SEEING WITH THE EYES OF CHRIST

Many are asking during this time of racial unrest, “How do we deal with these ongoing sinful human actions as children of God?” A young budding theologian suggested three words: Pray, Listen, Act. Praying we have done from the baptismal inception of our faith and throughout our lives as Christians, in our homes, schools, churches and communities. Listening … well, it takes intentional relational outreach to listen and see the plight of the marginalized in our communities. Acting is the most difficult of the three, because we must put our prayers and listening into action on behalf of others, as Jesus did in Matthew 9:27–30 and Matthew 25:31–46.

We can’t easily solve historic issues of race relations as Americans and Christians, but we can start to make a difference in our congregations, communities and country. There are some Synodical resources for your aid at this time: CTCR documents on racism and the Rev. Keith Haney’s Bible study through Concordia Publishing House, One Nation Under God: Healing Racial Divides in America (cph.org/p-31186-one-nation-under-god-healing-racial-divides-in-america-downloadable.aspx).

We are all on edge, and rightfully so. But the child of God always looks to Christ, backs away from the precipice of anger, hate and racism and leads with love, grace, mercy and peace in healing the age-old enemy of humanity, sin.

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)
There’s a wonderful African-American spiritual we all learned as children, one we often teach our own children and grandchildren: “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.”

It’s such a joy to watch little children’s faces light up as they sing this song in Sunday school and vacation Bible schools across the country. What happiness we see as they make a big circle with their hands and arms to demonstrate “the whole world” God has in His hands.

Despite its simple sing-song lyrics, there is a profound meaning in this beautiful song, especially as we go through this time of uncertainty and fear surrounded by a worldwide coronavirus pandemic.

As we listen to reports from politicians, doctors and medical specialists, it’s easy to forget this simple yet real message: God has the whole world in His hands.

He’s got little babies, He’s got you and me, brother and sister, mothers and fathers, pastors and doctors, the people of Kansas and Kenya, the sick and the well — the whole world — in His loving, all-powerful hands. “The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (DEUT. 33:27).

Best of all, God loves the whole world so much that “he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life” (JOHN 3:16). What more could we need?

This is truly a difficult time, especially for the church, when we have not always been able to gather in community, or visit those we know are alone and lonely, especially our seniors. I am so very proud of the pastors across our Synod who have risen to this challenge with love and compassion and found ways to minister outside the church building. Pastors who take their messages to sidewalks, parking lots, to conference calls and livestream, interactive Zoom calls and Facebook posts with Bible studies, worship services and devotions and daily messages of encouragement and prayer.

You will read in this issue of Timeline about some of the creative and loving ways our pastors are serving their people and the church, and their dedication to their call despite the challenges of social distancing and “lockdowns.” You will see that we are the church, as we proclaim His Good News and serve His people in and out of a church building.

We pray for one another with greater urgency in this time of closures. And we look for the day we will all join together in our song, joyfully praising the One who’s “Got the Whole World In His Hands.”

Gospel singer and Christian witness, the beautiful Mahalia Jackson, did full justice to this joyous spiritual in 1927. Listen and remember our God’s omnipotence and His love in Jesus Christ, through whom the world was made, at youtu.be/IkhHHQjT_Ho.
During this time of isolation and social distancing, we thankfully had livestreaming of church services already in place, and have expanded our other ministries to reach our congregation and community. We began livestreaming services at Grace Lutheran five years ago. We don’t have that capacity yet at Crown of Glory. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided we would hold the worship service at Grace with two members (musicians) from each church and one person operating the camera. We put the order of service on the website (glcconcordnc.org) so people could follow the prayers, liturgy, Scripture and hymns during the service. They can also print it out, as we do for our members without access to the internet. The services are available directly on YouTube or Facebook (youtube.com/channel/UCv3lo2-UnDGjLcmh4iJJuXg).

We connect with all our members using something everyone has access to: a telephone. We have a prayer conference call every Wednesday, and we provide all the information for how to submit prayer requests and how to participate. Every Thursday we have a Bible study conference call. The Bible study materials are on our website, so they can be printed out ahead of time. There is also a two-session study on Martin Luther’s “A Simple Way to Pray.”

