



# LDA<sup>TODAY</sup>

Summer 2021

## Refreshed Student Seminar Brings Depth, Builds Community

Sometimes you have to shake things up in order to dig deeper. And that's exactly what Deaconesses Deb Lennox and Valerie Webdell, LDA Co-Directors of Education and Formation, did when they refreshed Student Seminar this year.

Student Seminars occur in a three-year cycle of themes, which aligns with the average time a student spends in formation. Starting in 2021, these themes were integrated not only with the LDA Theological Touchstone and seven Hallmarks, but also with the LDA's Mission and Vision (see page 3).

"We want our students to more actively live into our Theological Touchstone and Hallmarks during their formation experience," Deb said. "This approach," added Valerie, "will ensure that our students are grounded in the values and identity of the LDA, which will enable them to more actively live out their calling to serve the people of God."

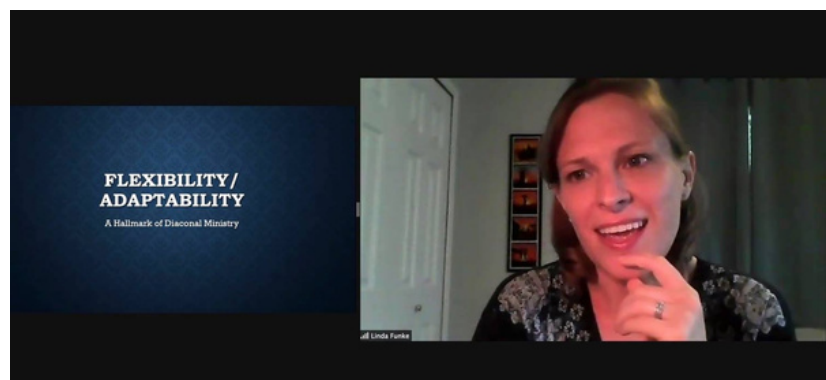
The theme of the March and June 2021 Student Seminars was Wholeness for All Creation: Leadership and Presence in an Uneasy World. It focused on one element of the LDA's Mission, to restore wholeness for all creation. In that context, students had the opportunity to dig deep into two LDA Hallmarks: Flexibility/Adaptability and Prophetic Voice.

Student Seminar themes in subsequent years are:

- Form, Send, and Nurture: Care-full Community and Healthy Ministry, focusing on the Hallmarks of Intentionality of Vocation and Community; and
- Ecumenism and Our Call to Serve, focusing on the Hallmarks of Mutuality and Diaconal Focus.

In addition to the new themes, there was a change in the student group project strategy.

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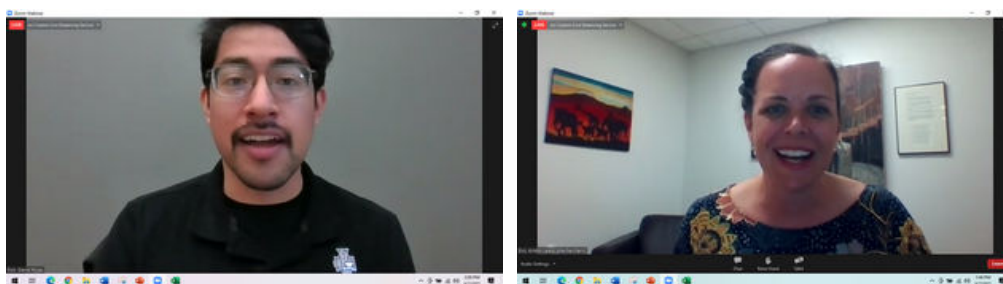
*Deaconess Linda Funke talks about the LDA Hallmark of Flexibility/Adaptability in her ministry story at Student Seminar this year. Ted Dodd, Diaconal Minister, United Church of Canada, and President of DOTAC, broadens students' understanding of the global diaconal community. Students heard Deaconess Adrainne Gray underscore the LDA Hallmark of Prophetic Voice in her ministry experience.*



