

## **Pastor Diener's Report to the Voter's Assembly – June 28, 2020**

*"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me [Jesus]...*

*Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going.*

*How can we know the way?'*

*Jesus said to him, 'I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.*

*No one comes to the Father except through Me.'...*

*I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace.*

*In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart;*

*I have overcome the world."* (John 14: 1, 5-6; John 16: 33)

### **TRUST IN GOD IS ESSENTIAL AT ALL TIMES - ESPECIALLY NOW!**

It has been commonly shared amongst all people that we are facing a NOVEL virus and these are UNPRECEDENTED and UNCERTAIN times. This is not entirely accurate. Our nation faced the Spanish flu just over 100 years ago with nearly 500 million people infected world wide (1/3 of the world's population) and 50 million perished from this pandemic. The United States had well over 600,000 deaths.

Truth be told - we have lived in unprecedented, uncertain and trying times ever since the Fall. Sin is at the root cause of our diseased and dying world. I don't say these things to belittle our current war against the Covid-19 pandemic but only to share the simple but profound truth: There has been only one ESSENTIAL since the Fall: **Trust in God!** My constant and fervent prayer for our Grace church family has been throughout this crisis the very same prayer of Jesus in His High Priestly Prayer: *"Sanctify (Set them apart) them in the truth; Your Word is Truth."* We are set apart by the faith given to us in our Baptism and strengthened through Word and Sacrament which allows us to put our complete trust in God - and Him alone.

There is a story about a married couple that faced the very same surgery - knee replacement surgery. But they faced their upcoming challenge in very different ways. Bill wanted to know all the details. He read up on the surgery and consulted with his physician. He investigated the manufacturer of the knee replacement parts, tuned into YouTube and watched videos of the operation. He knew how it was going to be done and that knowledge gave him some sense of comfort, perhaps even control.

Joanne was different. She did not know the details of the operation. She simply knew her doctor. She trusted her to recommend a great surgeon. What the doctor and the surgeon said was enough. Now, she simply waited in trust.

Obviously, when it comes to how you handle your health care, either approach is appropriate. Some people want details, so they are well-informed. Others would rather not know and, instead, put their trust in their doctors. Either way is appropriate as we approach our health care, **but what about when we approach our God?**

In one of our recent Easter Gospel readings, Jesus addresses His disciples. He has spoken of a frightening future, His betrayal, Peter's denial, troubled times, and now His disciples reasonably have questions.

Peter wants to know where Jesus is going (13:26). When Jesus replies in a way that is less than specific, Thomas argues that, if they do not know where Jesus is going, they will never know the way (14:5). For these disciples, there is comfort in the details. Faced with a problematic future, they want more than promises. They want times and places. They would like a clear set of directions so they know how to navigate whatever might come. (Sound like anyone you know? Does this sound like something you have voiced amidst the isolation and troubling future?)

Jesus, however, **simply offers them a promise and His presence.** His promise is He is working on their behalf. Without giving explicit details, He says He is preparing a place for them and promises to come back and take them to Himself. When pressed further, Jesus moves from this promise to His presence. He says to Thomas, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (14:6). Jesus sees His disciples facing future uncertainty and responds not with details about dates and times and procedures to follow, but with His promise and His presence. He is indeed the only Way, the only Truth, and the only Life.

They may not know where they are going, but, as long as they are with Jesus, they know they are on the way. With His promises to comfort them and His presence to guide them, they can face the uncertain future. "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus says. "Believe in God; believe also in Me" (14:1).

Today, our Lord still invites us to live in trust. **Viral pandemics create uncertainty.** We are not sure where we are in the time line as the virus unfolds. We are not sure how we can recover from the suffering. The way forward is hard. We want some assurance of where we are going, how we will get there, precisely what will happen along the way.

But, today and every day, Jesus answers our prayers not with specific details. **Instead, He calls us to a life of trust.** He is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. In Him alone, there is peace and victory over the world and its burdens. Whatever happens, He is there with you.

