

Annual Report
Bishop Paul Erickson
2022 Greater Milwaukee Synod, ELCA

To be honest, it was rather challenging to write my report without knowing how the election process would proceed, but one thing that was clear was that it needed to occur after the process was completed. Regardless of whether I was elected to serve a second term, there many things I need to share, and first among them are words of gratitude.

When you elected me to come back to this synod as your bishop, after having been away for some 13 years, none of us knew how things would go. I think we've done some good and important work together, and I'm grateful to all of you who have offered words of support, affirmation, critique, and challenge, as I believe that they have all served to make me a better bishop and all of us a better church. I thank you for your grace when I've messed up and your patience with me and with the synod staff as we have worked to learn from our mistakes and do our jobs better so that you could do what God is calling you to do with greater effectiveness and greater love.

I'm so grateful for the chance to work with this staff; I'm going to invite them to come forward at this time and join me on the stage, and then I'll say a few words and ask that you offer them your thanks.

- Mary Romskog, Executive assistant for administration and candidacy
- Phil Smith, Administrative Assistant
- Lee Johnston, Financial Administrator
- Pastor Kristin Nielsen, Assistant for Congregations in Mission
- Pastor Matthew Short, Assistant for Evangelical Mission
- Pastor Jennifer Arnold, Assistant for Missional Leadership,
- Robyn DiGiacinto, Communications Specialist, and
- Pastor Chris Manke, Executive Director of Outreach for Hope

I have great professional respect and deep personal affection for each and every member of this team; we work hard, we laugh frequently, and never doubt that these folks love this church and want what's best for you and for your ministries. As I indicated in the run-up to the bishop election, whenever there is a new term, whether it's an incumbent bishop serving a second term or a new bishop, there is often a need to re-evaluate the roles and make-up of the synod staff, and we'll sort that all out in the coming months. Today, I simply want to say how grateful I am to be a part of this team.

As we gather under the theme, "We love all; creating communities of welcome," I've asked each of the three assistants to share a few words about how their work engages this mission.

Rev. Matt Short, Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission

When I am invited to preach in our synod's congregations, I often reference those two words: evangelism and mission, not just because they are in my job title, but because they reside deep in my heart. Evangelism simply means good news. And mission simply means it's not just for us. This good news touched my life when I was a kid; during a difficult time, I knew God was with me because of how a group of Lutheran Christians saw it as their mission to share that love with me. And now I want everyone to have that same gift I was given; an open and affirming community of faith where God's love is real and felt in powerful ways.

So today, I want to share with you briefly two things that I am excited about as tools for all of us to feel more grounded in the good news, and more equipped to make sure it's not just for us, but for everyone.

The first thing I want to tell you about is a process of transformation we call "Faithful Innovation." This simple process invites a congregation to identify a small guiding team of folks who want to do little mission experiments and see what they learn about where the Spirit is leading their church. I'm excited to announce that we are re-launching this process this Fall. It's 3 trainings over 9 months, for as many churches as want to be a part of it, and the promise is simple: you will experience the movement and energy of the Holy Spirit as we are transformed together through listening to our neighbors. You can learn more by visiting www.milwaukee-synod.org/faithful-innovation. If you are interested, visit the website first, and then reach out to me and we'll talk about what it could look like for your congregation.

The second thing I want to tell you about is a fantastic new tool that our synod has committed to providing for every congregation. It's called "Mission Insite," and it is actually a collection of quite sophisticated tools that could help you see your neighborhood in a whole new way. You create an account, draw a shape on a map, and learn more about the folks who live near you. But one important note; this is great data, but in the end, it is just data. The whole point is to ask...how does this *information* invite us into deeper and more authentic relationships with our neighbors.

I am excited to work with you as together we use tools like these to figure out new ways to be people of evangelism and mission - good news that is available to everyone. Thanks.

Rev. Kristin Nielsen, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregations in Mission.

I accompany churches when they are in times of a Rostered Minister transition. I work with councils, interim pastors, and call committees as their congregations articulate who they are, who their neighbors are, what God might be calling them to focus on next in their ministry, and ultimately how all these things inform what kind of leader they are looking for next.

This is a time of powerful discovery and discernment as congregations connect once again to their purpose and goal of sharing the gospel with love and welcome in their communities. We have learned that a leadership transition time is an opportunity for ministry rather than a pause in ministry. This is especially true when we move into transition times using the core values of our synod: curiosity, courage, compassion and collaboration.

As I accompany congregations, I have noticed many things that help transition times to go smoothly. Here are a few that may resonate with you even if you are not currently experiencing a leadership transition:

Share the load, you do not need to do this by yourself. Delegate tasks. Engage as many from the congregation as possible. Ask for help. Offer to help.

Ask lots of questions. If someone has different opinions about something, rather than trying to prove you are right, get curious and ask them questions. See if you can find out what is the underlying value behind the opinion.

Trust that the Spirit is in the process, that God is at work among you now. Not just when the next pastor or deacon arrives. Ministry continues during the interim. It can be a time of experimentation and discovery.