We have had a good response to the Bible study, with 47 people participating. We had been talking about offering online Bible study for some time to provide for people who don’t come out at night or can’t come during the day. This social distancing just pushed it along.

The prayer calls have been very positive and by putting both congregations together, we are forming a stronger bond.

During Holy Week, I learned to do the livestreaming myself, working the camera, iPad and YouTube so we could have Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. We had an Easter Sunrise Service by Zoom with our sister churches, Mt. Calvary Lutheran and St. Peter Lutheran.

We are working on providing more virtual activities for children at both churches. We did a virtual Easter activity with Grace children and keep in touch with group texts. The elders at both churches have divided up the names of members and are calling them regularly.

We have a good collaborative relationship with many agencies in our community to meet critical needs such as food and transportation, and we also can help connect members to groups that do home repairs and meet other needs. We have a strong health ministry, with access to a nurse, so that has been a bonus for us during this time of questions and concerns. Our members did a Lent walking devotion under her guidance, where everyone could practice social distancing while also counting steps. We even have a Facebook live yoga class, blood drives, health screenings, cancer prevention workshops, meetings for caretakers and those who are grieving and resources to help meet most needs. The nurse also set up a mask-making workshop with members of the community.

Right now we are trying to figure out how we will reopen when it is time. We have smart TVs and separate spaces: sanctuary, conference room, Sunday school rooms, so everyone can maintain safe distances. We have grants from the Mid-Atlantic Lutherans in Mission to help address these issues.
Here is a popular Christian song by Kirk Franklin that says, “Our God is an awesome God, He reigns with wisdom, power and might, Our God is an awesome God.” The Easter Greeting, “The Lord is Risen, He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!” is a reminder that the God who created us, loved us, forgave us and restores us is indeed an extraordinary God and He continues to do awesome things in our lives.

We continue to read report after report about what we can expect the future to look like as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I have listened to the news reports and watched the White House updates, I have heard many times that there are many variables and uncertainties regarding the virus. What vaccine will kill it? How long will we have to practice social distancing? What will the new normal look like? How does this virus challenge or change the way we conduct church? When will we be able to gather again and just how will we worship together?

Obviously we don’t have all the answers to those questions and many others that flood our minds. While it is important that we address these concerns, we will address them with faith as our backdrop. The awesome God who sent His only Son to conquer death and hell and pay the price for the sins of the world is still with us. He’s still an awesome God. He’s still doing awesome things. We are still blessed.

God has blessed us to make some major adjustments, to deal with some major losses, to address some major needs. He has not forsaken us. He will continue to empower us, direct us, lead us, use us, restore us, because He is an awesome God who is known for doing awesome things.

“Our God is an awesome God. He reigns.” The pandemic does not reign. The questions that we have do not reign. Death does not reign. Sickness does not reign. Our God reigns. The Lord is Risen, He is risen indeed, Alleluia. Not only is He risen, but He’s working, He’s interceding, and He’s blessing His people to show His love in so many ways.

We are thankful for all of those who cannot stay home but are working on the front lines for our safety and health care. We are thankful for those workers who stock our grocery stores, and who deliver our food, mail and other packages.

We also can have awesome expectations. We don’t know clearly how God has defined our future, but He is defining it. He knows it and we can expect Him to provide for us, to walk with us, to lead us, and to encourage us along the way. An awesome God can handle our awesome expectations (youtu.be/aflHUpeBeUo).
Pastor Lewis has served as pastor of First Timothy Evangelical Lutheran Church since its founding in 1988.

1. Do you livestream your sermons? Has this been added with the pandemic, or is it something you regularly do?

Currently, we do not have the equipment or resources to livestream our services. However, we have developed a telecommunication system in which to hold our weekly worship services, Bible Academy, meetings, and other activities. The system operates using a dedicated audio conference account which enables us to worship together in real time and allows us to hear and speak to each other while participating in the services. Our website administrator works with me to prepare the Order of Service bulletins and posts them on a special page of our website. Members are then able to view and download and/or print the bulletins to follow along during the service. The hymn lyrics are also included in the bulletins to accommodate those who do not have access to hymnals at home.