In His life, death and resurrection, He has shown you the depth of His love. In His ascension into Heaven, He has shown you the breadth of His rule. While you may not know what is going to happen, you do know where you are – in the hands of a God who loves you with an everlasting love. Out of love Jesus came for you, lived the perfect life for you, died an atoning death for you, rose to give you assurance and victory, rules to give you His very best, and promises ultimately to return for you.

His way is long enough that it leads through all suffering. His truth is clear enough that it reveals whom to trust. His life is strong enough that it brings us to a new creation. With Jesus as our Way, our Truth, and our Life, we have what is essential for every moment of our lives now and for eternity.

During this time of pandemic and following the Governor's orders to "Stay Home, Stay Safe" we have traveled through Lent, Holy Week, Easter, National Day of Prayer and Ascension - and now looking forward to the Season of Pentecost - a season of growth in the Lord. It has been my prayer that we could still provide our church family with weekly bulletins and sermons, Bible Study materials, an Easter coloring contest and faithful encouragement with regular contact on Saturday mornings with the distribution of bulletins and devotional materials. As your spiritual shepherd, I have felt the need on my heart to continue to provide these items for you, despite being on disability.

The easy thing to do would have been to separate myself from my church family and simply focus on my own healing. But I do not believe that my time on disability takes precedence over the Divine Call I have as your pastor. I have been blessed with good care from my doctors and with the constant encouragement from the Grace church family. I have continued writing sermons, when I felt well enough, but have found sermons provided by Concordia Pulpit for times when I did not. I will continue this practice until we officially open for gatherings of worship. At this point, Pastor Verity will be paid for providing the resources for weekly worship. It is likely that my disability will continue until September 15, 2020. Rally Sunday is September 20. Lord willing, I will be able to return to full time service as your pastor.

I had hoped for a greater turnout for the National Day of Prayer on May 7 since prayer is essential during this time. But those who attended were able to lift up prayers around the flag pole and encourage one another while maintaining a safe distance and proper measures of safety.

I want to thank the Grace church family for their faithful support of God's work and ministry through generous giving throughout this time. People have joined "Joyful Response," or mailed in offerings or have dropped them off at the church on Saturday mornings. **Your generosity amidst these dark times has been a bright shining light for our church family and God's Church.**

At the time of this writing (May 15, 2020), we are making plans for the gradual re-opening of Grace. We will be providing confession and absolution in the bulletin along with the distribution of Holy Communion on Saturdays (the elements will be consecrated by myself). We are praying that the Catechumens will be able to engage in the Rite of Confirmation on Pentecost, May 31 with services for each individual family. We are praying that we will be able to gather as a church family for worship beginning on Trinity Sunday, June 7.

Please remember, **the re-opening of our church for worship will look much different** than it did at our last Sunday service on March 22. We are looking to purchase an electrostatic sanitizing machine for our Sanctuary, Preschool, Bible Study and Fellowship areas. In the meantime, we will continue to wipe down and sanitize all areas that may be touched as we gather. **Our goal is to create an environment where every concern, fear, and anxiety is removed.** If everyone feels safe, you can be truly open to the life-saving, life-giving message of Christ. We will continue to ask that **if you are not feeling well in any way, that you stay home.**

Before coming to church, ask yourself these questions:

- Am I showing any flu-like symptoms?
- Have I had a fever of 100.4 or higher in the past 14 days?
- Have I had prolonged exposure to someone who has tested positive for COVID-19?
- Is there any medical reason why I believe I shouldn't be around others?

If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions, we strongly encourage you to stay home until you answer "no" to all of them. Watch "Worship Anew" on Sunday morning. View an on-line service. But stay at home until you are well.

When you come to Grace, here are some of the changes that you can expect: (Please remember that this is a fluid situation and some practices may vary)

- **We start with prayer.** Following the science and epidemiology are great, but as a church family, we start with prayer. Understanding our particular and unique needs as a church family are critical. Therefore, we lift them up to God first.
- We are constantly seeking to follow CDC guidelines and precautions for safety.
- Trust that the entire church building has been deeply cleaned and sanitized.
- The Hymnals, Bibles, Prayer Cards and envelopes have been removed.
- The entire worship service will continue to be printed out in the worship bulletin - therefore no one will be sharing or passing materials between individuals.
- There will be no children's sermons at this time - because it is near impossible to ask children to practice proper social distancing or adhere to "touchless" requirements.
- We will ask families to sit together as a unit while distancing from other families.
- There will be no passing of the offering plate. You may place your offering in the plate as you enter, mail in your offering to the office or **consider participating in "Joyful Response"** so counters no longer need to touch the offerings or envelopes.

