

“For in hope we were saved.  
Now hope that is seen is not hope.  
For who hopes for what is seen?  
But if we hope for what we do not see,  
we wait for it with patience.”

~Romans 8: 24-25

Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,



You have no doubt noticed the increasing darkness. The kids go to school in the dark, and soon, the school day will end as it began, in darkness. The hours of light are getting shorter and shorter, and people are grateful for lingering twilight.

How ironic that the most hopeful season of the church year begins as the darkness increases. In the weeks to come, we light candles on the Advent wreath, and it's not a moment too soon. These lights of hope stand against the growing darkness. And every week, as we add the flame of another candle, the light will increase and shine brighter even as the darkness comes sooner and lasts longer.

In this season of Hope, and as this year of Hope 2021 comes to its end, I share with you some things that I do see that give me hope:

**1. Our congregations continue to find new creative ways to do ministry.**

As I read through your newsletters, whether online or hard copy, I am impressed and encouraged by your continued efforts. Sure, some things have paused. Yes, some priorities have been re-evaluated and energies placed in new directions. Yet, this is all good as we continue to be church together and church for the sake of the world. I am grateful to the Spirit that is at work among and through us as the work of Christ continues.

**2. We have wonderful pastoral leaders!**

In the past few years, we have welcomed many new pastors and they bring new energy, perspective, and ideas. And our seasoned pastors and Licensed Lay Ministers have provided stability and the blessing of trusted relationships that keep congregational partnerships in motion and help reduce anxiety. And congregations in pastoral transition have been patient and involved, waiting for God's timing with hope.

**3. We have renewed joy in being together again...safely.**

As pandemic restrictions have eased, Pastor Jim and I are once again happy to gather with you for worship. I do not mind wearing a mask if it means we can sing together and gather in the same space. I love hearing the voices of others raised in song and prayer. It has felt like salve on a wound to share the peace, sing alto to someone's soprano, and hear combined voices pray the Lord's prayer together in the rhythm and cadence of voices in unison. While I truly believe that some sense of community can be achieved and appreciated through Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook live, the joy and value of the community gathered in person is also true and real.

**4. Our synod is newly connected through Lifelong Faith Formation, Pastoral Leader Check-Ins, and various Zoom meetings.**

While I have missed being able to add lunch and snacks to in person Synod meetings, in many ways we are more connected as a synod than we have ever been. Teachers and students from the Copper Country to Marinette, from Ironwood to Sault Ste. Marie gather in virtual classrooms and discussion groups. We are church together in a whole new way, gathering to discuss and wrestle with conversations about issues of race, scriptural interpretation, and to consider and plan various ministry efforts.

## **5. God is at work!**

In all our efforts, in all our re-evaluations, in all the changes and future uncertainty, the Spirit of the living Christ is gathering, inspiring, supporting, and guiding. We are discovering again what it means to be church, what the purpose of the Body of Christ is in this world, and who we are in mission together. I see a new hunger for deeper spirituality and for meaningful connectedness to God and each other. I see ministry efforts taking on a life of their own. I see details and pieces falling together. I see a willingness to experiment, to try new things, to jump even when the landing is unclear.

There is much to be hopeful for because of what we can see even as we continue to hope for that which is still becoming. As Advent candles are lit, as the glow from the manger bed grows brighter, as we strain to hear the songs of angels, remember that you are not alone. In hopeful anticipation of Christmas and a blessed New Year, I believe it is not too soon to share the following verse from “It Came upon the Midnight Clear” that speaks anew to our present circumstances:

*And you, beneath life's crushing load,  
whose forms are bending low,  
who toil along the climbing way  
with painful steps and slow:  
look now, for glad and golden hours  
come swiftly on the wing;  
Oh, rest beside the weary road  
and hear the angels sing!*

Yours in Christ,  
Bishop Katherine Finegan