# Executive Director's Corner

Even as pandemic persists, these past months have been rich in reflection and anticipation in community. It's been a time to look back – to recall the gifts of those on whose shoulders we stand. It's also a time to look forward – to build on our century of wisdom and experience as we respond to the needs of God's people today. Here are but a few highlights:

- 2021 marks the LDA's 50th anniversary of women serving as Executive Director. In celebration of this milestone, I invite you to read an excerpt from Deaconess Diane Greve's article on page 7.
- The first three men consecrated as deacons in the LDA celebrate their 7th anniversaries of consecration. Next year marks a decade since the LDA began forming men for diaconal service.
- We are engaging in broader conversations about racism. Deacon David Rojas Martínez and Deaconess Kristin Lewis (pictured below) participated in a panel for Valparaíso University's Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. David also presented during a Racial Justice Journey session offered by DOTAC (DIAKONIA of the Americas and Caribbean) this summer.



*Deacon David Rojas Martínez and Deaconess Kristin Lewis*

- Members of our community joined with diaconal servants around the world for DOTAC's Mondays in May, a series of theological studies of diakonia. Our affinity groups continue to gather via Zoom and support one another.
- It's been a busy time of preparation and gathering for annual meetings. The Community of Lutheran Deacons met in person July 8-12 at Lutherdale Bible Camp, Elkhorn, Wisconsin. The Lutheran Deaconess Conference met virtually July 15-18.
- On a final note, I am looking forward to my sabbatical, September through November 2021, as a time to unplug, recharge, and rest. Contact any of the LDA staff, and they can direct you to the right person to assist you in my absence.

Faith and service in Christ,

Deaconess Lisa S. Polito, Executive Director



## Center Partially Reopens

At its July meeting, the CITT (COVID Incident Think Tank) determined that we can partially reopen the Center in ways that are mindful about the health and safety of the LDA staff. Valerie and Amy are welcome to work at both home and in the office. CITT-recommended air purifiers are in use at the Center. Masks must be worn by guests who are not vaccinated.

The Center may be used for activities on Friday evening, Saturday, and Sunday, with access for set-up after 4:30 p.m. Wednesday morning worship resumes with the following guidelines: Worshipers will be masked; worship will be held outside as much as possible; we will have morning prayer and not celebrate the Eucharist. Breakfast is being re-imagined.

We want to have flexibility and grace as we move forward, understanding that the coronavirus will be with us for a while yet. We are grateful for the guidance of the multidisciplinary CITT team to help us navigate safely through the pandemic.

# Cover Story, continued

"Part of Student Seminar involves fostering community through a group project on a ministry topic," Valerie explained. "In the past, we have focused the group project on leading a Bible study. This year, the groups were tasked with teaching a fictional congregation about Prophetic Voice as a way to help students understand this hallmark."

On top of all this, Student Seminar was again held virtually as the COVID-19 pandemic continued.

"In order to plan the Seminar itself," Valerie said, "we had to be flexible with scheduling and people's capacity with Zoom. We tried to make sure that we were able to focus on the selected topics without getting too fatigued."

Deb shared how the experience of the first virtual Seminar in September 2020 helped shape this year's Seminars.

"When in person at the Center for Student Seminar, days typically begin at 8 a.m. and sometimes go until 8 p.m.," Deb said. "In September, the goal was to keep the days shorter to prevent Zoom fatigue as we were still living into what a virtual seminar meant. This resulted in some scheduling challenges to fit everything in a shorter time frame. For 2021, we realized that we could have longer days with more frequent breaks, as well as incorporating more small group time for community building."

Community building is an integral part of student formation, and engaging in community is a way of life for LDA deaconesses and deacons. Deb explained how she and Valerie have been intentionally cultivating community in new ways in response to pandemic-imposed meeting restrictions.