**There is no greater time to participate in this automatic giving than at the current time.** This will be the "new normal" and this practice continues to allow for faithful, first fruits and "touch-less" giving to the Lord.

- We will encourage the practice of hand washing, hand sanitizer, and the wearing of home-made masks, if you are able to wear them. The church will have hand sanitizer and masks available, if needed.
- A new camera for the church has just been installed and we hope to provide those who are sick, those who have underlying conditions and those who don't feel safe, to watch our Grace YouTube channel to view the worship service. Bulletins and sermons will continue to be printed on-line.
- Greeters will open the narthex church doors for you.
- You will be asked to pick up your bulletin and any other materials from the table in the narthex outside the sanctuary doors. You may also visit your mailbox. We will Lysol the mailboxes prior and after each service.
- Sunday School, Bible Study, and Fellowship will be cancelled until Rally Sunday on September 20, 2020.
- Please minimize the use of restrooms and drinking fountains. But restrooms will be open - but you will be asked to have a kleenex in your hand prior to opening doors, flushing and touching faucets, etc. Please use a kleenex when touching the drinking fountain handles.
- We are currently planning to have an Alternative worship service for healthy individuals 65 and over at 9:00 a.m. And a service for families with children and those under 65 at 11:00 a.m. each Sunday.
- There will be no readers - limiting those who are in the chancel area. The pastor will read all the lessons.
- The Lord's Supper will be distributed in "station communion" fashion with social distancing between members.
- The nursery and all classrooms will be locked since they have been cleaned and sanitized. The Human Care Committee hopes to open a brand new nursery in September. Those using the nursery will be able to watch the service on the Television. Human Care has made some changes to the nursery to bless the future use of this room and ministry.

So, as you can see, the "new normal" will be quite different for some time - at least until our Nation has secured a vaccine and we can safely engage in a "newer normal" because of the blessings of medications and advancements against this pandemic.

I thank God for those who are willing to serve at Grace – as Officers, on our Boards, Committees and Organizations. We serve because Christ first served us – and continues to serve us 24/7. On the date of our Voters Assembly, a number of people will begin their service as leaders in our congregation. We thank God for the service of Dr. Robert Reneker Jr. for his six years of faithful service as our Congregational President. He has fulfilled his role admirably and we pray that he will continue to be blessed with a servant's heart. We also thank Dawn Schrader for her faithful service as Church Secretary. We have been blessed by her service.

We are a busy church family. Even during time of social distancing, Easter cards have been delivered, shut-ins have been visited and cared for by Pastor and the Deaconesses, Quilts have been fashioned, Prayer Shawls have been made and delivered to those in need and our church family has encouraged one another on social media, with cards and phone calls. Thank you for serving as a blessing to one another as the Body of Christ.

West Michigan Lutheran High School has been a bright shining light of excellence during this dark and dire time in the education of children. This school maintained excellence with distance learning, weekly chapels, prayer partners, Google meets and zoom calls. Very few schools can boast of such continued excellence during this time of Pandemic. We have four students from Grace who will be graduating from WML on June 25: Maggie Eastland (Valedictorian of the 2020 Class), Jackson Miller, Jenny Wang and Greta Bini. We pray for God's care and safety upon Jenny and Greta as they return home to China and Greece. We thank the Campbells for serving as a Host family for these students. We need more people to consider serving in this way. Ask them how they have been blessed by hosting these youth.

I have continued to serve as the Pastoral Administrator throughout this time - although on a limited basis since my disability. Please prayerfully consider supporting our West Michigan Lutheran higher education with your prayers and financial support.

