

Annual Report to the Synod
Bishop Paul Erickson
June 2023

It's been quite a year. As we have worked to accompany congregations and leaders as we engage in God's mission of love and reconciliation, we've had a lot to figure out and a lot to sort out. I'm grateful for all the prayers and support we have received, and for all the challenges and questions we have also received, as it all works to strengthen our ability to do the work that God has called us to do with increased skill, grace, and compassion. We're all in this together, and I'm grateful for you all.

I'm also grateful for the dedicated and talented staff that you allow me to work with. As I mentioned last year when I was re-elected, we were going to need to take a look at the roles and make up of the synod staff, and this resulted in a few changes, and a few changes yet to come. In August, we said goodbye to financial administrator, Lee Johnston, and welcomed Pastor Karen Pahl as our interim financial administrator, and in October we bid farewell to Pastor Jennifer Arnold and eventually welcomed Pastor Afi Dobbins-Mays as our new Assistant to the Bishop for Authentic Diversity and Leadership.

I can't tell you how much I love and appreciate working with this team, as they make coming into the office each day something I actually look forward to. One additional change that will be happening in the coming months is that our interim financial administrator, Pastor Karen Pahl, will be returning to parish ministry, and we will be transitioning the bookkeeping and accounting work to a firm called Supporting Strategies. Our office administers the finances for 11 different ministries and organizations, and we believe that this will allow us to do this work more efficiently, and it may even result in saving a few dollars. This transition will take place over the next few months, after which Pastor Karen will resume her duties as synod treasurer and continue to coordinate and oversee the synod's finances. This will take some getting used to, as much of this work will be done remotely, and we ask for your patience and understanding as we make these changes. We are deeply indebted to Pastor Karen for her work with us this past year.

As we gather under the theme, "Curiosity: hear the stories," I've asked each of the three assistants to share a few words about how their work intersects with this theme.
(Kristin/Afi/Matt)

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

I serve as your Assistant to the Bishop for Congregations in Mission. That means that I accompany churches when they are in times of a Rostered Minister transition. I work with councils, call committees, interim pastors, and everyone else that is connected to a transition process as a congregation is articulating who they are, who their neighbors are, what God might be calling them to focus on next in their ministry, and therefore what are the gifts and skills they need in their next Rostered Minister.

So, it is a time of discovery and discernment as a congregation connects again to their purpose, their mission, and how are they going to share the gospel, how are they going to love and welcome in their communities. What I have learned is that the leadership transition time can be an opportunity for lots of ministry reimagining, rather than just simply a pause in ministry. It is especially true when we move through a transition time that you are going to use these core values of curiosity, courage, compassion and collaboration.

Wait a minute... do you feel like if you were here before... you heard me say this last year... oh my goodness, ah...! It's true. This is the same introduction. I looked it up to see what in the world I am going to say to you today, and I thought, "I could just read the same thing. I want you to hear the same thing. It is still true." But that's kind of cheating, isn't it? So, I am just going to do a little bit of a summary of what I said. Here are ten things that when you are doing this work, I want you to pay attention to. Little nuggets, snippets:

- 1. Share the load.*
- 2. Ask lots of questions.*
- 3. Trust that the Spirit is in the process.*
- 4. You are not falling apart.*
- 5. Pray. Pray. Pray.*
- 6. Have fun together - Play.*
- 7. Ambiguity is uncomfortable and it can be pivotal.*
- 8. Honor differences in communication styles and ways of knowing.*
- 9. Love is at the center of the gospel.*
- 10. You got this. Through God, all things are possible.*

AND, I have two more that I want to add this year:

FIRST of all... please, please, please, listen to the core of what is stirring for you right now in this moment, as you have been sitting in this assembly and we have explored this topic of DEI. If you are excited... What is it that is making you excited? What are the experiences and stories that you are connecting it to? If you are confused... What are the gaps? What is it that you are wishing you could put words to if you are saying "Wait, this doesn't quite make sense"? If you are resistant... What else is happening for you? If you are thinking, "How am I taking this back to my congregation? There is no way this will work." What is happening? Are you feeling a flutter in your heart, are your palms getting sweating? Is there a knot in your stomach? Are you not saying what you really want to say, because you are saying "Hm, I am thinking about my church." In all this, be curious, without judgement. Even though you may want to. Notice these reactions, so that you can explore them. It is in these kinds of places that I have noticed the Holy Spirit is at work, inviting you to listen, listen, listen. So pay attention! This is the kind of practice that we need you to work on, so that when there is a transition, you are ready. Because if you are going to do your work well in a transition time, you need to ask good questions, and don't be afraid of them.

SECOND... be kind to yourself. Be kind to your pastors, to your staff, to your council members. There is so much going on right now. We are seeking to address so much in our churches, and it is a lot... when you want to say "Ahh... it is not possible anymore! What are you talking about Pastor Kristin! You don't know what we are really facing!" It's true. I don't. And many of us individually are holding a lot inside, because we don't want others to see what we are dealing with. Or, we have practiced putting our heads in the sand, ignoring, denying, numbing.

Listen. Be kind to yourself and allow yourself in these days to explore with grace. WITH GRACE. If you practice what we are talking about with curiosity, wondering both for yourself and one another... the Holy Spirit is going to do amazing things! It may not be what you expect, but it will be amazing. Thanks for the gift of doing this work together, and for the gift of being able to accompany you. I am excited, as I always am, to see what God is going to do, because amazing things happen through you. Thank you.

Pastor Afi Dobbins-Mays, Assistant to the Bishop for Authentic Diversity and Leadership.