We’ve found this system to be very effective for and appreciated by our congregation, and it provides an opportunity for corporate worship and fellowship while respecting the guidelines set forth by the CDC and government agencies in response to the pandemic.

2. Do you have a Facebook presence? Are you using that to reach out in new ways to your flock (i.e., posting more prayers/quotes, links, devotions, Bible studies and what are you doing)?

Although we have a Facebook page, our website serves as our primary resource for information and offers weekly, dynamic content for members and viewers. We include weekly Scriptures on our homepage for meditation and a photo of the week for fellowship on our photo gallery page.

3. Are you offering communion in some form and, if so, how?

Unfortunately, we have not been able to partake in Holy Communion due to the limitations placed on the number of people gathering in groups. The celebration of the Eucharist will be our top priority once we are able to resume worship service in our sanctuary.

4. How are you handling keeping in touch with members/the sick/the homebound?

We have been blessed to have consistent participation in our telecommunication system each week to facilitate ministry to the majority of our membership. I also keep in touch with members of the congregation and the community through phone calls, text messages and through personal interaction when I’m in the neighborhood checking on the church grounds.

5. Any other ways of helping your congregation through this pandemic?

Prayer has been an essential means of helping the congregation understand and take comfort in knowing that through this entire situation our Lord is still in control and will take care of His people. We share words of encouragement and fellowship with one another through our text message group and I’m always available to provide pastoral counseling to address individual concerns. Our Food Pantry program also remains open and operating to serve the needs of members and the community.
Matthew 25:35 is something deeply moving to me. Our church mission is God’s math: Love x 2: Love for Jesus, Love for you. We share food and clothing with the hungry and homeless and offer assistance and prayers. Often the homeless confide in me and tell me about the issues going on. Due to COVID-19, I learned that the homeless shelters had been closed and homeless forced out of a refuge in several areas where they were living. Our city wanted to advertise the narrative that all of the homeless were being housed in hotels. I knew the real story needed to be told and the spotlight shined on what was really happening.

Unfortunately, the city’s narrative was not the reality. Only a small percentage of those without homes had been given rooms in hotels. Many of our homeless citizens were promised housing but had been left behind, in the park and under the expressway. In fact, they were told that city buses would come back to get them. For me, this was a terrible reminder of the citizens who were left behind on the bridge and abandoned during Hurricane Katrina. The citizens who stayed in the park — Duncan Plaza — were left without water, proper hygiene, toilets, showers. It was a story that needed to be told and shown to everyone.

I want it to be understood that I did not do this without asking Mayor LaToya Cantrell herself and city council members to address this problem. I had worked with Mayor Cantrell in the Broadmoor community ever since I arrived in 2011. I worked on her campaign, and I was sure I could encourage and engage them in helping those most overlooked and most vulnerable to disease.

However, my persistent pleas fell on deaf ears. I personally spoke with the homeless citizens in Duncan Plaza many times. I filmed videos of the inhumane conditions in the park. In one video, I interviewed a woman who was eight months pregnant. I told the city that I would release these videos to the media if they did not deal with the situation. I had many supporters from all over the nation write to our mayor and city council pleading with them to remedy the situation and to care for the “least of these.” Again, in spite of this, they failed to act.

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Words cannot adequately describe my sadness over the city’s lack of response. I will say that the mayor said that she was focused on long-term solutions. However, I pleaded with her to address the critical short-term needs — especially in light of the pandemic — by providing water for drinking, hand washing and temporary toilets. Nonetheless, there was still no response.

I decided I needed to take a stand. I would leave my comfort zone and spend the night in the park. I set up a tent and wore my clerical collar.

The experience was incredible. I knew it was for a purpose and was fully at peace. It was a blessing to share the Word and pray with people who live in the park. They are not anonymous “homeless” but faces and stories, with a need for the Savior and a need for help in their present situation.