As far as my report concerning our church family: currently we have 17 students in Confirmation instruction. What a blessing! We are looking forward, Lord willing, to four students being Confirmed on Pentecost - James Gottschall, Stephanie Cronkright, Cadia and Carmen Wiseman. They went through Questioning on Wednesday, February 18 and are eager to become communicant members at Grace. Please keep these and all our catechumens in your daily prayers.

We've had one Baptism since the last Voters Assembly - Evelyn Marie Gottschall, who was born on the day after Ash Wednesday, February 27 and was Baptized on Sunday, March 8. Zakk Wyatt Urias was born on Saturday, February 29 but the Baptism date is pending. We said "So Long for Now" to one member, Delores Bergin, who passed away on Thursday, April 16 at 6:30 p.m. Her memorial service is pending. We also pray for Julia Reneker whose step-mother, Marion McClain passed away and whose funeral was on May 7, 2020.

I continue to ask for members to join the "Telecare Loving Calls" ministry where phone ministers will call 5 people per month each month as a means of staying connected and ministering to one another. I have gradually received confirmation of those willing to serve. But we need at least 25 phone ministers. Please consider serving in this manner.

The Nursery is being renovated. We will have a TV to watch the worship service while in the nursery; we will have a new play wall for younger children; there is new flooring and furniture; and there will be a limited number of toys that will be rotated. This way the children will have new and clean toys. We are looking for those who will serve in the nursery during worship and during Bible study hour.

The Human Care Committee has scheduled First Aid Training and Stop the Bleed training on Saturday, August 8 and Saturday, August 15 - both from 9 a.m. - 2 p.m. Circle these dates on your calendar. We would like everyone who serves as an usher, deaconess, Nursery staff, Sunday School teacher or volunteer to consider this free training. Thank you to Danielle Campbell and Tonya Blomeling for offering this training.

The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee is now forming. We will plan to meet in the Fall. This will be an important group to plan for special celebrations, the return of previous pastors, and creating special anniversary items for us to celebrate and enjoy. If you would like to join, please speak with President Reneker.

I continue to serve as the Chairman of the English District Evangelization Team and the Lake Erie Representative for the LifeLine Task Force for the English District. I also serve as a facilitator for the Synod Re:Vitality Programs: "Connect to Disciple", "Every One His Witness", "Shepherding of the Strays" and the new program, "Service in God's Kingdom." Because of my leadership on the Evangelization Team, Grace has been given the opportunity to pilot this new program to enable and equip congregations to form strategy and plans for the future. It is a gift valued at \$2,500. We have received all the materials and videos. I will lead this Bible Study and Program in the Fall.

In honor of our upcoming 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we are continuing to support the capital campaign of \$300,000 to fund-raise for a number of projects critical for the present and future of our congregation including finishing the parking lot, replacing roof heating and cooling units, the new organ fund, the video project and various other projects. Thanks largely to the generosity of Jake and Harriet Diehm and their bequest for Grace, we have surpassed the 75% mark of the \$300,000 goal. We will make a push in the Fall to complete the remaining 25% and proceed with the purchase of the new organ. Thank you for your generous gifts to support this ministry.

We grieve the cancelling of this year's Vacation Bible School - but we are making plans to have a great experience with the "Rainforest Explorers - Jesus Leads the Way" in 2021. The Sunday School ministry is looking for Team Teachers and Substitutes for the Fall. Please prayerfully consider serving in this joyful ministry of sharing Jesus with our children. I would like to begin a new ministry in the Fall with every member (or two) serving as a mentor / prayer partner with every one of our Youth. Everything I have read says that we need to put every effort to support our Youth in these dark times. I pray that when I ask for mentors to step forward, I will have an eager and energetic response.

Even though we will not be meeting for in-person Bible Study during this pandemic and the Summer months, I will still provide opportunities for study - including a Zoom gathering. I'm sure once the warm weather settles into Michigan and the restrictions are eased in our state, there will be the temptation to get out and enjoy the beautiful State of Michigan. Please remember the continued importance of gathering together as a church family for worship and mutual encouragement.

