



## **NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH NEWSLETTER 2024**

*May he live as long as the sun  
and moon endure, from one  
generation to another.*  
Psalm 72:5

Twenty twenty-three is in the record books. For some the idea of 2023 being done is a sad thought: the wedding of your loved one or the birth of a new baby. Maybe 2023 was the year you reconnected with someone from the past or was the year that everything fell into place. You know that “all good things come to an end” and with a smile on your face, you say goodbye to 2023.

For others, good riddance is all they can think of when looking back. This was a year that you just want to forget ever happened: death, division, war, fighting, tension. It may be the year you or your loved one spent more time at doctor offices than you wanted. Maybe work was just too much or maybe there were major changes at work. Respect, honor, comfort, and peace were not part of the year and with a smile of relief and promise on your face, you say goodbye to 2023 and grateful it's done. But no matter where your head and heart landed, 2023 is gone, never to be again.

We live in a world of beginnings and endings. We experience life and we experience death. It is a rhythm we expect, with unexpected events that shake things up. And while we understand all of this, the end is always harder than we imagine, and it can lead to fear of other endings.

Later this month, we will gather as a congregation and look back at all that has happened within this congregation. We will have conversations about the things we did in 2023. We recognize the people that have come into our lives and those we lost. My struggle with our Annual Meetings and the church in general is how much we depend on the past and looking forward is greatly impacted on the past; do we try new things because they haven't worked in the past or why try new things at all because we think the past is just fine?

We are a society of numbers and the success/failure revolves around those numbers; more points means we win the game and better grades brings more prospects for schools and jobs. The same goes for churches as well. At the end of each year, congregations/pastors are required to send basic info to the ELCA headquarters in Chicago to give a picture of what each congregation looks like. We send information on budget, attendance, membership, and basic ministries through fill-in-the-blank and yes/no questions. All the while, we (churchwide included) know that these numbers are just numbers and don't give the true picture of the ministry being done in our churches.

Then came 2020 and pastors had no clue how to calculate numbers during Covid-19. How do we submit average attendance when people are not gathering in sanctuaries? How do we answer outreach ministry questions when that cannot take place? We all quickly realized that numbers aren't appropriate when God's work is the topic. How do you put numbers to the connection you have with another person? How do you put numbers in a heart that was changed based on love? How do you put numbers on the people you have prayed for and who are praying for you? How do you put numbers to

all the people who have experienced Christ in the world or even our community over the last year? Numbers don't always work.

I say all of this because when we gather at the end of the month, we will be looking back and trying to judge success by a bunch of numbers and I'm sorry but the math will not add up. I have had numbers of conversations at Gosnell's or Jen's, the park, or school that will never end up as a part of those list of numbers. We all have because God's work can't be judged on numbers.

This is also true when we look around our sanctuary or look at report numbers for the daily life of the church. We see worship attendance numbers down and we compare that to what numbers were 30 years ago. All this brings worry about the future of the church. I am here to say that while we live in a world of life and death, God only deals in life and God's church will never die. However, what the church looks like may need to shift slightly.

In confirmation class I remind the future leaders of the church that we recognize God as one who always comes to us. We, as theologians of the cross, understand that we can never work our way to God by being better and better, but God ALWAYS comes to where we are. I believe this is the model of the future church. If God's church is going to continue (which it will), we need to move beyond the walls our churches and to be where God is sending us- out into the world. This is much harder than the way we are used to being church. This means we must get dirty (metaphorically speaking). This means we have interactions that are not easily translated into numbers that are then entered into a report. It is time we take God's message outside of our building to the people who need it most and see what being the church really looks like. The time is now, and the year is new. It's Go Time.

Go in peace, Share the Good News. Thanks be to God!

Pastor Sara