"We were already having student hangouts via Zoom. Since then, we have offered Wednesday worship, text study, and soup suppers for Lent and Advent online. This allows the whole student community that includes 21 deaconess students and seven deacon students to participate, whereas before it was just available to those local to Valparaiso (Indiana)," Deb noted.

"For Student Seminar, guest deaconesses and deacons from the LDA were invited as presenters and guests to get to know students, to speak to their ministry experiences in the context of the Seminar theme, and to build community," she said. "And members of other diaconates from around the world also joined us to broaden the students' awareness of diaconal communities beyond the LDA."



*Above: March 2021 Student Seminar (top) and June 2021 Student Seminar (bottom).  
Below: Deaconess Valerie Webdell (top) and Deaconess Deb Lennox (bottom)*



## Our Mission and Vision

**LDA's Mission:** Preparing and supporting the whole people of God in Christ's call to serve.

As the LDA

- We form, send, and nurture communities of deaconesses and deacons in a Lutheran context to serve in all walks of life.
- We value ecumenism in our Christian call to serve.
- We energize people to serve among and advocate for all affected by brokenness; and seek to restore wholeness for all creation.

**LDA's Vision:** Following Christ, people of God serve those across the street and around the world.

# Deac Spotlight

## Following Christ, Serving in a Pandemic

*As the global COVID-19 pandemic persists, our deaconesses, deacons, and students continue to serve morning, noon, and night on the front lines, ministering to and with others, sharing the love of God with those who are suffering. Here is a glimpse into the lives and ministries of three members of our community who told their story of faith and service to LDA Today.*

### DEACONESS BARBARA FINLEY

*"My call to diaconal service compelled me to stretch my compassion beyond my previous sense of what I thought was safe – for the sake of some of the most vulnerable people."*

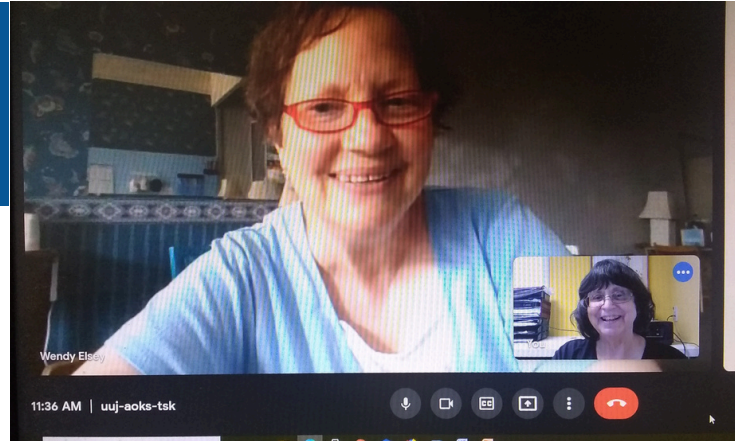
**Barbara is a mental health therapist in South Bend, Indiana.**

As a mental health therapist, I am open to utilizing a client's faith, as each may want to, as an additional resource for healing/recovery, with healing/recovery being the main goal of my counseling treatment process. The populations I mainly serve are the elderly and those with special needs. God has given me an appreciation, amazement, and compassion for this population that has grown through listening, supporting, and engaging in their challenges and heartbreaks. After two decades of working as a social worker in community mental health, I've served for the past 10 years through my own private practice, called Therapeutic Care, in South Bend.

During this time of isolation, I, along with so many others – health care workers, home care personnel, chaplains, pastors, teachers, parents, police, etc. – have experienced "compassion fatigue" that has been more up-close and personal and always too close for comfort. There have been huge adjustments/changes, lack of normal outlets, deaths of significant others, intense emotions of all kinds, and just downright loneliness, anger, and confusion – all of which has come to us during the long lockdowns, new demands, and new fears evoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. And it's not really over yet!

For my practice, insurance companies allowed and paid for "therapy by phone or virtually," which my clients love, as mobility is always a challenge for them. These calls became weekly in many cases, and my questions to clients went something like this: "Are you alright? Are you getting what you need? Are you able to cope? How was your week?" And for those who wanted it, "Can I pray with you today?"

I have needed to cry out to God with all my heart, in prayer that is OUT LOUD, visceral, and even includes breathing, silence, singing, and physical movement. This is not a new learning for me, but I did it to a new level of depth and intensity. My call to diaconal service compelled me to stretch my compassion beyond my previous sense of what I



*Deaconess Barbara Finley, inset, meets virtually with one of her clients during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

thought was safe – for the sake of some of the most vulnerable people. With God's help, I found that I could step outside boundaries to meet the needs of this unique time because I could be fed in new ways, and it was somehow enough to keep me going. Manna in the desert comes to mind.

I learned by experiencing not only in myself, but also in those I served, that faith is indeed a resource from God that offers hope when all around seems hopeless, as solutions are just not in sight. In difficult times faith seems to come out of nowhere! But God teaches that faith is actually an abundant gift that comes with just having a desire for it.

The community can be supportive by continuing to love, listen, pray OUT LOUD, sing, be silent together, reach out beyond when called, and just enjoy being with God together. I really love and am inspired by our diaconal community's shared sense of call. Our community includes all who support us in any way and all with diaconal hearts whom only God may know. Community without walls!

## UPCOMING CONSECRATION

**Deacon Candidate Galen Shriner**  
October 10, 2021



### DEACON STEVE ARNOLD

*"I'm in the ministry of listening because it's important to not just hear what people are saying, but to listen to what they are really saying."*

**Steve is a spiritual director; Chaplain, Crest View Senior Communities, College Heights, Minnesota; Founder, Pivot Point Ministries; and Professor Emeritus, Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota.**

The pandemic has clipped my wings. I decided that, as a senior citizen with some underlying health conditions, I should not go out to see people and should not interact directly at the care center or senior communities. I've named my apartment habitat Subiaco, the cave in Italy where St. Benedict spent time before starting his ministry. It's been a place of refuge, reflection, and reframing my service to others. Instead of meeting with others in a coffee shop, I'm doing coffee on Zoom.

I find it easy to converse with people, and they tell me their story. Even in the lobby of my apartment building while getting the mail, I listen. Listening is the first word in The Rule of St. Benedict. I'm in the ministry of listening because it's important to not just hear what people are saying, but to listen to what they are really saying.

The pandemic generated a lot of creative opportunities to be supportive of the ministry and maintain safety for me and the residents in the nursing home. My ministry transitioned to room visits via Zoom. I'm also doing online worship services, writing liturgies, and writing and recording devotional messages each week for the nursing home.

Deacon Elliott Stephenson has been my tech support. I sometimes have been on the phone with him twice a week, saying, "Elliott, what do I do now?" I even purchased a green screen to use when recording with different backgrounds. All this use of technology – I call it my anti-Alzheimer's campaign – keeps those synapses forming!

One thing I learned early on is that seniors' emotional and spiritual needs are significantly impacted by the isolation of the pandemic. They are suffering from ambiguous loss (loss that occurs without closure or clear understanding). Residents know their family is out there, but they don't see them. Loneliness and ambiguous loss require a whole different approach to grief support. This prompted me to develop workshops for clergy and deacons so they could help people understand and deal with the grief they were experiencing.

With all this loss and loneliness, a strong ministry of encouragement is needed. I send three to four notes a day and make Zoom calls encouraging people, including former students who are in ministry. People are feeling shattered, their trust has been shaken. I think of Psalm 46, with the seas roaring and the mountains trembling.

