



**Northern Texas - Northern Louisiana Mission Area
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

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A letter from Bishop Kevin Kanouse and Vice-President Stephanie Varnum

10 November 2010

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

+ *Grace and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!* +

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia, for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means....”

- 2 Corinthians 8:1-3

We have recently completed a very Spirit filled and engaging Mission Council retreat where we focused our attention on our commitments to our joint *DiscipleLife*. One of the major discussions during the meeting was the financial health of our Mission Territory. Like the churches of Macedonia we can say that we have a “severe affliction” in our Synod. The finances are not good. The purpose of this letter is to explain where we stand with our finances, communicate what actions the Finance Committee and Mission Council have taken and let you know how as a community of believers we can work together to become a financially healthy Synod again.

First, we both want to say thank you for your generous support during these challenging times in the economy and in the church. We understand the struggles many congregations are going through and appreciate what support you have been able to give to date. Continue to put your hope and trust in the Lord as we move forward to serve our neighbor, proclaiming our new life in Christ.

Financial Health

With the current giving we are projecting total Mission Support for this year to be \$1,206,000. This will be approximately \$131,000 below the *amended* Mission Support of \$1,337,000. (Note that as originally approved by the Assembly, the Mission Support was to be \$1,455,000!) Churchwide support, synodical office rent, reduced synodical staff compensation and benefits, office expenses, synodical programs, are paid first. Support for other agencies, institutions, and ministries such as Campus Ministry, Texas Lutheran University, the Lutheran



Sowing and Growing Disciples of Jesus



Sembrando y Creciendo Discípulos de Jesús

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Seminary Program in the Southwest, seminarian scholarships, social ministries and shared missions will be paid as funds are available and as additional Mission Support is given.

As you can see, many of our church partners are going to suffer if we cannot overcome the projected deficit. We will need to finish the next three months (November, December and January) with revenue of \$125,000 per month to reduce the projected deficit to \$60,000 to lessen the impact on our missional partners. As we are preparing our 2011 actual Mission Spending Plan, our partners are being warned that they are likely to receive additional reductions in the support we promised.

Finance Committee and Synod Council Actions

The following actions have been taken to address the financial crisis:

1. Staff reductions have taken place: Debi Gebhardt, our receptionist and general administrator was laid off in mid-summer. Pr. Jamie Segaran Bruning the Youth and Family Ministry Coordinator we called in 2009 was cut to the status of “Consultant for Youth Events.” She will be supporting just the Junior and Senior High Youth Gatherings, the Youth Convo, and the National Lutheran Youth Gathering when it is held. The very part-time bookkeeper we had employed, Tom Ness, was released at the end of October and Judy Rommel has picked up the bookkeeping responsibilities. To cover the administrative responsibilities of Debi Gebhardt and Judy Rommel, Irma Banales, our Hispanic/Latino Ministry Coordinator will be working 10 hours per week as receptionist and office helper in addition to her other full time responsibilities.
2. There have been other administrative efficiencies implemented in running the Mission office to reduce expenses. For example, phones are answered by volunteers, other staff as available, or voice mail and we have reduced our phone lines from six to three. These and other reductions have helped but do not add up to significant savings.
3. Finance Council members will be contacting many Congregation Councils over the next 2 months to further explain the financial status of our Mission Area and answer questions congregations may have on the items outlined in this letter. They will be especially contacting congregations that have remitted no Mission Support his year.
4. Pastor Stephen Kanouse, Director for Evangelical Mission, and our Stewardship Team are currently leading a group of folks through our Stewardship Academy and the Team is proposing holding Stewardship Days in various places throughout our Mission Territory over the next year.
5. We are holding *Living DiscipleLife Celebrations* in five more areas around our Mission Territory through March to engage congregational missional leaders in a focus on growing our mission capacity. Events are being held in Waco in November, Lubbock in December, Richardson and Fort Worth in January, and Avoca in March. As you have an opportunity, please attend or send at least a handful of your most missionally-minded leaders to one of these events.
6. For conversation purposes, we are asking congregational leaders to spend time in thoughtful discernment about a common use of two terms, *Mission Support* and *Benevolence*.
 - **Mission Support** is money given by congregations or the Mission Center for direct support of another expression of the ELCA. Congregations give Mission Support to the NT-NL Mission Center for our use in *Leadership Formation for*



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DiscipleLife and the Mission Center then sends a percentage of this total to ELCA Churchwide as Mission Support.