However, it is not something that I would want to do again. I’ve never been a camper. This was the first time I ever slept outside.

But I felt very secure with one friend — a local pastor — on my left and a community member on my right. Many of the homeless people told me where they were in the park and if I needed anything to just yell for them. We slept on the hill underneath a tree with clouds moving above us and a cool breeze around us.

The kindness I felt was palpable. I learned that we are not different. I learned that there was love, kindness and compassion in that park despite the conditions. I learned that there was a community there that was as strong as my church community.

I learned that I could not totally immerse myself in the situation because soon I would return to my comfortable home. I also learned that no human being should be forced to live like an animal. No one deserves the treatment they have been given in the park. In many ways I’m still very angry, hurt and disheartened.

This is the way in which the coronavirus has showed our worst attributes. However, I likened the work of the man who cleaned up to that of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus didn’t make the mess of our sinful world, but he got right into the middle of it and cleaned it up. Renue Systems did this without a complaint or compensation. He did it out of love for his fellow man. My heart will forever be grateful for this example. We just celebrated the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ, who took our dirty sinful garments and replaced them with robes of righteousness.

There is no excuse for the city’s abandonment of the homeless. I know the mayor has a very difficult job and a lot of pressure. Therefore, Sunday morning I sent her a text and told her I was praying for her.

In Christ’s love, our church remains committed to “the least of these.” We welcome them to worship, to the food pantry, to our clothing and food giveaways and to the church as refuge. We invite them to our Sunday sidewalk worship (facebook.com/bclovesx2nola/).

In the end, this was an amazing experience and I am so very grateful that God gave it to me. It was a joy to sleep in the grass underneath a night sky marveling in God’s beautiful loving creation.

➤ About 10 days after Pastor Manning’s night in the park, city leaders called to tell him they were moving the homeless into hotels. It’s not a perfect or permanent solution, but it is progress. Pastor gives glory to God “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (EPH. 3:20).
CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF FAITH-FILLED LIVING:
MARVIN BENJAMIN GRAEBER

Marvin Benjamin Graeber, a lifelong Lutheran and a member at Grace Lutheran Church in Greensboro, N.C., celebrates 100 years of faith-filled living this year. Born in Kannapolis, N.C., December 19, 1920, he was baptized on Easter Sunday 1921 at Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, founded in 1898. Marvin and his older brother Charles L. Graeber were born into a Lutheran family. “Our grandfather’s father was owned by a Lutheran minister, Rev. Jeremiah Graeber. When he freed his slaves, they took his name and religion,” said Marvin’s daughter, Sharon Graeber. Charles, born in 1914, was educated at Immanuel College and served as pastor in the Alabama field at Bethlehem in Autauga County and at Grace in Montgomery.

After graduating from Carver High School, Marvin joined the U.S. Army. The World War II veteran and S/Sgt. served 24 months in foreign theaters, receiving the American Theater Medal, EAMET Medal with four bronze service stars, the Asiatic-Pacific Medal and the Good Conduct Medal. He was honorably discharged the day after his 25th birthday on December 20, 1945.

Graeber attended North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (now North Carolina A&T State University), graduating in 1949 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology. In 1951, Marvin was called to re-enter the U.S. Army and serve in Korea. After his second tour of duty, he enrolled in graduate school at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, graduating in 1952 with a Master of Science degree in Organic Chemistry.

In 1954, Marvin married Beulah Mae Long of Landis, N.C. They had one daughter, Sharon D. Graeber, who is a licensed architect and artist and lives in Greensboro. Marvin was employed at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University (NC A&T SU) from 1953 until his retirement in 1983. He held the positions of assistant dean of men and superintendent of buildings & grounds and campus police; he retired as associate director of the Physical Plant. Marvin was appointed by the NC Department of Justice to serve as a Campus Policeman from 1962–1972.

An active member at Grace Lutheran Church in Greensboro, Graeber served as elder and president of the Men’s Club. He also served on the Board of Directors for the Southeastern District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Graeber was a precinct chairman, a life-time member of the Greensboro Branch of the NAACP, president of the Greensboro Citizen’s Association and chairman of the Guilford County Board of Social Services. He actively supported his college, serving as regional director for his alumni association, board member of the university’s foundation, treasurer of its Sports Hall of Fame, and active member of his fraternity, the Tau Omega Chapter of Omega Psi Phi.

