



# Northwest Washington Synod

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

January 2022

Dear Beloveds in Christ,

Grace and Peace to you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For many of us, 2020 and 2021 were difficult years. Isolation, fear, anxiety, depression, job loss, loneliness, family disputes, illness, political polarization, and grief all played a part in making this a challenging time. On top of these struggles, many of you are concerned about your congregation. Your concerns might include worship attendance, budget matters, employee retention, leader recruitment, COVID concerns, and building maintenance. I feel all of this. All of these things weigh on my heart, as well. And, truthfully, difficult conversations will be needed by congregations and councils regarding all of these things.

But there are other questions and other topics to grapple with, too. Perhaps even more important conversations. Author and consultant Susan Beaumont writes:

"A congregation that is not growing is dying. However, growth won't necessarily be reflected numerically. It doesn't have to involve more bodies in worship or in membership, or more dollars in the budget. It should involve growth related to the congregation's proximate purpose: deepening spiritual practices, integrating kids with special needs into the life of the congregation, strengthening intergenerational connections, and the like. A leader trying to move an organization away from general aspirations about growth, toward a more specific purpose, can ask these questions. Growth to what end; what will growth accomplish that is central to our mission? Who will benefit from growth? Is growth possible or even desirable? Where will growth come from? (*How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, p. 14.)"

These and other questions are important to talk about and wrestle with – especially when the future looks so different from the past. I truly believe that a vital congregation is one with a sense of purpose, deep spirituality, and engagement with their neighborhood. Yes, sustaining a ministry takes money and people. But it is much more important to have meaning and purpose, to continue to talk about what God is calling for you to do and to be, and to participate in what God is already doing around you and within you.

I am excited and hopeful for our future together. I trust that the hope I have is not false or illusory. This hope is not based on some "pie in the sky" optimism. Instead, I am trusting that through all things, the God who comes to us as a baby still comes to us in our need and our distress. While the world might not always be as we would like it to be, I have hope that the Holy Spirit is dancing us into a new world.

I am so thankful for all of you – for your grit, your determination, your faithfulness, and your willingness to engage with one another – even when you might disagree. In this Epiphany season, may God continue to reveal Godself – through you and through your neighbors. And, as Paul writes in Romans, "*Now may God, the fountain of hope, fill you to overflowing with uncontainable joy and perfect peace. And may the power of the Holy Spirit continually surround your life with super-abundance until you radiate with hope!*"

+Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee