



“Involved from the Beginning”

Pastor Joel Bjerkestrand was appointed a member of Spirit in the Desert’s Board of Directors in April 2019, bringing thirty years of involved ecumenical experience with Phoenix area faith communities and civic organizations. He is a dynamic speaker, mediator, educator, and counselor, having served three Lutheran congregations in the Phoenix metro area, one as associate pastor and two as senior pastor. Since 2011 he has been on staff as visitation pastor at La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church, Scottsdale.

Spirit in the Desert’s mission of welcoming and serving people of all faiths and backgrounds, is in sync with Joel’s values. While pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church, the congregation helped two Jewish groups launch their synagogues by temporarily using the church’s facilities.

Joel’s life began in India, the son of Christian missionaries, where he lived for twelve years. He graduated from high school in Peoria, Illinois, from Augsburg College in Minneapolis, and earned a Master of Divinity from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. In college he met and became married to Sue Halvorson, who is now a retired elementary school teacher. They have two adult children and eight grandchildren.

The beginnings of Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center are familiar to Joel. In 1993, he was a member of the Executive Committee of the ELCA Grand Canyon Synod when the Synod received the gift of facilities and land in Carefree and also funds for additional buildings from Mac and Maybelle Estrem of Sun City, Arizona. Over the years, Joel has used Spirit in the Desert for church retreats and for various groups and programs.

Joel said, “Twenty-six years after its founding, the number and variety of retreats is growing and each year more people are benefitting from retreats. Spirit in the Desert is going in the right direction by meeting the growing need for retreats.” He added, “I know from experience the deep benefits of retreats. Years later, people have shared with me how a retreat was life-transforming.”

As a member of the Mission and Development Committee of the Board, Pastor Joel will be able to use his networking, fund-raising, and leadership communication experience to support Spirit in the Desert’s mission of providing renewing and healing retreats.