

CONNECTED, GENEROUS, FREE TO SERVE

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Dear church,

We have been living with this pandemic (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/tag/covid-19/>) for nearly a year. So much has changed. Bubbles, personal protective equipment, social distancing and one-way grocery aisles are part of our lexicon and everyday experience. Who knew, a year ago, that face masks would be advertised as ideal stocking stuffers? Our homes have become offices, schools and gyms. Our commutes have been cut down from hours of traffic to walking over to the dining room table. I do not look forward to the weekly summary from my iPhone that tells me how many hours a day I am staring at a screen.

But the pandemic has also revealed the remarkable resilience and creativity of this church. Within weeks of shelter-in-place restrictions, thousands of our congregations converted to online worship, Bible studies and coffee hours. As the economy stuttered and people lost jobs, you stepped up the work of your food pantries. When kids needed internet access to go to virtual school, you became neighborhood hot spots.

We became more connected. And the gospel was heard by people who, in the “Before Times,” would never have come to church.

There is a story about the devil bragging to a pastor, saying that the pandemic was the devil’s tool to close all the churches—to which the pastor replied, “We have opened a church in every home.”

You have been generous. In March and April we began to hear concern from our bishops about synod ministries. What would happen to camps and campus ministries? What would happen to congregations that were anchors in communities and were already stressed before the pandemic? We offered Daily Bread grants (https://support.elca.org/site/TR?fr_id=1391&pg=entry)—\$500 from the churchwide organization/\$500 from the local congregation. We hoped that 50 congregations might be able to raise the matching funds. So far 374 grants have been awarded. Working with synod bishops we launched the COVID-19 Appeal (<https://community.elca.org/advanced-donation-form/covid-19-response-fund>), which is designed to support key ministries in synods. You stepped up and in eight months have given over \$1.7 million. These grants have been distributed to ministries in 62 of our 65 synods.

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Now it's 2021. The pandemic is still with us. Yes, there are vaccines and distribution is being sorted out. There is an end in sight. But now is not the time to let down our guard. We'll keep washing our hands, wearing masks and avoiding crowds. We will do this for ourselves and for each other. We will respect the disease and give thanks to God for the gift of science. And we will continue to worship, pray and serve.

The pandemic has also taught us something about ourselves. Though we are physically distant, we are connected. Paul put it this way in a letter to the Corinthians: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:26-27).

It is our joyful duty to care for one another, particularly the most vulnerable. It is an act of faithfulness when we limit ourselves so that the pandemic is brought to heel. It is an act of love when we restrict our travel or wear a mask. As Martin Luther pointed out in *The Freedom of a Christian* (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2020/10/the-freedom-of-a-christian/>), it is the freedom we have in Christ that makes us servants of all.

There is a model of such self-giving, self-limiting love. "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:4-8).

I pray that we all live in such freedom.

Peace. Be well.

Liz

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