**REPORT OF THE BISHOP**It seems odd, that I am writing this, and we are preparing now to hold a Synod Assembly, a mere 7 or so months after the last Assembly closed. But for all of us passing through this time of pandemic, panic, protest and political division – everything seems odd at best; horrific at worst. Not since the civil rights era, or World War II, or the Great Depression, or the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic, or the First World War – perhaps even the Civil War – have so many challenges and calamities piled on at once. So many of us are exhausted, scared, uncertain, and in grief. And the weight in the church has fallen particularly on our congregational leaders, their councils and staff, and especially our pastors and those serving in pastoral leadership. I have spoken with many who have suffered greatly, and who suffer still. And yet, we still get up in the morning. Still go to work. Still plan and conduct worship. Still run and attend meetings, many still on “Zoom.” Still baptize, still preach, still offer communion in ways that are safe and faithful. Still visit the sick and the homebound, through windows or wearing masks. Still offer life-giving ministries. Still care for loved ones, neighbors, even total strangers. Still teach and still make music unto the Lord. Still get our kids to school, and babysit our grandchildren, and do our vocations in offices, schools, hospitals, construction sites, military bases, prisons, police barracks, in the streets and on the road. Many of us are retired, but you’d never know it, because we still serve and work and give back. Many of us are on disability, and strive to stay connected, but feel disconnected or left behind. And so many of us still volunteer, create, dream, and encourage others. Many, many of us are completely “behind the scenes,” uncelebrated, unsung, even unknown – and yet, we get up and do it all again, would do it all over again, for the glory of God alone. Can we pause – even as you read this, and I write it – can we please pray THANK YOU to God for our pastors, our deacons, our bishops, our cantors, our youth workers, our councils and committees, officers and chairs, administration and office support, our faithful volunteers and daily members and prayer warriors, past and present – who BY THE POWER OF GOD and FAITH have gotten us through everything – especially this time of pandemic? AMEN! And so, here we are. What’s next? Let us dare to ask that question, not with impending doom and gloom, but with boldness of faith, and brightness of eyes, and joy in our hearts. Let us be GOD-RELIANT! Let us be CHRIST-CENTERED! Let 5 us be SPIRIT-LED! Never forgetting the Gospel of Jesus, the Mystery of Faith: CHRIST HAS DIED. CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN!!! This 2021 Synod Assembly, in all three of its big moments – the Online Assembly, June 4-5; the Installation Service, June 5; and the August 14 “Ministry Laboratory,” or “MIN-LAB” – has one theme: “GROWING YOUNG AND VITAL.” This theme recognizes an overall goal that God has for our Synod, and for all of us and our congregations: we seek to invite and inspire young people to share their needs and concerns, joys and passions; and to take their place with all of us, in making and re-making the church as Jesus-centered community for today and tomorrow. “GROWING YOUNG” is a movement rising up across the nation, across denominations, and it has been active and vital here in NEPA Synod for over a year already. It is one of three VITAL SIGN GOALS taking us into the next several years, to 2026 and beyond. The second Vital Sign Goal is named “GAINING STRENGTH.” It calls for every congregation and every leader to affirm and identify their strengths, and to find a partner or partners to combine strengths and shore up weaknesses by working together. And the third Vital Sign Goal is called “GOING BEYOND DEATH TO LIFE.” This Goal seeks to create an overall strategic plan for stuck, struggling, or finishing congregations to live well, serve well, and when they ready, to end well – leaving a lasting, faithful, purposeful legacy. These three VITAL SIGN GOALS will take time; at least 6 years of focused effort, teamwork, and clear goals and outcomes. Our Synod staff in new positions will be tasked with helping to form and support the teams and task forces who get to work on each of these three Goals. These wise and creative volunteers, working with me and the Synod Council, will lead us to real solutions, to ways that work for addressing the real problems that real congregations face. That’s the plan for the long run; but what about our immediate needs and concerns? What is God calling us to act on, today – and how has God already been at work in and through the people and congregations of this synod? These questions are why, we are also focusing this Synod Assembly on what we call “VITAL SIGNS FOR NOW.” What are the ways we have already been: HEALING THE HURT? LOVING THE LAND? And ENGAGING THE STRANGER? At this Synod Assembly – June 4-5 online, and in-person on August 14’s MIN-LAB – we will be sharing what we do, and inspiring each other to answer these questions. All coming from the big question: “WHAT ARE OUR 6 VITAL SIGNS?” As the Body of Christ, we are all called to share his love and life. As we do this, let’s also share ideas, and partner with each other to go even further. To be sure, the challenges we face are difficult and immense. But our God is bigger and stronger, and our Christ Jesus has already gone before us, to show the way. And by the Holy Spirit, we will all be well led – if we but listen and follow.   
  
With joy and gratitude, I am… Christopher deForest, Your Bishop