In addition to his military awards, Graeber also received the Silver Beaver Award from the Boy Scouts of America, the Chairman’s Award from the Guilford County Democratic Party, Senior of the Month in 1987 from the City of Greensboro, The NC A&T SU Hall of Fame Award of Excellence, and Citizen of the Year and Founder’s Day Awards from the Tau Omega Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. He was also inducted into the NC A&T Sports Hall of Fame (Baseball).

➤ Marvin B. Graeber was an amazing child of God, believing and confessing his faith in Christ for nearly 100 years, from his Baptism and confessional Christian life in one of our historic black congregations, Grace Lutheran, Greensboro, N.C., through his journey to his heavenly home on Friday, June 26. We pray his Christ-centered life in the Church Militant inspires you as we all look toward our final home in the Church Triumphant.

– Rev. Dr. Roosevelt Gray

Marvin Graeber served on the LCMS Southeast District Board, and stands with Rev. Mack, Chairman of the Board, and Pastor Donald Anthony.
150-YEAR-OLD SANCTUARY MEETS 21ST-CENTURY TECHNOLOGY

by Rev. Delwyn Xavier Campbell Sr., Strategic Mission Developer, St. John Lutheran Church and Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Gary, Ind.

St. John Lutheran Church in Gary was founded in 1870, so this year it is 150 years old. It’s a beautiful sanctuary, but it was obviously not built with 21st-century technology — the internet and social media — in mind. By God’s grace, we have found ways to work around our limitations and have been live-streaming since March.

Our worship service is not a “full Divine Service” because we are not able to have the “call-and-response” that is an integral part of our liturgy. But we incorporate the main elements of Confession and Absolution and the Service of the Word. We do not have the Service of the Sacrament online, but I do administer the Lord’s Supper to the limited number of members who come to the church.

We are teaching a Zoom-based Bible study on Revelation to members of St. John and Good Shepherd. One advantage of Zoom or Google Meeting over Facebook or YouTube is that the first two platforms enable two-way communication along with the ability to see each other. Facebook, while being easier to access, does not allow the speaker to respond to questions in real-time (youtu.be/rKSBVq3nHKA).

One beautiful thing: I have met some people who were listed as members but had not attended worship. I recently led an area pastors’ Lectionary Study on the Zoom platform, and pastors from other parts of the country who I had invited through Facebook participated. I hope we can use the internet to extend our reach.

Our online presence is limited: We do not have a website, nor do we have any means of collecting donations online. Thanks to a recent grant opportunity, we intend to change that for both congregations and the mission.

One of the reasons why I believe that owning our internet broadcast capability matters is because Facebook and YouTube monitor the messages of the livestream congregation.

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those using their platforms. A person who has no interest in the proclamation of the Gospel has the capability to interfere in our efforts.

Not everyone, of course, is linked into the information highway. Some of our members, whether by choice or necessity, do not have smartphones and social media pages. They tend to be the elderly, and many of them do not have family members nearby. I have been calling on them to check in regularly. I am delighted to share God’s love with them, since, in some cases, they are not getting much contact in their lives.

I am taking classes in a Ph.D. Missiology program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Ind., and I hope to learn a lot of things that I can apply to my work in Gary. Since the classes are about missions, I take the opportunity to share what I am doing in Gary and invite my classmates and professor to consider joining my support network.

My wife Lenita is actively engaged in making us safer. She has made masks for us, and constantly sanitizes everything that comes in from outside. She has also begun spring planting in the garden, and she expects that we will be eating most of what we grow. Since we were already homeschooling our daughters, the only change is that we no longer get to go on field trips and other group activities with our homeschool collective.

I spend a lot of time praying for the congregations and for our supporters, and I believe that the Lord will lift this pestilence in due season. My go-to prayer is Psalm 25:4–5: “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.” To those of you who are reading this newsletter, I encourage you to “be of good courage, and wait on the Lord.”

