

# *The Epistle*

July 2021

Vol. 48, No. 7

## **THE NOW AND YET-TO-BE OF CHURCH**

**By The Rev. Christopher Mietlowski, Assistant to the Bishop**

The Metro NY Synod has been saying “**We are church together.**” I'd like to talk about that phrase in sections starting with “**we are...**”

### **We are...**

We are the beloved children of God.

We are made in the image of God.

We are the object of Jesus' love and the very reason he hung from the cross.

We are forgiven, redeemed, made new in the resurrected Christ.

We are fed God's abundant mercy and grace in word and meal.

We are loved... always.

We are forever held in the promises of Jesus.

### **We are.**

### **We are church.**

Recently, the church celebrated Pentecost. Many congregations invited worshipers to wear red. Some prayed the Lord's Prayer in multiple languages simultaneously. Yeah, we get Pentecost. *Or do we?*

Perhaps we see the Pentecost experience more of an historical event. The birth of the church some say... the launching of the disciples, the followers of the Resurrected and Ascended Christ as living witnesses of Easter hope. The scene was chaotic, uncontrollable, unexplainable. People suddenly began speaking in new languages, doing something they couldn't just moments before, being sent to places they hadn't anticipated.

Chaos, uncertainty, lack of control, change. Lots of change. Those are things we tend to avoid, to resist. We like predictable. Comfortable. Manageable. Smooth. Steady. We want things to go the way we prefer, to look the way we imagine. These past 14 months have underscored that we absolutely don't like our lives to be disturbed. Disrupted. Unsettled.

The Holy Spirit (the power of God) descended and touched each disciple which caused them to do something they couldn't do just seconds before. Unlikely people doing unlikely things in unlikely places. The entire situation was out of their control.

Many titles are given to the Spirit: The Advocate. The Comforter. The Protector. The Guide. We like those. They're gentle, soothing, supportive. But we are less welcoming of the influence of the Spirit when it causes disruption, upset when the Spirit provokes and pushes us toward radical change. That part is harder to handle.

Over the centuries, as the church grew, as the institution expanded with immense power, the Holy Spirit became “domesticated.” I suspect Pentecost in our congregations on Sunday looked nothing like the chaotic event described in Jerusalem long ago.



The church that has been so dominant for centuries has been steadily shrinking over the last 50 years. Research tells us that only 15% of Christian congregations are growing; 85% have plateaued or are in decline. But we know that all too well don't we? Used to be that anywhere a few people built a building with a steeple, hung a sign, and opened the doors... people just walked in.

It's just not that way any longer. The era of Christendom, the time of the church's powerful authority and influence is behind us. I'm not saying the Christian church is dying. For the body of Christ will remain forever. But the form it takes needs to evolve.

A pastor recently wrote a book called "Canoeing the Mountains." In it, he described the Lewis and Clark expedition. Sent by President Jefferson with a mission to find the waterway to the west, from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean, the explorers Lewis and Clark set out on their journey. They paddled and paddled, sometimes navigating turbulent waters... but eventually... unexpectedly... they ran out of water. They had no choice but to abandon their canoes and adapt. They had to adapt and figure out other ways to continue their mission.

The author makes the point that the church, in its current model, is running out of water. Rowing harder is not the answer for us. (Rev. Tod Bolsinger) It's time for the church to adapt. To step out of our familiar patterns and traditions and structures and expectations to continue our mission of proclaiming Christ crucified and risen.

### **We are church.**

**We are church...** called to worship the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves. To be God's Easter love loose in our communities which calls us to reimagine, reshape, redirect, reinvent, repurpose the way we are church.

In my role as a deployed assistant, I have care of almost 70 congregations in our synod. Nearly half... nearly half... are in some kind of significant transition. (and a bunch more are soon to follow). Many congregations are facing the reality that they can no longer support a full-time pastor.

One thing is certain, any answer to the statement "**All we need to do is...**" will not be the long-term solution. **All we need to do is...** hang a bigger sign outside. All we need to do is... get a youth director, then we will have more children in our church. We know youth in our culture have found other ways to connect and socialize. **All we need to do is...** get a praise band. That will attract new members.

Some congregations in our synod are considering merger as a path forward which is a legitimate consideration. **If...** if... it is an effort to simply consolidate expenses and does not address the "why," why are you church in your community? Who is being served by your ministry? How are you living out Christ's action through you and your faith community, then the merger may only delay the inevitable.

Beloved, the church everywhere, every denomination across the country... stands at a crossroads. Change must happen. Adaptive change. Our circumstances cannot be solved with quick fixes or simple solutions. The era of Christendom is behind us. What the church will evolve into, what it will become is ahead of us. We are living in this unsettling in-between time, a time of significant transition. No one knows what the future will look like. Add to it, many of us are anxious and wondering how things will look like post-covid. Who will return to worship? Who won't? The reality is that the church faced major problems before the global pandemic. COVID has intensified things.

**We are.**

**We are church.**

**We are church together.**

Long ago, the power of Almighty God caused chaos. Wonderful, amazing, terrifying, glorious chaos. Something incredible happened. The power of Almighty God lifted, blessed, guided, empowered, and sent the followers of Jesus in new directions to be church together, “to live for something else, someone else beyond themselves.” (Loren Mead)

The path we’re on is not sustainable. Our situation is serious, bordering on urgent... many congregations are in crisis. We just can’t keep going as we are. *“The reality is that we have a hard time thinking beyond what we are and have now, not to mention nostalgia for times long over and gone. With fewer thoughtful younger folk daring to be part of faith communities, we end up with what one pastor, Rev. Pastor David Frost calls “survival theology.” We will do anything to stay open, avoid the slightest challenge in order not to lose already dwindling members.”* (Fr. Michael Plekon)

We are not in this alone. That same powerful Pentecost Spirit... is with us. We are not facing these challenges by ourselves as individuals or as separate congregations. We are bound with one another beyond our street addresses. We are bound together as conferences. We are bound as a Synod. We are bound as a national and international body of Christ.

Moving forward by the Spirit means change. Change means there will be loss. We will need to let go of some of the ways we have lived out church for centuries. Dying and rising are at the core of Christianity. Remember when Jesus approached the fishermen James and John, the Sons of Zebedee and called them to follow? They dropped their nets and walked away. They left a way of life that was so familiar to follow Jesus into an unknown future.

Please don’t think my next sentence will be a radical call to a nomadic life of homelessness and street corner preaching. But we do need to discern the Spirit’s prompting... in us... among us... and through us, calling us to reimagine, redirect, reinvent, and repurpose the way... **we are church together.** Can we be open to possibilities and new ways to gather as God’s people?

Recalling Jesus’ prayer on our behalf: **“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in the name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”** (John 17:11) I invite you to imagine something. We are saying these words to each other: **“we are church together.”** Can we hear these words coming from Jesus to us? Can we imagine Jesus saying to us **“my beloved, we are church together!”**

God has a way of choosing unlikely people to do unlikely things in unlikely places so that the work of Christ, the gifting of holy hope and divine love continues to transform this broken creation.

**“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”** (Isaiah 6:8)



## BIBLE STUDY AT THE BEACH

Sunken Meadow State Park Boardwalk Pavilion

**TUESDAYS + STARTING JULY 6 + 9:30AM**

### *Church Council News*

**Synod Assembly Delegate Needed-** This year's Metropolitan New York Synod assembly will be held virtually on August 20 & 21. We are looking for one more delegate. We must no later than July 19. Please contact Kevin or Pete if interested.

**Gloria Dei Collaboration Team-** The Gloria Dei team for the Huntington/Melville Discernment is complete! Many thanks to Barbara Thomas, David Mohr, Lindsey Quenqua, Deena Scott, and Pete Teichmann for agreeing to join this important ministry. Work will begin later this summer providing periodic reports to the congregation on the progress of the effort.

**Congregation Council-**Your Congregation Council met virtually on June 16:

\*Finances - weekly envelope receipts continues below the budgeted amount. The second PPP loan is assisting with salary and utility payment

\*Collaboration effort - at the time of the meeting, all positions on Gloria Dei's team were not yet filled (that has since changed)

\*Olson Hall reopening for events and use by community groups - Council approved a motion to retain the current rental fee structure until December when it will be revisited for 2022

\*Worship - discussions about returning the service to its full length with singing and of once again worshipping outside during the summer months

\*Chapel usage - the Chapel Committee continues to seek a suitable group to use the Chapel. Discussions are on-going with a prospective church group.

\*The Congregation Council also met with the interim pastoral candidate, Rev. Judith VanOsdol, on June 15. Pastor VanOsdol was given a tour of our campus and entertained questions from the Council, as well as posing questions to the Council. Rev. VanOsdol is a highly experienced pastor who has served the church both domestically and internationally in Argentina and Switzerland. More information on the interim timeline will be announced as it becomes available. Pulpit supply pastors and deacons will continue to lead us in worship through at least August.

### *Scriptures for July 2021*

**Sunday July 4—Pentecost 6**

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

**Sunday July 11—Pentecost 7**

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-+29

**Sunday July 18—Pentecost 8**

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34,53-56

**Sunday July 25—Pentecost 9**

2 Kings 4:42-44

Psalm 145:10-18

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

# ***Lutheran Counseling Center—Update for July***

## **What is the ‘New Normal’ and How Can I Be Ready?**

*By Molly W. Blancke, MPA, BSW, Executive Director*

*“For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” Is. 30:15*

Now that COVID-19 rates of infection are lessening along with a higher percentage of those fully vaccinated, how do we resume our pre-pandemic lives? Will we have another outbreak? Will we ever feel confident in large crowds? How will our lives change? These are questions that no one can answer. However, before we propose to resume a pre-pandemic ‘normal’ life, we need to recognize and resolve any of the following common mental health issues that we may have experienced as a result of the pandemic during the last 15 months:

Fatigue that often poses as burnout; feeling tired even after plenty of sleep; being overwhelmed by so much work yet having problems focusing; wanting to ‘seek community’ but still reluctant to leave home.

Anger that manifests itself either towards the pandemic itself and losses incurred as a result or towards others, as seen in ‘road rage’ and irritability to the point of attacking others with harmful words, accusations, even sometimes resulting in physical violence.

Anxiety and stress that has snowballed. Studies show anxiety to be three times the problem that it was in 2019; substance abuse rates have risen drastically in many homes.

Problems sleeping during the pandemic are reported in two ways: those who cannot get to sleep or stay asleep for long periods of time and those who sleep too much, unmotivated to get out of bed in the morning, possibly as a result of depression.

Strained relationship issues with spouses and other close family members. These stresses have in some cases led to verbal abuse or domestic violence.

Extended grief over the losses we have incurred including the loss of loved ones, complicated by perhaps not being able to be with them during their illness; loss of a job or money; loss of health; in some cases, loss of purpose in life.

Insecurity about the future, especially in deciding how to incorporate the new with the old. Pastors and church leaders are among those who are uncertain of what changes are needed to continue spreading the gospel while keeping their church intact in the midst of lessening attendance and donations. Where is God directing the Church of today?

While many of these issues may seem daunting, refocusing on God as the priority in our lives and seeking Him in prayer and in Sabbath rest can make a huge difference in how we respond to whatever we are facing. One’s perspective can often provide the motivation needed to conquer fear and move forward. However, if habits of resting, proper diet, exercise and doing things you enjoy with those you love no longer seems to take away your pain, fear or anxiety, please consider calling the Lutheran Counseling Center for help. A caring, Christian counselor can walk with you through your struggles and help you process your losses, giving you the strength and courage necessary to be open to God’s future direction.

*Please visit our website at: [www.lccny.org](http://www.lccny.org) for more information. For an appointment with a counselor, call LCC at 1-800-317-1173. All sessions are virtual.*



# BIRTHDAYS!

<i>Kristin Calderone</i>	7/2
<i>Sophia Karl</i>	7/2
<i>Jessica Daniello</i>	7/4
<i>Samantha Cohen</i>	7/7
<i>Karen DeMotta</i>	7/9
<i>Ryan Pascucci</i>	7/9
<i>Charles Rempe</i>	7/11
<i>Robbie Fagan</i>	7/12
<i>Shane Brennan</i>	7/13
<i>Marilyn Miltner</i>	7/13
<i>Louise Palmieri</i>	7/13
<i>Steven Schneider</i>	7/15
<i>Carter Phillips</i>	7/16
<i>Michael Readinger</i>	7/16
<i>Lisa DelGaudio</i>	7/17
<i>Kaitlyn Ruege</i>	7/18
<i>Nancy Schneider</i>	7/18
<i>Janice Miller</i>	7/19
<i>Joseph Pascucci</i>	7/19
<i>Patricia Pantazis</i>	7/25
<i>Karin Harms</i>	7/26
<i>Diane Orehosky</i>	7/28
<i>Nicole Schneider</i>	7/29
<i>Richard Thyden</i>	7/30
<i>Jessica Bowden</i>	7/31

Summer  
is here!

This is the day the  
LORD has made;  
let us rejoice  
and be glad in it.

PSALM 118:24



## STAYING CONNECTED

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**Stephen Goldstein, Organist & Adult Choir Director**  
Email: inspanctus@gmail.com

**Joseph's Storehouse Food Pantry, Olson Hall**  
**Dennis Hood, Director**  
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**JULY 2021**

