

'Take Heart' retreats uplift, refresh pastors during COVID-19

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December 9, 2020



The Rev. Timothy Heath Jr., pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Oswego, NY., sings during morning prayer in the Ancilla Domini Chapel at the Lindenwood Retreat and Conference Center in Plymouth, Ind. (LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford)

By Cheryl Magness

DOXOLOGY: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel has been mentoring and supporting pastors with its Classic Series retreat program since 2008.

Now, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the LCMS Office of National Mission (ONM) is partnering with DOXOLOGY on a series of retreats to help pastors and the souls in their care find Gospel rest and refreshment during this challenging time.

The new series of retreats, under the theme “Take Heart: Strength and Confidence for Demanding Days,” aims to:

- Sustain the work of pastors;
- Help pastors diagnose ministry challenges;
- Provide strategies and assistance for responding to those challenges; and

- Equip pastors with both spiritual care and psychological resources.

Refreshment needed 'more than ever'

The Rev. David Fleming, DOXOLOGY's executive director for Spiritual Care, said that, in the early days of the pandemic, LCMS pastors and congregations adapted well. But as the weeks have turned into months, Fleming said many pastors are reporting feeling discouraged and depleted by:

- The constant decision-making and need to adapt to changing circumstances;
- The lockdowns of homebound and ill members;
- The governmental prohibitions on funerals, weddings, church services and singing;
and

- The differences of opinion within their congregations over various aspects of the pandemic’s effects.



The Rev. Anthony Oliphant, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Elmhurst, Ill., and the Rev. Steven Anderson, pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Chicago, chat together during break. (LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford)

“Consequently,” Fleming said, “our pastors are in need, more than ever, of refreshing time with the Word of the Lord, rest with brother pastors and helpful presentations to understand what’s happening and what can be done about it.”

The first two “Take Heart” retreats were held Sept. 28–30 in Wichita, Kan., and Oct. 5–7 in Donaldson, Ind.

The Rev. Charles Henrickson, pastor of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Bonne Terre, Mo., attended the Donaldson event. Henrickson reported that, due to COVID-19, his congregation suspended in-person services from late March until early May.

“That was tough,” Henrickson said, “especially since that time period included all our Holy Week and Easter services. During that time, I did online services on Facebook Live. ... Of course, we could not have the Sacrament of the Altar since we could not gather at the altar.”

Henrickson is thankful that he has been able to resume in-person services but said that attendance is still not at pre-pandemic levels. “Some of our members have stayed away because they are at higher risk or are self-isolating after being near someone with a positive test. While understandable, it has been discouraging not seeing as many people in the pews. Also, it continues to be difficult for me to visit members in hospitals and nursing homes because of the restrictions those facilities place on visitation.”

Henrickson said he is “grateful to our Synod for sponsoring this retreat for pastors, and to DOXOLOGY for putting it on. This was a needed respite for pastors who have been under added stress this year. It was good to be with my brothers in ministry, to share our stories and to build one another up. The directors did a good job in their presentations, and the chapel services were refreshing. It’s good, sometimes, for pastors to sit in the pew and be ministered to.”

Henrickson has also attended DOXOLOGY’s Classic Series, a three-part program over 12 to 18 months for pastors, their wives and congregational leaders.



The Rev. David Fleming, executive director for spiritual care at DOXOLOGY, leads a session during the retreat. (LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford)

Healthy pastors

The Rev. Michael Meyer, director of Disaster Training for the LCMS, has been working with DOXOLOGY on behalf of the ONM under the *Making Disciples for Life (MDFL)* initiative to develop and coordinate the “Take Heart” retreats. Funding has been provided by the LCMS Soldiers of the Cross—Amplified program so that, other than transportation, there has been no cost to pastors. Meyer reported that a total of 72 pastors from over 20 LCMS districts attended the first two retreats.

“Never before in our lifetimes has the world disregarded the church as much as now,” Meyer said. “Yet now, more than ever, the world needs to hear the proclamation of the Gospel. The church needs healthy pastors to care for the flock and to speak God’s peace amid — and to — a world in chaos.

“The Office of National Mission, via *Making Disciples for Life*, is committed to supporting the health and well-being of every single pastor on our roster. Healthy pastors lead to healthy congregations. We pray, daily, that the Lord would send faithful laborers into the harvest and support them in it.”

ONM Executive Director Rev. Robert Zagore said, “We have been overwhelmed with joy by the thank-you notes that tell how impactful the first gatherings have been. The Office of National Mission is working to arrange up to 30 more events per year over the next two years.

“Lord willing, this will help our precious shepherds to recover from the stresses they’ve endured and be ready for the vital work ahead. We are also planning ways to provide loving care for our commissioned workers too. We are all Christ’s family, and we take care of one another.”

Here is a sampling of comments from pastors who attended the first two “Take Heart” retreats:

- “It was an encouraging breath of fresh air. There was so much to learn, but also so much joy and hope that was shared in these trying times.”
- “God renewed my heart when it was downcast. DOXOLOGY opened me up to once again taste the goodness of the Lord and hope in Him.”
- “What I’ve learned in this short time ... will, without doubt, benefit not only myself personally, but also my family and the congregation I serve.”
- “This could not have come at a better time for me. I will be returning to my parish with a renewed hope and a refreshed spirit.”
- “In a time of great fatigue and discouragement, this conference provided true rest and encouragement in Christ Jesus our Savior.”

- “This retreat gave me strength to face the challenges persistently arising through these COVID-19 days.”
- “It was exactly what I needed at exactly the right time.”

Learn more about DOXOLOGY at doxology.us.

Posted Dec. 9, 2020