- Check out our website: [www.gracelc.net](http://www.gracelc.net) We will continue to post items on this website and Facebook that will provide information and encouragement.
- Make sure to stop by church to get your weekly bulletin and sermon. Use the bulletin as a means for blessing your family altar with the readings, prayers and opportunities to lift up those in need.
- Once again, please consider participating in the automatic giving program, "Joyful Response." This is critical during this time so that we have faithful, first-fruits and touch-less giving. You will consider this a true blessing.

Our Grace church family has been tremendously blessed with prayers of healing for all those who underwent surgeries this Winter. We thank God for the healing from the corona virus given to Randy Franks and Cindy Carlisle. We walk together with Steve Blomeling as he has undergone a number of surgeries and is now battling cancer. We have witnessed God's hand of grace upon our members. Our weekly prayer list is a constant celebration of God's care and protection and the offering of thanksgiving for His blessings.

Pray for the Preschool as we look forward to the Fall. Ask God for students and families to be blessed by our ministry. Pray for our servants - Maria and Christy - and ask God to keep everyone safe as we enter into a new school year.

If you remember back to New Year's Eve, I preached on the importance of having 20/20 vision at all times - recognizing that only God through His Spirit enables us to see things as they really are with His truth and to walk through trials with sight clearly upon Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life. I had no idea at that time what this year would present. Even as much as we have prayed and planned and looked forward to a "new normal," there is still much we don't know and can't possibly foresee. But please help us to communicate with clarity during these uncertain times. We understand that the more clarity we can provide to our Grace church family amid uncertainty, the easier our transition will be into the "new normal." **Help us get our database up to date with your email addresses and correct phone numbers.** We will include you in all our mass mailings. Check our website and Facebook accounts. We will always update these for your benefit. We are continuing to seek to improve our digital capabilities and brainstorm for better ways to serve. **If you have ideas of how we can help serve you, please let us know.**

If you do not participate with an internet presence, ask for information. Call the church office. Call my number at any time. I want to help you with the most up-to-date information. Call one of your fellow church members. Clarity and communication are comforting during these trying times.

I do not want to be an alarmist but there is a real possibility that we'll be faced with another situation where we may have to close our doors and self-isolate. We want to be prepared. We are working on having a strong plan of serving our church family no matter what the future holds.



It has been said that “Crisis is the cradle of innovation.” We adapted when the virus hit because we had to. Our mission and ministry hasn’t changed - we want to reach the world with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Continue to uplift this effort by sharing with family, friends and neighbors the essential need to rely on Christ and His grace.

Just a quick personal note: While on disability, I have still suffered from a number of falls. I was on a protocol of medication and diet for seizures. The medication has made me feel “out of touch” due to drowsiness and a constant fog. The diet has been worthwhile (but difficult during a pandemic - no Lucky Charms, no bread, no potatoes - no comfort food.) But because of the continued falls, they are now looking into cataplexy. The plan at the time of this writing is go through continued tests and then a trip to the Mayo Clinic. I have had four injections into my back due to the falls and subsequent pain. Therefore, I anticipate the disability to last at least the six months ending on September 15, 2020. Marcia has had her leukemia numbers increase which means taking every precaution and avoiding any sickness. Thus far, God has protected her from illness. Due to the “Stay at Home” order, we have not traveled which has prevented Marcia from visiting her parents in Nebraska. Her father has been quarantined in a nursing home this entire time. In June, we hope to visit Missouri for our grandson’s graduation from Preschool and then Nebraska to visit her parents.

In a joyful note, our younger son, Matthew, after a competitive interview process was given the position of the State of Michigan Director of Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Since this position allows them to live anywhere in the state, Matthew and his wife, Allison are looking for housing in the West Michigan area. We look forward to their move to Michigan in June.

If anyone has any questions, concerns or encouragements, please feel free to approach me at any time. May God fill your reflection upon all the upheaval, isolation and burdens of battling the coronavirus with complete trust in God and His presence with you always. You are never alone! I pray that we will look forward to the “new normal” with the essential relationship with Jesus Christ, His comforting Word, His consoling Spirit and the truth that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life - now and forever. I thank God for the opportunity to serve you.

In Christ Alone,  
Pastor John Diener  
Galatians 2:20