To support Missionary Campbell’s ministry, visit lcms.org/campbell.

"MY GO-TO PRAYER IS
PSALM 25:4–5: ‘MAKE ME TO KNOW YOUR WAYS, O LORD; TEACH ME YOUR PATHS. LEAD ME IN YOUR TRUTH AND TEACH ME, FOR YOU ARE THE GOD OF MY SALVATION; FOR YOU I WAIT ALL THE DAY LONG.’"
SERVING GOD’S PEOPLE IN NEW YORK AS A DEACONESS

INTERVIEW WITH DEACONESS JANINE BOLLING, DCS, MPA
SAINT PETER’S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, BROOKLYN, N.Y.

How did you come to the Lutheran faith?
My mother knew of the Lutheran church because as a child she attended St. John the Evangelist Lutheran School in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in the neighborhood where she grew up. Years later, when we were looking for a new church home as a family living in Canarsie, the Lutheran church popped into our lives again.

I was not always Lutheran, but finally found a nice church home when I was 16 at St. Peter’s in Cypress Hills. This was after being introduced to the Lutheran denomination at St. Matthew’s Lutheran in Canarsie when I was 13. I went to my first National Youth Gathering the summer before 9/11 and the rest is history.

When did you hear your call to church work? What appealed to you about being a deaconess?
During my time as a student at Martin Luther School in Queens I got to know a number of church workers who were my teachers. They influenced me into looking at church work as an option for a career choice since I wanted to be a teacher/principal. My pastor, the Rev. Dr. David Benke, was also a major encourager in my life.

I had not heard about deaconesses at all until college at Concordia University Chicago. I originally went to study secondary education English and I found myself discussing a major change from Lutheran Teacher Education to something else. Dr. Lila Kurth and Dr. Julie Archibald told me that since I was seeking flexibility and education across age groups that the deaconess program may be a good choice. I knew I had teaching gifts, but I also wanted to use them on a wider scale. I spoke with some of the deaconess students, made a program change, and the rest is history! It was a 5-year journey with a B.A. in Theology and Deaconess Internship.

Where were you born? What church did you attend as a child?
I was born and reared in Brooklyn, NY. Anywhere on the “L” train line, my family has lived! I grew up in a Christian home and my mom and dad took us to a variety of churches growing up, mostly non-denominational/evangelical. I never missed a Sunday until my sophomore year of college. I am thankful my parents instilled this strong faith tradition in me.

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Did you get significant church support — from individuals, pastors, others — spiritually and financially for your studies?

My home district, the Atlantic District, was a significant source of spiritual and financial support for me in my studies. I received a district scholarship that helped to offset some costs and I regularly spoke with Dr. David Benke, Dr. Dien Taylor and Pastor Christoph Schulze in my time getting through the program. I also received scholarships from Concordia Chicago. These were in academics, churchwork and music (choral).

When did you get your call to St. Peter’s?
I was officially called to St. Peter’s in 2012. It was my second call. My first was to Camp Restore — New Orleans.

What did your pre-COVID ministry schedule look like?
The ministry is centered around our mission statement: reaching out with the love of Jesus in word and deed. I am responsible for connecting with our young adults and youth, making sure that programming gets proper support, writing grants, coordinating vacation Bible school, assisting with religious education and special projects from the pastor, supporting women’s ministry, and remembering those who may be overlooked.

I work part time for St. Peter’s and I work in recruiting for the State University of New York (SUNY) system. I am also working on my doctoral studies at Concordia University Wisconsin in the Ed.D. program.

With the coronavirus pandemic, how is your church ministering to members and the community?
The ministry still is centered around our mission of reaching out with the love of Jesus in word and deed! This is more digital now, as I lead weekly Spiritual Health Checkups online to help those in our family of faith and those on the “outskirts” to connect with God and one another. I also assist with our ministry team in doing outreach to see how our members are doing during lockdown. I assist with singing in church on Sundays for our live worship service and I am working on producing content for our people online that helps to strengthen us all for the journey (facebook.com/St.PetersLutheranBrooklyn/videos/725912924820653).

We have done mask distributions, prayers for the ill, assisted members with obtaining financial assistance, and, unfortunately, helped to support those mourning loved ones who have passed away from the virus.

What would you recommend for young women trying to discern a path in church work?
Pray and fast. It sounds old fashioned, but it works! Talk to God like He is a friend. Ask Jesus to walk with you. We serve a God who shows up for us! Seek His Word.

Listen to those who know you best and hear them out on the gifts that they see in you. My brother, Pastor Gerard Bolling (Bethlehem, St. Louis) has been a voice in the darkness for me time and time again, seeing things in me and encouraging me to proclaim God’s truth to those who need to hear.

“Pray and fast. It sounds old fashioned, but it works! Talk to God like He is a friend. Ask Jesus to walk with you.”

Deaconess Bolling with Clara DeValle, preschool director and head trustee.
In a world where people are highly relational, we have been thrust into its opposite: social distancing, mass worrying, and mask wearing. The imposed quarantine from COVID-19 has affected everyone, old and young, rich and poor, black and white.

In our fast-paced world, the generation most affected by forced isolation is our youth, especially the youth in our churches. Our ministry — High Impact Ministries (HIM) — traditionally is through church community. Now we are forced to isolate and watch worship online. What about relationship building? How do we minister to youth and effectively reach them in this time of social distancing?

Through HIM, we minister to over 200 kids four days a week in our afterschool program in Hot Springs, Ark. This pandemic has been a challenge for us and has caused us to do ministry differently. Social media platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime, Facebook Live, and Instagram TV have been vital links for us to connect with our youth. We gather with our students two days a week — Sundays and Thursdays — for discipleship training and relationship building.

With this technology, you can do almost the same thing you would in person, but of course you miss seeing someone in person. Seeing their faces on the screen and watching them interact with each other is a blessing. What a joy to see students log in to our online social media platforms to discuss the Word of God, to worship, to play and to build relationships with one another. Over the last two weeks, we have seen an increase in the number of students joining the meetings. We have seen student interaction increase as they learn how to communicate through the platform we are using. I believe this is a tremendous blessing from God: We are still able to minister to our youth and build up one another.

One student shared with me that that she felt “boredom and loneliness.” These feelings could lead to negative thoughts of self-harm. That’s why at High Impact, we have set a social media calendar to make sure we meet the needs of the young people we serve. When it comes to their social, emotional, and spiritual development, we use these platforms to build up, disciple, and express Christ-like love to students.

We are finding that students from kindergarten to 12th grade are able to log on to computers, receive text messages, and/or talk on the phone to receive an encouraging word to help them grow as precious children of God.

High Impact is excited about the future. We are using this time to minister to young people and their families in our community, and also to prepare us for the time when the lights come back on and we’re able to fellowship in person, face-to-face.

INTENTIONAL INTERACTION

I have encouraged my leaders to “meet” with their students online at least two times a week to continue the rhythm of when we were meeting with them in person. This interaction will confirm to students that they are loved and cared for, even during a time of separation. It is so important that we do not stop reaching out. This generation especially needs to feel consistency.

Rev. Amos Gray with youth Zoom Bible Study through High Impact Ministries.
The children of first responders have a safe, caring and loving home away from home while their parents serve on the front lines of community need in Dallas.

St. Paul Lutheran Church, which opened its St. Paul Christian Academy last August, continues to care for eight children of first responders during the pandemic shutdown. The children, ages 1–5, have familiar faces greet them every day, in a caring Christ-centered classroom setting, as St. Paul Academy is open five days a week, 12 hours a day. An afternoon on the playground with teachers and Pastor Byron Williams Sr. was a welcome activity.

Before the pandemic and the forced closure of schools, St. Paul Academy had 40 children enrolled in its preschool and afterschool programs, Williams said. With the coronavirus pandemic, the Academy carefully screens children and staff each day — temperatures are taken, and everyone wears masks and gloves. No parents are allowed in the buildings.