My faith truly has been deepened through my prayer life and contemplation. I've developed a strong sensitivity to human need and to hear the cries of people. For the first time in ministry, I need to be cautious so as not to be overwhelmed by human need. The last year also deepened my dependence on God. I'm realizing a greater call to trust. God is in charge. It's going to be ok – but it may not be in the way you think. That's a message I try to give to myself and the people around me.

I would ask the community to continue their prayers to lift up this ministry to the Lord and to encourage people in the loneliness and isolation of the pandemic, especially seniors. We need to reach out to our neighbors and make sure they are cared for – that's something every diaconal person can do.

# Deac Spotlight

## DEACONESS STUDENT LISA SWAYNE

*"We couldn't let the pantry close. We simply had to figure out how to do this safely."*

**Lisa is Volunteer Coordinator of the Food Pantry at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Valparaiso, Indiana.**

We were getting ready for the pandemic at the food pantry in early March (2020). At that time, our focus was on not touching things, and we bought these horrible plastic gloves! Then everything shut down.

We couldn't let the pantry close. We simply had to figure out how to do this safely. So, we worked with our director to create a plan to protect the health of our volunteers, staff, and clients. Ninety-nine percent of the volunteers are retirement age and older, and many have underlying health issues. We urged those who were most vulnerable to stay home, but it was hard. Our volunteers are so committed to helping!

Volunteers and staff wore masks, and we kept our distance inside the church building where we organized donations and prepared orders for pickup. Volunteers aged 65 years and older or those with pre-existing health conditions did not come into the building; they served clients outside.

It took a while to get a new system going. The hardest thing was adjusting to the logistics. We were used to people shopping in our tiny pantry closet and selecting what they needed. As clients waited their turn to shop, our staff and volunteers ministered to them. We moved our staging area into the gathering space and served clients under the church's portico. People dropped off donations and picked up supplies under the portico.

We thought people who needed food would pull up, pop their trunk, and we would put the items in. What we learned is that people who are food insecure have trunks that don't work, trunks that are stuffed with their belongings, or they have no trunk. We also learned how to minister to people as they sat in their car and at the same time keep the pantry drive-thru line moving.

Eventually, we got into a groove. The 15 people who served at the pantry kept it going twice a week throughout the pandemic, except for two weeks we closed in November due to a spike in the virus. And we have expanded! The pantry started delivering food to clients who became homebound.

Our clients saved us – they gave us a purpose during the pandemic.



And all of us learned something. We've grown into caregivers. It's a beautiful thing to see.

I've learned how important service is to me, to continue to walk with people. People who are food insecure are just forgotten – but as we come through the pandemic, the public seems to be paying more attention. Maybe this will be a silver lining – that those who are food insecure will be seen and remembered, and we'll do a better job of caring for those who are poor.

I'm grateful that I can reach out to people on DeacList and ask them to pray and to direct me to resources. That's how the community helps me – they lift me up and walk with me in this ministry. I would ask the community to continue to pray and to vote for elected officials who remember those who are hungry. I also would urge everyone to pay attention, do a little digging, and learn about food insecurity in your area. And do not give food pantries old (expired) food!

## APRIL 2021 LDA BOARD MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

### Election of Officers

- Mark Elgert, President
- Deaconess Jean Warren, Vice President
- Chuck Denninger, Treasurer
- Julie Lehmann, Secretary

### Installation of Members

- Deaconess – Ann Baas
- Pastor - Tom Stoebig (re-elected)
- Laywoman - Maryn Olson
- Layman - Michael Steffen
- Deaconess student – Almuth Koby
- Deacon student – Matthew Petersen



Left to Right:  
Dr. Lucille Wassman,  
Deaconess E. Louise Williams,  
and Deaconess Lisa S. Polito

## Celebrating 50 Years of Women Leading the LDA as Executive Director

*The following is an excerpt from "100 Years of Service – LDA Leadership," by Deaconess Diane Greve.  
Read the complete article at <https://thelda.org/100-years-of-service-lda-leadership/>.*

By the late 1960s, many deaconesses began to envision a more prominent female voice in the deaconess community. The social changes of the time led to new possibilities and visions for the leadership of women. In 1970 the Lutheran Church in America and American Lutheran Church ordained the first female pastors. It was the *kairos* moment for women and particularly deaconesses to step into the role of Executive Director and other leadership positions.

