



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

NEWS RELEASE

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Denver Bitner Named as New President of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Denver W. Bitner, formerly the senior pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Rockford, has been named the new president of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). He began on February 2, replacing the Rev. Dr. Frederick Aigner, who is retiring after more than 11 years of service. The Des Plaines-based LSSI is one of the most respected statewide organizations that serves and advocates for people in need, from adults with developmental disabilities to foster children to ex-offenders who are trying to get their lives on track. LSSI serves nearly 73,000 people in communities across Illinois.

Bitner is joining LSSI at a difficult time both for the national economy and the Illinois government. In the face of state budget cuts and late payments to social service agencies, one of Bitner's top priorities will be to ensure that LSSI's vital services continue to be available for families across the state. "Every dollar of public investment in community services such as home care for seniors, substance abuse treatment and early childhood education saves taxpayers between \$6 and \$8," says Bitner. "Our challenge is to find new ways of collaborating with our governmental partners, churches and community groups to make Illinois a stronger and more prosperous place."

In this effort, he will draw upon his 36 years working at Zion — 22 of those as its senior pastor. Zion is a large, inner-city church with a racially diverse membership of approximately 1,800. Under Bitner's leadership, the church has developed a strong commitment to social outreach, serving as a model within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Over the last three decades, Bitner's church has transformed the Midtown neighborhood of Rockford — one of the poorest communities in the nation — creating several social ministry organizations, such as the award-winning Zion Development Corporation, which works in the areas of employment, economic development and housing renewal and rehabilitation. Over the years, Bitner's contributions to the larger community have also been recognized beyond the congregation and Lutheran circles, most recently when the Rockford City Council proclaimed the week of January 5 "Denver Bitner Week."

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“It has been a joy to pastor a congregation that lives out the Gospel’s mission to care for all of God’s people and to also serve the community around us,” says Bitner. “I’m honored to now be taking this mission statewide with Lutheran Social Services of Illinois.”

In taking the reins at LSSI, Bitner is building on a long-established relationship. LSSI has partnered with the Zion Development Corporation in a variety of projects, including its Transitional Living Program, which serves youth who are aging out of foster care. In addition, LSSI’s Prisoner and Family Ministry’s AmeriCorps program is based at the Patriots’ Gateway Center, a Zion site.

Bitner also served on LSSI’s Board of Directors (2004–2007) and on the board of the ELCA’s Division of Church in Society (1997–2003), overseeing the work of the division with national and global social service ministries, and chairing the board (2000–2003). He has also served as a consultant on Urban and Multicultural Ministries for ELCA’s Northern Illinois Synod.

“Pastor Bitner brings a track record of leadership within the Lutheran church — both of congregations and of the church’s outreach to vulnerable and underserved people,” says Eric J. Draut, chairperson of LSSI’s Board of Directors. “He has demonstrated an enterprising spirit in developing significant outreach ministries, gaining recognition in Illinois and across the nation.”

“The mission of LSSI is also the mission of the church: to provide holistic care to all people,” says Bitner. “I look forward to serving with the board, staff and church community to help those in need and foster the development of safer, healthier communities.”

Bitner holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wittenberg University, a Master of Theological Studies degree from Hamma School of Theology, a Master of Divinity degree from Wartburg Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

Founded in October 1867, LSSI is a not-for-profit social service agency of the ELCA. It serves children, families and adults, particularly seniors, through an array of services at 83 program sites across Illinois.

For more information, contact LSSI at 847/635-4600 or visit www.LSSI.org.

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