Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Near the beginning of this pandemic I relayed to you what had been shared with me: this is a marathon not a sprint. Marathon indeed. We are more than four months past the arrival of COVID-19 in Minnesota. We have made adjustments and created new ways of being church together. We’ve experimented and learned and, from our current vantage point, it seems the opportunity to do so will continue.

I am writing today to offer a word of encouragement and thanks. I am so thankful for all the ways you, as the People of God in the Southeastern Minnesota Synod, have navigated this season with grace and courage. It is a joy to see innovations in worship, collaboration and sharing of resources between congregations, as well as new people participating in the life of the church. The Spirit is at work in our midst. Thanks be to God! And thank you for your faithful participation in the ministries of the church!

I have the sense this pandemic journey will continue for some time yet. We cannot know when the need to physically distance, wear masks, and limit our time in shared spaces will end. As we look to the months ahead and a new program year, it is wise to pause, take a break, and intentionally reflect on the lessons we’ve learned and the opportunities yet to explore.

It is also important for each of us to remember Sabbath is a gift and a commandment. This is a gentle reminder: if you haven’t carved out time and space for Sabbath rest, please do so.

I know many of the conversations around congregational decisions can be difficult. In times of uncertainty and stress every decision feels crucial. In moments that we feel at odds it is helpful to step back and approach intense conversations with an adjusted framework. Asking the questions: What do you hope for? What do you fear? and What is our “why” in this process? can help all of us remember our common vocation to love God and neighbor.

Each of the 167 congregations, six Synod Authorized Worshipping Communities, and two campus ministries in our synod is gifted with caring and compassionate leaders and members. Each is navigating this pandemic in a slightly different way. Remember this is one of the strengths of our church. We trust one another to do what is faithful in each context. Be wary of the temptation to compare. Instead let’s practice learning and collaborating all the while recognizing what is best for one community may be different than what is best for another.
I am so thankful for every single one of you. I am thankful for your faithfulness, your inquisitiveness, your kindness, and your generosity.

May the Holy Spirit sustain us as we continue to run the race set before us. May the Gospel be proclaimed in all we do. May we be filled with courage and joy in the days to come.

In Christ,

Bishop Regina Hassanally
Southeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA