursting open to see people there who hadn't been to church in years. I know that Jesus loves them and gives them life and salvation. I know the church is getting bigger, because of what Peter quotes from the prophet Joel to the crowds on the day of Pentecost: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

It's not just the people who sit in a pew on Sunday morning. Many more are longing for God and are longing to be loved by God's people. They are the Church, even if they don't currently participate in the institution.

The day of Pentecost wasn't about institutions; it was an outpouring of love. It was God breaking down barriers of language, ethnic prejudice, and religious piety.

(See BIGGER 2, Page 24)

Campus Ministry Updates

By THE LUTHERAN LETTER

In early March, a small group from Lutheran Campus Ministry will spend their spring break working to help with hurricane cleanup near Boone, North Carolina.

In partnership with the United Methodist campus ministry, Lutheran Disaster Response and the North Carolina Synod, and Lutherock Camp and Conference Center, students and campus ministers will make connections with the community and help in the recovery efforts.

Campus Ministry Madness has begun

Help support Lutheran Campus Ministry sites through March by donating in this friendly fundraising challenge between campuses. Raise funds for the important work with students on campuses

and increase the visibility of campus ministry everywhere.

You can help LCM at Penn State show off its dedicated fans, and (even more importantly) support the transformational work happening through campus ministry nationwide.

How can you help?

1. Make a contribution to LCM at Penn State (or another school) at <https://luminelca.org/madness/>

2. Watch for weekly updates and match ups on social media. Please like and share social media posts on Facebook and Instagram @lutheranpennstate

3. Invite friends and family who care about campus ministry to share our posts and support Lutheran campus ministry at Penn State and elsewhere in the country.

This event runs through April 1. †

+LuMin
 Support Your Team
ELCA
Campus Ministry
Madness
 JOIN THE FUN!
 Lutheran at PENN STATE
 Lutheran Campus Ministry at Penn State
 March 1 - April 1, 2026

BIGGER 2

(Continued from Page 22)

It was a celebration of people, who had been separated from religious life, being transformed by love and life and salvation.

We remain in a Pentecost moment. People who are calling out for salvation and love are all around us. It's easy to miss them because we don't understand their language of faith, and may-

be they don't speak ours. I pray that the Holy Spirit will come, gentle and mighty, to fill our hearts, to open our ears, to break the locks on our institutional doors. I pray we can find them and listen well to one another, so that we can witness how big God is making the Church and learn from one another what being Church means. May it be so. †

BEFORE YOU GO

I ended my last final thought with the message “see you in the spring.” That might have been a little premature.

As I sit here today during the last week of February, there are a couple inches of snow falling in Somerset. Hopefully spring-like weather has arrived as you are reading this. This time of year is becoming one of my favorites. I enjoy fish fries, St. Patrick's Day, and of course, Easter. The season always reminds me that there are still plenty of faithful in our communities, as Bishop Shock noted in his piece. I saw TV newscasters with ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday, and lines at local fish fries for folks who forgo meat on Fridays. When we celebrate Easter at my in-laws, “The Greatest Story Ever Told” is always on the television.

It's a yearly reminder about the meaning for the holiday, which can sometimes be lost among the Easter eggs. We are going to make sure Nora knows that Jesus' story comes first. Speaking of Nora, her birthday – April 1 – is another reason this time of year is becoming so enjoyable for Courtney and me. It looks like Easter will fall on April 1 in 2029, making for quite a celebration (no joke) several springs from now. Growing up, I remember Easters with snow, warm Easters where it seemed summer had arrived early, and weather in-between. But even now, early buds are starting to push through the ground, a natural signal of renewal, and part of the message of the resurrection. I hope you have a wonderful Easter, regardless the weather.

Rick Kazmer, editor