

# Congregational Letters: Finding God during a Pandemic

## Objectives:

1. Help congregational members share their story when we are unable to gather.
2. Provide an opportunity for people to reflect on their daily lives and see where God is present.

## Introduction:

At Calvary Lutheran Church in Solana Beach, California, we chose as our Advent theme “Light of the World, Light of Our Lives” and wanted to encourage people to look back on the past year with eyes tuned in to where God was present in the world. Inspired by the work being done at Westwood Lutheran Church in St. Louis Park, Minnesota (thank you, Pastor Van Hunnik!), we decided to ask people to write letters to the congregation, sharing where they saw the light of God shining in their lives and in the world during 2020. We originally thought about asking for a devotion but thought that writing a letter would be less intimidating for people. While we did this during Advent, it could be a project for any time of the year.



## Steps:

1. *Getting the Word Out* – At the beginning of November, we began advertising in our online e-newsletter, asking people to sign up to write a letter. We let people know that the letter would be shared through eblasts to the congregation – one each day of Advent – and posted on our Facebook page so that it could be shared with our community.
2. *Targeted Emails* – At the same time, we sent out invitations to specific households who we thought might be willing to participate. We needed 26 individuals or families to commit. Our pastor planned to write a letter for Christmas Day to bring our efforts to a close. A sample letter also was included so households could get a feel for what we were looking. (see sample letters) In the end, we received 28 letters from a variety of members, including young families, families with older youth, couples, singles, and senior citizens. The range was awesome! The length varied and some people added pictures.
3. *Due Dates* – We lined up a week of letters at a time, asking people to have their letters in a week before the batch of letters went out so we had time to edit typos and grammar. For example, those going out starting November 29 had to be in by November 22.
4. *Posting* – Once the letters were completed, our office administrator scheduled them to go out at the same time each day using Constant Contact to our email list. In

addition, she posted them each day on Calvary's Facebook page. Go to Calvary Lutheran Church Solana Beach and search for "letters" and you can read what was written.

#### Feedback:

The response that we received from members and friends of Calvary was tremendous. First, several of those who wrote letters let us know how much they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the year. A few had indicated they initially were reluctant to write anything, unsure if they could point to an example of God's light. The experience of writing the letter allowed them the space to find God present in their daily lives even during a pandemic, political and social unrest, and personal grief.

Secondly, those who read the letters told us how much it made them feel connected to others at Calvary. They enjoyed learning about the details of other people's lives and were touched by the personal stories they told and the hope they expressed. In addition, the project has inspired people to find new ways to connect in the year ahead. The collection of letters was assembled into a pdf booklet and people have obtained copies so they can have them to read throughout the year.

An additional idea would be to invite children and youth to draw pictures and provide a caption as to where they saw God in the world.

#### SAMPLE LETTER #1

*Dear Calvary,*

*As we look over this past year, it has been a time of trial for all of us, bringing changes we had no way of foreseeing. And yet, for many, it has also been a time of opportunity, a time to slow down and evaluate, a time to connect in novel ways, and a time to pursue new interests.*

*For us, it has been all the above. One of the things that has excited us, however, is taking up birdwatching together. This new pursuit started when we had three pairs of house finches build nests at our home. Our curiosity about them led us to find out more about San Diego birds in general and, to our surprise, we found that our city is one of the best birdwatching areas in the world!*

*Our next step was to hang a hummingbird feeder outside our kitchen window to attract these little aerial acrobats. Watching their antics brings joy every day. Now we head out on a regular basis, mostly in our neighborhood, but also to other locations, to watch for new arrivals migrating through the area as well as our local inhabitants. God's avian creations are amazing in their diversity and ability to navigate our world. Without the pandemic, we might never have discovered this hobby. We thank God for brightening our world with these feathered creatures.*

*May the light of Christ shine in your hearts this Advent!*

## SAMPLE LETTER #2

*Dear Members and Friends of Calvary,*

*Covid-19 or not, Christmas is coming to Calvary. It is like a strong light coming from afar and streaming very directly to each one of us. And like our fellow members, we are ready for that light as we too have had our share of darkness.*

*Our beautiful house of worship has sat in darkness as we were unable to worship there. Week after week the lights have not been turned on in our fellowship hall, in our gathering rooms and in our Sunday School spaces. When our good friends and fellow members of Calvary like Hilde, Brent, and Margaret died this year we were unable to remember them with worship and eulogies in our church.*

*Mel was unable to preside at the wedding of a grandchild. For the first time in more than 25 years. Jane's specially hand-crafted Christmas gifts for all grandkids and one great-grandson will be opened and she will not be there to get those thank you hugs.*

*Yet as we remember the dark days of 2020, we cannot avoid those rays of light which consistently made their way through. The light of the Gospel shone through every Sunday as we listened to Pastor's wonderful sermons on our computer and in the way we shared the Holy Eucharist in the familiar setting of the study in our home. Light streamed especially brightly in September as more than 150 members of Calvary let their light and the light of Christ shine through acts of community service all over San Diego County. The light came via the telephone as Calvary Men's Support Group met each week and was reinforced by all the Zoom meetings of a variety of other Faith Groups who shared joys and sorrows, disappointments and hopes.*

*And this we know: we will see light again this Christmas. It will shine brightly from the glow of an angelic host announcing the arrival of our Savior. It will be dim but unmistakable as it shines through the meager swaddling clothes wrapping a holy infant. And it will be diffused through many neighborhoods as all of us who call ourselves Calvary members gather around the Christmas trees in our sometimes isolated, yet warm and loving homes, and sing as best we can, "Silent Night Holy Night-Let the Light shine."*

*In the name of the One who is the Light of the world*