



Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 25, 2009

CONTACT: Jo Ann Dollard
847/390-1446

Denver Bitner, New President of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, to be Installed March 29 in Chicago

The Rev. Dr. Denver W. Bitner, recently named the new president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI), will be formally installed on Sunday, March 29, at Saint Luke Church, 1500 W. Belmont, in Chicago. Bitner came to LSSI after serving as the senior pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Rockford.

The Rite of Installation will begin at 4 p.m. and will be performed by Bishops Warren Freiheit, Wayne Miller and Gary Wollersheim of the three Illinois synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The Rev. Dr. James Kenneth Echols, president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, will deliver the sermon. The service will feature a variety of music, including traditional hymns and gospel and world music performed by choirs, as well as a trumpet solo by Chicago jazz great Bobby Lewis. A reception will follow the service.

Bitner began as LSSI's president on February 2, replacing the Rev. Dr. Frederick Aigner, who retired after more than 11 years of service. Founded in 1867, the Des Plaines-based LSSI is one of the largest statewide, faith-based organizations that serves and advocates for people in need, from foster children to adults with developmental disabilities to seniors.

"The call to this ministry affirms the call of the church to work in the community to serve people in need," says Bitner of his new position.

"I have come into this role at a difficult time in the history of our state and our nation," says Bitner of his new role. "But LSSI is well-prepared to confront the kinds of difficulties that most people are facing every day. Oftentimes, our best work comes in the face of adversity, if we have the grounding in God's call to us to serve and care for those most in need. Our challenge is to find new ways of collaborating with government, churches and community groups to make Illinois a stronger and more prosperous place."

- more -

In his new position, Bitner will draw upon 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 developed a strong commitment to social outreach, serving as a model within the ELCA. Over the last three decades, Zion 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.”

“I have a much bigger parish now, as LSSI serves in communities large and small across the state. It is humbling to consider that our agency touches so many people’s lives,” says Bitner.

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, as well as 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.”

###

About Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

Founded in 1867, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois is a statewide, not-for-profit social service agency of the three Illinois synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. LSSI’s services include foster care, adoption, pregnancy counseling, Head Start, child care services, services for at-risk families, residential services for youth, counseling, mental health, substance abuse treatment, residential programs for adults with developmental disabilities, housing and services for older adults and individuals with disabilities, nursing care and rehabilitation, and programs for prisoners and their families. For more information on Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, visit www.LSSI.org.