Worship services have been offered in the sanctuary and on Facebook Live with a limited number of musicians, elders and the pastor participating and spaced appropriately. They also began offering worship in the parking lot, with some resistance at first. But even though it is out of the comfort zone of many, the parking lot services have attracted many people who would have never stepped foot inside the sanctuary, with some neighbors even setting up folding chairs across the street before the service, hungry for the Word (facebook.com/splcdallas/videos/86483255407851/).

“We’ve had more people listen and watch our livestream than have attended in person,” Pastor Williams said. “I believe we are fulfilling a deep need.”

The elders and prayer warriors continue to pray by phone every Tuesday for the church and the community. There is a Bible study held every Thursday night by Zoom with approximately 20 to 25 participants.

The Academy staff started a community garden, to feed and teach the children about growing fresh vegetables and also to share with the elderly.

There are many good things coming from the changes, but there are struggles as well, Pastor Williams noted. When longtime church member, Arlene West, a church mother and the first African American to integrate the then all-white LCMS church died, they could only allow 10 people at the gravesite. However, several members showed up at the cemetery and stood at a distance to witness their love for their sister in Christ.

“We are eager for things to turn back to what we call normal but, in the meantime, we are leaning on this great God we serve to continue to show Himself strong on our behalf,” Williams said.
LCMS BLACK MINISTRY FAMILY CONVOCATION SET FOR JULY 7–10, 2021

With the coronavirus pandemic and resulting closures, the Convocation Planning Committee has rescheduled the LCMS Black Family Convocation for July 7–10, 2021. The Convocation will be held in Mobile, Ala., the original 2020 site, under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Ulmer Marshall of Trinity Lutheran Church and School.

Our theme will take on new meaning, after going through the closures even our churches experienced this year, as we will be “Stepping Out in Faith,” based on 2 Corinthians 5:7, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” We will be addressing key ministry issues including recruitment, revitalization, ownership and communication as we are “Equipping, Encouraging and Empowering for the 21st Century.”

The Regional Planning Committee is asking each congregation to support the convocation with a $300 planning fee. This support will allow LCMS Black Ministry to assume the bulk of the costs of the event. Checks should be sent to Trinity Lutheran Church, 2668 Berkley Avenue, Mobile, AL 36617, and tagged “Trinity Lutheran Church – Black Ministry Planning Fee.”

Please prayerfully consider now and make plans to attend this important convocation as we celebrate our historic LCMS Lutheran faith since 1877. Registration information will be available soon.

INTRODUCING THE BLACK MINISTRY THINK TANK AT THE 2021 BLACK MINISTRY FAMILY CONVOCATION

A new initiative to energize and invigorate communication and collaboration in Black Lutheran Ministry will be introduced at the 2021 Black Ministry Family Convocation.

The Black Ministry Think Tank — including diverse perspectives of men, women, laity, clergy, African-American, African immigrant, youth and Caucasian from across the Synod — was formed last fall to address the need to renew and strengthen communication and collaboration network.

The effort was led by Nikki Rochester, who serves as information coordinator for the LCMS Southeastern District’s Coalition of Lutherans in Black Ministry. After nearly a year of conference calls, an eight-member planning team convened The Black Ministry Think Tank during a two-day conference in Memphis last fall. Most participants demonstrated their commitment by paying their own travel and hotel expenses. Additional funding came from $7,000 donated by districts, individuals and congregations invested in the project.

The observations and goals from the think tank will be shared at the 2021 Black Ministry Family Convocation. A major outcome was the decision that the think tank would be an ongoing work group rather than a one-time event. It continues to convene and deliberate via conference calls. The current active members are: Rev. Paul Anderson, Rev. Donald Anthony, Vicar Jerrod Drye, Rev. Meredith Jackson, Mrs. Shirley Jackson, Rev. Warren Lattimore, Rev. Cleveland Lewis, Rev. John Loun, Rev. McNair Ramsey, Ms. Nikki Rochester, Rev. Doug Shamburger, Aisha Lewis-Scott, Rev. Aubrey Watson and Mrs. Mary Wise.