There were deaconesses in professional leadership, however, as early as Deaconess Ina Kempf, who was employed as the Superintendent at the LDA's Beaver Dam training school following her consecration in 1922. Other women served over the years in various roles – from house directors at the Chapter House and Deaconess Hall, to the position of Field Secretary.

In 1971, Dr. Lucille Wassman, a laywoman on the LDA Board, was selected to be the next Executive Director. This was a radical change for the deaconesses and for the LDA after having had only clergymen in

that role from the inception of the program. Other changes were taking place concurrently as the deaconesses were now serving beyond the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, consecration no longer was dependent on a call, and women could be married during their student years. Additionally, in 1973, Deaconess Norma Cook Everist became the first deaconess elected as the LDA Board President.

In 1974, Deaconess Louise Williams was called to the position of Director of Deaconess Services. Upon Dr. Wassman's resignation in 1975, Louise moved into the role of Executive Director, which she held until 2007. In 2008, Deaconess Lisa Polito was called to serve as Executive Director after serving for six years as the LDA's Director of Development and Public Relations.

Through these 100 years, the Board and staff have always served the same vision: "Following Christ, people of God serve those across the street and around the world." We pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us all into the next 50 years and beyond!



### 2021 PHONATHON: A STORY OF GRATITUDE!

*This year's Phonathon was a big success – thanks to our hundreds of committed donors and dozens of callers. Your generosity will help the LDA to continue to live its mission: Preparing and supporting the whole people of God in Christ's call to serve. THANK YOU!*

### BY THE NUMBERS ...

40+ volunteer callers

More than 650 donors

\$2,000+ matching funds

Over \$165,000 raised

# Supporting Students

## Scholarships Help Students Answer God's Call

*It's been 30 years since the LDA established an endowed scholarship program to help cover professional education fees for students in need. Thanks to many generous donors, there are now 21 endowed scholarships, in addition to a general scholarship fund, to support students in the education/formation program. Each year, the LDA gives out more than \$45,000 to diaconal students. In this issue of LDA Today, we take a look at the stories behind some of the endowed scholarships and hear words of gratitude from students who have benefited from them.*



**Anne Alden Memorial Scholarship**  
(Anne, mother of Deaconess Jamie Alden, died in 2012.)

My home congregation had three deaconesses (two on staff, another a member). They encouraged me to consider becoming a deaconess, took me to area meetings and had me help with host activities when there was an international

gathering in town. I got my BA elsewhere and worked for a few years before enrolling in the LDA program and going to Valpo (Valparaiso University).

The scholarship I received made it possible for me to attend without going into further debt with student loans, or placing a financial burden on my family. The deaconess community and my call to diaconal ministry have been the consistent core and center of my life through professional and personal transitions over the decades.

Over the years my mom, Anne Alden, saw what a positive influence the deaconess community was in my life, and all of the wonderful things deaconesses do in the world. She was a consistent supporter of the LDA, and in her will included money to fund a scholarship. Learning from her example, I funded a scholarship and enjoy seeing both our gifts at work. I am committed to ongoing support of the LDA's general fund, and also like the feeling of connection (through these scholarships) to individual students while they are in formation.

— Deaconess Jamie Anne Alden, consecrated August 17, 1975



### Dick and Bernice Burgess Scholarship

(Dick and Bernice are the late parents of Deaconess Karen Burgess-Cassler. Dick died in 1992, Bernice in 2009.)

