



Confirmation conversation

Over 50 leaders from New Jersey talked about the gifts and challenges of confirmation

The special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed—keep that ablaze (2 Timothy 1:6)!

So began New Jersey's "Confirmation Conversation" on Nov. 1. Over 50 rostered ministers and lay leaders met at St Paul Lutheran Church in East Windsor to ponder confirmation ministry.

Confirmation is an intentional time when youth begin to internalize the faith God has first given them. These two- to three-year programs are the core mechanism for faith formation at many of our churches and have been for years. The pews in our communities are filled with people who had meaningful confirmation experiences that served as a foundation to their lives. Yet our churches are also filled with people who never went through a confirmation program but are now considering them for their children.

As a church, we care deeply about the faith formation among children, teens and their families. We want to do our best to plant seeds of the gospel in the lives of our confirmands. For decades, the ELCA has joined with other denominations to track trends (the Confirmation Project; theconfirmationproject.com) and gather information on what works for the youth and families of today. The conversation on Nov. 1 merged information from the Confirmation Project with what is being done in congregations across New Jersey. Participants looked at what we've done, what we're doing now, and what confirmation programs will be like five years from now.

Participants gathered in small groups to focus on why we do confirmation in the first place. What does an honest faith look like? What does a rich faith feel like? Lay leaders and pastors shared what they hoped confirmands understood and experienced by the end of their confirmation programs.



After focusing on the purpose of confirmation, the conversation moved to goal-setting and planning. Participants worked in small teams to dream new ways to make the "whys" of confirmation stand out. And as participants dreamed, they also looked five years into the future, creating a vision for what confirmation can become.

This conversation will continue. A follow-up session focusing on training, best practices and sharing resources is planned for the spring.

The Rev. Christa Compton, one of the event facilitators, is excited about what comes next: "We may not know what church looks like in the future, and we may not know what confirmation looks like in the future, but we know that we can trust in the promises that Jesus has made to us. I think that the Holy Spirit is going to help us discover new ways to live and learn together as communities of faith, and that's exciting." ☞

Making a difference together

Hunger exists in every zip code. Food insecurity is present even in affluent areas. There is no place in New Jersey that doesn't have people who wonder where their next meal is coming from. For communities of faith passionate about feeding people, taking a look in your own neighborhood can reveal a world of need you didn't know existed.

Christ Lutheran Church (CLC) in Woodcliff Lake spent decades working with the Center for Food Action (CFA) in Englewood. A box in the church's lobby is filled with donations weekly and a garden on the property provides over 1,500 pounds of fresh vegetables to the CFA every year. CFA feeds people all over Bergen County and the congregation knew this ministry was making a difference. While the struggle against food insecurity felt like it was something needed in places miles away, an ecumenical partnership showed CLC the hunger in its own neighborhood.

For over 30 years, the Tri-Boro Food Pantry has served hundreds of people in some of the most expensive zip codes in the state. After a leadership change, a new board of directors was needed. The food pantry, housed in the Pascack Reformed Church, used that congregation's ecumenical



Cans of food ready to distribute at the Tri-Boro Food Pantry.

and interfaith relationships to put a new team together. Leaders from Reformed, Roman Catholic and United Church of Christ churches joined with CLC to strengthen the pantry. None of these congregations were large enough to tackle the need alone. The faith communities needed each

other to help tackle hunger in Northern New Jersey.

An expanded volunteer base now keeps the pantry open twice a week. Local businesses donate nonfood items like toiletries, diapers and even school supplies to help every kind of family. Local grocery stores and farms now supply the food items needed for the Tri-Boro's special holiday meals, providing all the fixin's needed for 80 families to celebrate each other during the Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter seasons.

The local interfaith organization continues to support the pantry through its annual Thanksgiving worship service, CROP Walk and more. Even the towns joined the pantry by putting donation boxes in their boro halls. A local council person also is an official liaison to the pantry. All of this has been a tremendous help because the number of clients using the pantry continues to grow. In the last year, that number has increased 40 percent. Without these community and interfaith partnerships, there's no way the Tri-Boro Food Pantry could meet the obvious needs in Northern Bergen County.

CLC continues to support the work of the CFA but has expanded its ministry to take hunger seriously in its neighborhood. Connections through the local interfaith and eccumenical community brought to light the need in their highly affluent area. By working together, these faith communities can now make a bigger impact than they could alone. ♣

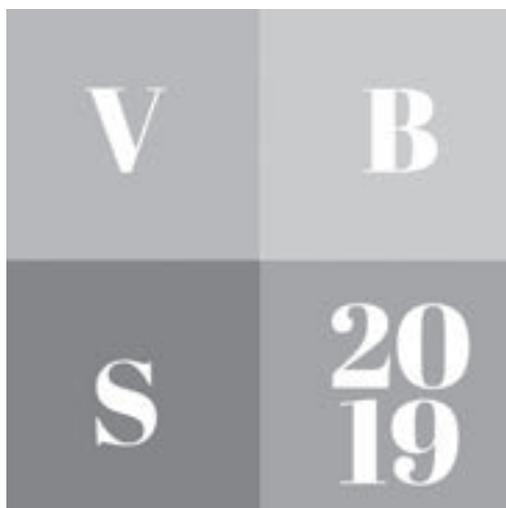


Members from Christ Lutheran Church collected over 130 pounds of vegetables to donate to the Tri-Boro Food Pantry on Nov. 18, 2018.

Thinking about vacation Bible school?

Here's a few tips as you plan for VBS

Vacation Bible school (VBS), the summer event that connects children to Jesus through fun-filled activities and hands-on learning, will be here before you know it. VBS is an opportunity to form faith in the families that are in church every Sunday. And VBS might be the only time that a certain family will step into your church. While there is no one right way to do Bible school, there are tools you can use to enhance your experience.



kids of abilities, including those with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Down syndrome and more. What unique aspect of your community can help give kids a gift alongside their experience of Jesus Christ?

- **Select a program** that mirrors the mission and theology of your church and community. Think about what message you want participants to receive.
- **Look at the gifts** already in your community. Do you have a community garden? Do you have an excellent musician? Do you have deep partnerships with nonprofits that would come to you? Match your VBS to the gifts already in your community.
- **Partner up!** Use your ecumenical relationships to sponsor a communitywide VBS.
- **Use the arts.** Think about the gifts you can offer kids. One VBS program in Bergen County is organized by several ecumenical churches, including Messiah Lutheran in Oakland. They spend a week teaching kids how to sing and read music. Other VBS programs put on a musical, teaching kids rhythm, dance and songs. Resurrection Lutheran Church in Hamilton Square spent their summer VBS building off their monthly “Joyful Noise” worship, creating a program for

- **Pick curriculum prayerfully.** Virginia Theological Seminary reviews curriculum every year. Visit vts.edu/page/cmt/vbs-reviews to see what program

works best for your community.

- **Consider using free curriculum** provided by the ELCA. “Taking Root” and “God’s Good Creation” are both focused on food insecurity and available for download on elca.org.
- **Host a day camp.** One of the gifts of the New Jersey Synod is Cross Roads Camp and Retreat Center. Every year it partners with local congregations to host weeklong day camps. Cross Roads provides the leaders; you provide volunteer housing and an up-front fee. With some initial investment on your part, you can provide a Christ-centered camp for your neighborhood at a fraction of the cost of what a regular day camp would charge a participant. Visit crossroadsretreat.com/day-camp for more information.

VBS should be fun and engaging for everyone involved. Celebrate God’s love. Celebrate your commitment to teaching the faith. Celebrate Jesus! And make a faith-filled difference to families in your church and in your neighborhood. 4

From the bishop:

Promoting and praying for peace

Dear friends,

When you receive this issue of *Living Lutheran*, we will be in the middle of winter, many congregations will have held their annual meetings to elect new leadership and approve a spending plan for ministry, and a new calendar year will already be a month old. As I write this reflection, it is a beautiful autumn day, Election Day is just 48 hours behind us, and I am weeping at the news of another mass shooting. Another mass shooting —this time in Thousand Oaks, Calif. Another ... this time. I pray there have not been any others between when I write this and when you are reading it.

In the New Jersey Synod, we have been vocal and active in our work of reducing gun violence and promoting peace. We have held educational events, taken up advocacy for legislation that places limits on the amount and types of ammunition allowed, worked on public health initiatives that teach peace-making skills, and held vigils in places where gun violence is a daily reality. This work continues for all of us.

As we continue this work, we must also examine our own complicity in a culture that loves guns and tolerates gun violence as inevitable. We must confess the ways we contribute to romanticizing gun violence. We must confess we have allowed

the politics of fear, hate and division to cloud the way we interact with our neighbors. We must confess our failure to believe Jesus' words that he, alone, is the source of abundant life and that in our disbelief, we rely on false gods to make our life seem safer or better.



Bishop Tracie Bartholomew

On our knees in this posture of confession, I pray our hearts will be broken open to receive the words of new life that propel us back into the world: *"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:31, 35, 37-39).

Working and praying for peace with you,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

Faith, Hope & Love

Building Safer and More Welcoming Congregations for LGBTQ+ Youth

On March 23, the church will gather together youth, young adults and adults eager to celebrate the rich diversity of God's people and learn how to make their homes, congregations and communities a safer, more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ children and youth.

Visit our synod website njsynod.org to register. ☒

LEAMNJ: Violence prevention

Take action with the Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey

There are ways you can advocate for policies that reduce gun violence and promote peace. LEAMNJ sends out a "Weekly Witness" email, offering ways to contact elected officials to love, care and support our neighbors in need (leamnj.org/weekly-witness). You can also visit the ELCA Advocacy Action Center (elca.org/advocacy/actioncenter) to see how you can contact your federal representatives. Contact your New Jersey assembly members and senators at njleg.state.nj.us/members/legsearch.asp. ☒