

# SYNOD NEWS

## Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA

### Being the Church in a Time of Pandemic

As this article is being written, social distancing and "stay at home" orders in response to the spread of the Coronavirus are preventing our congregations from gathering for face-to-face worship. But in the midst of circumstances that keep people from "going to church," it is heartening to see the ways in which the congregations of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod are focusing on God's call to "be the church," bringing a message of hope to their members and their surrounding communities. Leaders are discovering a number of creative ways in which God's people can still "gather" for worship and conversation - via Zoom, Facebook Live, YouTube, email, telephone chains, cars parked at a drive-in movie theater, and other means.

In addition to worship, prayers, and pastoral care for members, congregations are also turning their focus outward to bring tangible expressions of God's presence and love in the midst of extraordinary circumstances to their most vulnerable neighbors. This brief article highlights just two of these outreach ministries, as examples of the kinds of things that are happening in numerous sites across the territory of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

#### The Food Pantry at Holy Trinity, Dingmans Ferry



Every weekday morning, volunteers gather at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in rural Pike County to prepare bags of food for community members who are food insecure. In the past, typically 85 - 95 families would turn to Holy Trinity each month to supplement their nutritional needs. Food Pantry Director, Barbara Hupner, reports that the number of those turning to the pantry has increased due to the Coronavirus pandemic. And the members of Holy Trinity are responding, even as some of the traditional sources of food - such as donations from individuals or local stores - have decreased.

In addition, there are concerns for the safety of both the volunteers who staff the pantry and those who come for food. Barbara reports, "Due to this crisis we have begun a drive-up pantry pick up for our families. Each family receives three bags of non-perishable foods along with a bag of frozen meats, vegetables, butter, fresh fruits and cheese. This has helped us to maintain social distancing as well as keep our volunteers safe."



## The Food Pantry at Hope Lutheran Church and Hope's Table, Reading

Hope Lutheran Church in the northwest section of the City of Reading, and its partner ministry, Hope's Table, together host the largest pantry in the Helping Harvest (Berks and Schuylkill Counties) system. Typically, 200+ families are served in the biweekly distribution. Due to neighbors losing their work - and their income - during the pandemic, at the last pantry more than 350 families came for food.

To counter the empty shelves at local groceries stores, the volunteers at Hope's Pantry are committed to providing more items for those who turn to the pantry, rather than less. In addition to the food they receive from Helping Harvest, the congregation has developed partnerships with other congregations, local restaurants, bakeries, and farmers to provide healthy nutritional options for their



guests. They are also collecting other items, such as toilet paper, cleaning products, and soap that they distribute to families on each Thursday.

Meanwhile, the staff members of Café Esperanza, another ministry birthed by Hope, are offering drive-by or walk-by cooked meals to neighborhood residents two evenings a week - to supplement the prepared food assistance that is available to families through the Reading School system.

Delivery is available for those who can't come to the congregation's parking lot. Advertised only through word of mouth and a sign at the church, the response of the community has been notable - both in terms of the growing numbers of those coming for assistance and the growing numbers of those who want to support the ministry!



These two congregations - in different corners of the synod and in two very different contexts - are endeavoring to "be the church" by seeing the face of Jesus in their most vulnerable neighbors in this unprecedented time and responding in love. We know there are many other congregations conducting similar ministries that are also bringing to life Jesus' parable from Matthew 25:31-46, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...." Please share your stories of how your congregation has been and is engaging in ministries of care in your communities by sending a brief summary to [info@nepsynod.org](mailto:info@nepsynod.org).

*[This article was written by the Rev. Dr. D. Michael Bennethum, Executive Associate of the Bishop.]*

### COVID-19 Resources

There are many resources for dealing with the challenges arising out of the coronavirus pandemic. The synod website lists many of these for you use on a page that is updated on a regular basis. You can view it at <http://nepsynod.org/virus-resources>. Above all, please have patience in this rapidly evolving situation. No one has all the answers, but everyone can lend a hand.

Synod News is published monthly by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA  
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View the full color edition online at <http://nepsynod.org>.