- **Benevolence** refers to other monetary gifts that a congregation or the Mission Center may give to another ministry or social service agency (i.e. Lutheran Social Services, the local food bank, the local chaplaincy, or local campus ministry).
 - If your congregational budget isn't using these terms, would you consider using them? The goal is to clarify that part of your budget that goes to each category.
7. We request that congregations identify their "Mission Support" as a specific percentage of their unrestricted annual income and that this percentage become the basis for part of the stewardship planning in congregation. We ask each congregation to consider tithing 10 % of their unrestricted annual income for Mission Support. Consider your Benevolence offerings to be over and above that. This is sound biblical teaching you can use for your members in their giving to your congregation, as well!
 8. The NT-NL Mission Council asks your prayerful support for *DiscipleLife Alive!*, our initiative to grow our mission vision through *Leadership Formation for DiscipleLife*. You will be hearing much more about this after January 1, 2011 and at our Mission Assembly coming up at the end of April. Lead gifts will be sought during February, March, and April with the hope of moving into our Mission Assembly with 2/3rds of our goal committed or given.

How can we undertake such a venture when finances are so tight otherwise? Leaders, both clergy and lay have told us that the time is now to move forward with our mission focus. We believe that by undertaking a new, concerted mission focus, we will have the funds we want for the mission that Christ has given us.

How Can You Help?

Begin by lifting up this whole "affliction" to God in prayer. We firmly believe that God is leading us to new beginnings and we trust that God will show us the way through this crisis. Become an active participant in developing your congregation's budget. Become a "First Fruits" giving congregation to Mission Support. Practicing faithful stewardship will allow us to generously support mission work through our congregational, synodical, and Churchwide expressions.

The \$131,000 projected budget deficit looks overwhelming! It is if each one of us had to resolve it on our own. We invite you to look at working together, with 115 other mission congregations, as one interdependent Body of Christ for the solution.

What Does the Future Hold?

In reality only God knows, but we want to let you know that if the giving stays the same it will mean even more dramatic change for the 2011-2012 Mission Strategy. Our church is made up of three interdependent expressions (congregations, Mission Areas, and Churchwide), but the mission engine is the congregations! It takes the support from congregations to make the Mission Area and Churchwide expressions work.

Our Churchwide partner has already made organizational changes in response to a 35% reduction in Mission Support over the last two years; sixty five positions are being eliminated.



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You can read about the changes at the follow link <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx#&&a=4654>

Keep in mind that the Churchwide budget supports the funding for the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) on our territory and our Hispanic/Latino Mission Coordinator. They also support grants for new mission starts on our territory and support for current missions. If we cannot provide sufficient Mission Support to Churchwide, the grants they provide for our ministries are in jeopardy. Including the DEM support, we currently receive from Churchwide nearly the same amount we send in Mission Support!

We have a staff of three program people working for us (Bishop Kanouse, Pr. Stan Meyer, and Pr. Jane Mar—both Pr. Stan and Pr. Jane are called at 85% time). Administrative staff includes just Tyna Oslie and Judy Rommel. Reducing staff to save money is a possibility. If we need to take this action it certainly will impede the mission work in our Synod. It will be very difficult to support all the congregations and accomplish effective ministry in our large geographic region with fewer staff persons than we currently have in place.

We certainly have challenges ahead, but not unlike the churches in Macedonia we can overcome this “severe affliction” by putting our trust in the Lord and by giving generously with a joyous heart. Thanks for receiving this letter in the spirit in which it is intended, for discussing it, and for a prayerful response as you look to the end of this year and 2011 mission planning! We hold you in our daily prayers for your own missional outreach.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philippians 4:4

Grace and Peace in Christ Jesus,

+ Kevin S. Kanouse

Kevin S. Kanouse,
Bishop

Stephanie Varnum

Stephanie Varnum,
Vice President



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