I appreciated receiving a scholarship when I was a student. It made a difference to me and my ability to be a deaconess student. My mother set up a scholarship and I had to keep up with her. She was a good role model and valued how the deaconess training helped form me. I value diaconal ministry and want to make the training available to future generations. And, because I so value (diaconal) community, this is my way of perpetuating community and helping to make sure there is community in the future for others.

— Deaconess Karen Burgess-Cassler, consecrated July 3, 1993



### Jamie Alden and Hilary Hefferlin Endowed Scholarship

I learned about the Lutheran Deaconess Association (as it was called back then) when I was in college, and the campus minister was LDA Deaconess Betty Havey. She and the pastor of the local church helped me to discern my calling to diaconal ministry, which led to my enrollment in the training program and eventual

consecration.

Having a scholarship available to me when I was a student made a huge difference in my ability to focus on the formation process and studies, to fully engage with community, and to not worry about working a side job during that time.

The diaconal community has been central throughout my life journey and such a blessing to me! I treasure the gift that this community is and want to make sure it's strong and healthy for others long into the future. Having future generations of diaconal servants formed by the LDA and upholding each other in community is the best future I can imagine. My giving to the LDA general fund and to scholarships is my effort toward creating a better future for our world. I'm fortunate to be in a position to be able to do both, giving back and paying it forward.

— Deaconess Hilary Hefferlin, consecrated July 14, 1985

**Student Laura Sharp-Waites:**

When God calls you to ministry, you follow His direction. But then your first thought is, 'How will I afford to attend a formation program?' During my unpredictable formation, I encountered breast cancer and appreciated the scholarships even more during that 19 months as those scholarships meant I was able to continue in formation.

**Student Carrie Sovola:**

I am grateful and humbled to have received scholarships throughout my years as a student. This support has freed me from financial concerns so that I could focus on the personal and spiritual growth that formation brings. It has also been encouraging to experience the faith of the extended LDA community in their support of student formation.

### **Support Our Students**

LDA students are of all ages and backgrounds. The education/formation process takes most students two to four years to complete before being consecrated for diaconal ministry. With program fees, week-long Student Seminars, coursework, and attendance at Annual Meeting, total costs for a student often exceed \$15,000. Here's how you can help ease a student's financial obligation.

- Contribute to the LDA's General Scholarship Fund to provide immediate funding for current student scholarships, or designate your gift to one of the LDA's endowed scholarships. Donate online at [theLDA.org](http://theLDA.org) or send a check to the LDA at the Center for Diaconal Ministry, 1304 LaPorte Ave., Valparaiso, IN 46383.
- Establish an endowed scholarship through the LDA's DEAC Scholarship Fund. You may set up a fund with a gift of \$15,000 to the LDA. The total gift may be spread over as many as five years with multiple contributors. And you may name your scholarship fund in honor or memory of loved ones. To learn more, contact Amy Smessaert, LDA Director of Development and Public Relations, at [amy.smessaert@valpo.edu](mailto:amy.smessaert@valpo.edu) or 219-464-6925.

*The LDA — and our students — are grateful for your support. Thank you!*

**Student Julie Peralta:**

With my family moving to another state and only having one income, the scholarship funds allowed me (us) to not fret over how the tuition would be paid. Thank you for donating to the scholarship funds so students, like me, can benefit. One day I look forward to donating back for future students.

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## Cozy Up in LDA Spiritwear!

The weather outside will soon be frightful! Ward off the chilly temps with warm and fuzzy LDA apparel. Or get an early start on your holiday shopping.

Check out the LDA's store at Land's End, conveniently located on our website at <https://business.landsend.com/store/thelda/>. Our logo goes on any item you desire – jackets, vests, hats, scarves, shirts, backpacks, umbrellas, mugs, etc. And you can customize the colors of the logo to your heart's content!

P.S. We'd love to see a picture of you wearing your LDA gear!

*Deacon Andrew Stoebig sports his warm LDA apparel.*

**Lutheran Deaconesses and Deacons serve Christ across the street and around the world.**

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