You are not falling apart. You just experiencing change. You will get through this and it can be transformative.

Pray. Pray. Pray. Center yourselves in scripture and remember why you are there in the first place... to share the gospel, to be the people of God in 2022 and beyond. God is able to work through us when we open ourselves to possibilities that we did not imagine before.

Have fun together - Play. When challenging questions and or problems are in front of you, and you can't seem to find a way forward, redirect the creative juices. Take a break. Play for a few minutes and then come back to it.

Ambiguity is uncomfortable and can be pivotal. It is OK to leave a meeting without everything solved. Take the ambiguities to God in prayer. Listen for how the Spirit is stirring in your own heart, and then bring that back to a group for further reflection and discussion.

Honor differences in communication styles and ways of knowing. We do not all process information in the same way. Give space for the various ways that people take in and process new information and you will have much richer discernment about the decisions you make.

Love is at the center of the gospel. Welcome is at the heart of community. Seek that which gives life in all that you do.

You got this. Through God, all things are possible.

Thank you for your ministry as a part of the GMS of the ELCA. You are awesome people of God, and it is a privilege to accompany you in this journey of faith, as disciples of Jesus!

Rev. Jennifer Arnold, Assistant to the Bishop for Missional Leadership.

I continue to enjoy walking with our leaders and congregations in the common life and ministry we share. In addition to accompanying congregations in pastoral transition, I also serve as the staff point person to the synod's Anti-Racism Team. For the past 4 1/2 years it has been a privilege to meet with the team, learn from them, and to envision together how we might expand and grow our work toward racial equity and justice. At our February Together in Mission event we recognized and gave thanks for the 82 people who have served on the team in one way or another over the last 20+ years. The most recent team discerned that it was time to step back and to invite others to step in. We are now in the process of forming a new anti-racism team to carry this work forward. Earlier this month we held the first of three start up meetings to lay the foundation for the new team and its members. I am grateful for the 24 people who indicated interest in participating and who have begun the journey together.

I want to share with you briefly how this work has impacted and blessed me. I am coming to a better understanding of racism, its history, and its continued impact on people of color AND on me as a white person. My own learning is far from over, and in fact I expect that it will be a lifelong journey, but I have been changed along the way. I now think about racism every day. I find that I am paying attention differently to the world around me and am questioning things that once went unnoticed or unchallenged. When common phrases or colloquialisms come to mind, I try to pause and wonder from where they might have come. Do they originate from assumptions about people that tear down rather than build up? I am becoming more aware of the privilege that has been a part of my life that may not be extended to others.

Thank you for allowing me to be in a role that teaches and blesses me so deeply. Thank you for supporting this work as a part of our synod. Thank you for the ways that you too are learning and growing in your own anti-racist journey. It is holy and necessary work. Thank you.

Transitions. A significant piece of our work accompanying congregations and leaders relates to those times of transition, and you all have kept us busy. The complete transitions report

is posted on the assembly web page, but it details that, since we gathered in assembly last May, we have partnered with our synod congregations in the completion of 13 call processes, and I have presided at 5 ordinations, the most recent of which took place last Saturday! As a result of this work, we have welcomed 14 new rostered ministers to the synod, and as I read their names, I invite them to stand and be recognized and welcomed to the Greater Milwaukee Synod:

Perrie Dralle, Clare Sedlacek, Casey Sugden, Tina Kieckhafer, Kristine Ruffatto, Karen Kuttler, James Hearne, Justin Kierzek, Sarah Stumme, Jaime Larson-McLoone, Lindsay Brennan, Joshua Gyson, Montgomery Peterson, and Daniel Flucke.

We also want to take a moment to give thanks for the life and ministry of 5 of our rostered ministers who have died in the past 12 months:

The Rev. Jim Wilch died June 5, 2021

The Rev. Joan Jacobson-Wolf, died June 13, 2021

The Rev. Ross Larson died September 3, 2021

The Rev. Gerald Holz died December 22, 2021

The Rev. James Niederloh died February 12, 2022

We remember them in prayer. O God, we remember with thanksgiving those who have loved and served you on earth, who now rest from their labors, especially Jim, Joan, Ross, Gerald, and James. Keep us in union with all your saints, and bring us with them to the joyous feast of heaven; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

Anniversaries: We also want to recognize rostered ministers who are observing special anniversaries of their ordination or commissioning (25, 40, 50, and 60 years), as well as congregations that are observing milestone anniversaries of their founding (25, 50, 75, 100, etc.). Before we do this, I'd like to acknowledge that the pathway to ordination is often challenging, and that women, people of color, and those who are LGBTQIA+ often experience additional and unnecessary obstacles. We still have work to do to ensure that all who are called and gifted to serve in public ministry are able to do so, and I'm grateful for all who are continuing the struggle to help us become more fully inclusive and authentically diverse. We were able to resume our tradition of holding an anniversary lunch before the assembly, and this year we gathered at Fox Point Lutheran Church on Monday, May 2. As I read the names of those being recognized, I invite them to stand and remain standing until all the names in that particular group are called, and I will then invite us to offer our gratitude for their faithful service. These names are also listed on pages 42-50 of the assembly booklet, along with photos and brief reflections.

First, Word and Service ministers who have served for 25 years: Deacon Kenneth Bischmann, Deacon Susan Giese, and Deacon Judith Schroeder.

Next, Ministers of Word and sacrament, 25 years: Pastor Carol Creitz, Pastor David Dragseth, Pastor Kristie Jaramillo, Pastor Mark Jaramillo, Pastor Denise Mbise, Pastor Michael McAllister, and Pastor John Norquist.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 40 years: Pastor Paul Bulgerin, Pastor Jay Ford, Pastor Carolyn Fredriksen, Pastor Alice Horton, Pastor David Larson, Pastor Bill Mains, Pastor Paul Mittermaier, Pastor Rod Resheske, Pastor Sandra Roberts, and Pastor Ken Wheeler.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 50 years: Pastor John Gugel, Pastor Clifford Schmidt, Pastor Lowell Timm.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 60 years: Pastor Raymond Anderson, Pastor Al Heggen, Pastor Fred Hofer, Pastor Bob McClelland.

We also have two congregations observing milestone anniversaries, Fox Point, 75 years, and Trinity in Cedarburg, 100 years old this year.

Let's offer our thanks for these faithful servants and congregations.

As we now look forward to these next six years, I recognize that you've already heard a fair amount about the Equipping the Saints mission appeal and all the ways this will allow us to strengthen our work with innovation, collaboration, and leadership. You've heard about the authentic diversity audit that will provide for us a clear and, hopefully, unflinching analysis of who we are and what prevents us from fully living out our desire to be an anti-racist and fully inclusive church, as well as providing us some concrete steps to move further down that road. You've heard that we will be re-evaluating the what and the how and the who of our synod staff, so that we can better accompany congregations and leaders as we live into God's future together.

This is what we're hoping to do, and how we're hoping to do it; I'd like to take a few moments to share my thoughts on why we do this work. Simply put, we organize our work, as disciples of Christ and as Christian congregations, so that more people will come to know the life-giving and life-changing love of Jesus in communities of justice, love, and mercy. It's not about organizational survival or growth, it's not about personal fulfillment or professional accomplishment, it's not about us; it's about Jesus. It's about making sure that God's love is known and experienced in concrete ways by folks of every race and culture and age, people of every gender and gender identity and sexual orientation; people of every zip code and immigration status and political affiliation and religious affiliation, people of every personality and intellect and income tax bracket and more; All people are worthy of love, just as they are, and all people are capable of loving others, and it's our job to help folks remember this. That's why we do what we do.

If you've participated in synod events since I've been serving as your bishop, you may have heard me lift up the goal of every synod event as being that folks leave feeling more energized, connected, and hopeful than before. As I have been reflecting in recent months about whether I feel called to serve a second term in this office, I've wondered, what is it that has kept me energized, connected, and hopeful. The first thing that comes to mind is all of you: pastors, deacons, congregational council members, musicians, youth, young adults, seniors, all of you. We've all gone through some pretty tough challenges in recent years, and while we may have responded to these challenges in different ways, my hunch is that there are some similarities among us. As for me, I've had my share of sleepless nights and frustrating meetings, I've spent time wondering if what we do, as individuals and as a church, really matters, I've wrestled with how to dismantle the racism and patriarchy and injustice and disease of our church and our world without spiraling into the hatred and bitterness that defines so much of our public discourse today. But knowing that I am not alone in this work, that I am surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses, those who have gone before me, those who will come after me, and those who are in this with me now, that's what gets me out of bed in the morning, and that's what keeps me coming back to 1212 South Layton Boulevard, day after day after challenging day. We're in this together, and that's what keeps me going.

But what gives me hope? I was reminded while presiding at an ordination last weekend that one of the instructions given to pastors when they are ordained is "So discipline yourself in life and teaching that you preserve the truth, giving no occasion for false security or illusory hope." We all know lots of folks who try to convince us that they have a simple solution to whatever complex issue we're facing, a shortcut to success or a template that always fits and

always works. But I think we also know that quick and easy answers lead us into a false security and illusory hope more often than not. I have come to believe, even more firmly now than I did six years ago, that our hope does not lie in us being smart enough or faithful enough or innovative enough or anything enough. Our hope lies in the One who calls us as we are, broken, bruised, and imperfect, and declares us enough, but then challenges us to become more than we can be by ourselves, to become bold in our witness and courageous in our love, so that we might be swept up in the great, global movement of love that will not quit until the world is transformed. Love is what gives me hope and, in the end, love is all we have to offer; thank God it's all we need.

And so, I end, as I began, with gratitude. Thanks to the synod staff, for your hard work and faithful witness; thanks to my wife, Lynn, whose love keeps me grounded and who helps me be a better person every single day; thanks to all of you, the pastors, deacons, and leaders of this synod, for all you do to make a difference in your communities and around the world; thank you. Thank you for being companions on the journey of love; thank you for the honor and privilege of serving as your bishop.