As I have joined the synod, I've been warmly welcomed and appreciate the grace and movement of the Spirit in our midst. Over the last two days people have shared some powerful tools and wisdom for us, and I want to commend you on the great work that you've already been doing towards making the GMS more diverse, equitable and inclusive.

The thing that I've been wondering about is, if we can lean even more deeply into this work? How many ways can we find to be in deep authentic relationships with one another? Relationships that are so meaningful that they drive us to create safe spaces, brave spaces, judgment free, Spirit filled spaces? Another way to ask this question is: how many ways can we find to have compassion for and curiosity about others? To honor the Divine spark of God within each one of us?

In my first full time call, I was appointed to two predominately white congregations both of which had never had an African American pastor. In my time there I experienced first-hand the harm and trauma that racism and oppression cause. It was through the hard work, willingness to have hard conversations, and studying the gospel together as disciples that eventually transformation happened.

My work as the Assistant to the Bishop for Authentic Diversity and Leadership is to walk with you, to encourage you and to support you on your journey to be more aligned with the love and gospel of Christ. The ultimate goal of Authentic Diversity is to be a community of faith that embodies the love of Christ and to create a community that is truly practicing grace.

This takes hard work! A work that, as you have heard before, is focused not on fixing, but on connecting. We are called to this work, and we can do it! I envision a synod full of churches that set the model for the rest of the country; that demonstrates what true Christian community looks like. What can you do to invest in this vision? Attend Anti-racism trainings, join the Anti-racism team, fill out the evaluations from the Gold Team, attend the upcoming synod wide book studies (like "My Grandmother's Hands"). Let's journey together.

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

In some ways, my job title is kind of funny because those two words actually sum up...I don't know...everything we do in the church. Evangelism & Mission. Evangelism, at its heart, is just sharing the good news of this God who in every single generation expands our capacity to love. And mission...is what that love looks like in action. So, it really feels like an honor to serve in this role because I get to talk with congregations about the deep things – like why they exist, what drives them, how we organize resources for mission (that's stewardship) and how we can build new relationships with new people and join God in this expansive love.

The hope that drives me in this work is all the places I see God bringing new life. I know...it is a challenging time to be the church...but have no doubt...it is SUCH an important time to be the church. Amen? There is an epidemic of loneliness in the broader culture, and here we sit with this rich model of a beloved community. The world needs us, church...and it needs us to be that expansive love...

Every time I visit a congregation on a Sunday morning and am offered the chance to preach or to bring a greeting, I say some version of this message... it matters that your church is planted where it is planted. Your neighbors need you. Your community needs you. God can and will use you...right there...to touch the lives of others. What you do as a congregation...matters.

I want to say the same thing to this assembly. What we do together in southeast Wisconsin matters. Look at this room for a moment. Over 120 ministries represented. Christians, organized for good in the world. We can do so much more together than we could ever do alone.

Yesterday, Pr. Karen Pahl told us that over 1.65 million dollars was shared last year...by you. Think about that number. 1.65 million. That's pretty incredible. 45% of that is sent on to the Churchwide Organization to do all the incredible things that Pr. Kevin Jacobson shared with us just a little bit ago. The rest makes an impact right here.

In this synod, we have 4 new start ministries – groups that are trying to reach new people and “expand the tent” as Dr. Ingarfield said earlier. You saw a video about those just a short time ago. In this room, we have the honor of partnering with Breaking the Chains, a prison congregation that just recently expanded to a second site. There is weekly worship, and weekly Bible study...and I have to tell you, I have been to both many times...and it is holy ground. Like take off your shoes, Moses, this is holy ground. That ministry would not happen if it weren't for the people in this room.

We have the honor of partnering with three other new starts who all have as their goal to reach folks who aren't necessarily coming to our churches on Sunday morning. There is The Table, led by Venice Williams, a beautiful mosaic of ministries rooted both at Alice's Garden and now, a new building, what once was Capitol Drive Lutheran Church is now The Table's hub for ministry.

There is Wayfarer's Faith Collective, led by Pr. Michael McAllister; a group who meets for a form of dinner church to provide a safe space for big questions and those who don't feel like they fit in traditional forms of Christianity.

And there's our newest new start, new since last year...Be Still, led by Tracy Gingrass; a coffeeshop-based ministry for those who are seeking coffee, calm, and communion.

We also have new crazy little experiments that happen...like something that just happened a few weeks ago called “Wild Church” – this is an international movement of churches rooting themselves in nature for worship services that are deeply connected to place. Larry Harpster, an interim pastor in our synod, led that first Wild Church experiment...Larry wave. I invite you to talk with Larry if you want to learn more about how your church could join that movement.

Then, there's what we talked about yesterday. Innovation and mission coaching. And we have many, many congregations listening to their communities, trying mission experiments, and connecting to new people. Last I checked, we are up to about 1/3 of our synod who has engaged these mission renewal resources in some way.

And last, there are the beautiful movements of the Spirit like the Black String Triage Ensemble. And Dayvin...it has been an honor to walk with you as this ministry and movement has taken off. Dear siblings in Christ, it matters that we are the church together. And it is an honor to be in that fight, that work, that holy call with you.

Transitions.

A significant piece of our work accompanying congregations and leaders relates to those times of transition, and, once again, 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 7 call processes. While I have presided at only one ordination in the past 12 months, there are already three ordinations scheduled in the next month, and it is likely that there will be at least two or three more later this

summer. We have also had nine rostered ministers retire this past year, and we currently have 32 congregations that are seeking a pastor. As a result of this work, we have welcomed 8 new rostered ministers to the synod, many of whom are serving in interim ministry: Germán Novelli Machado, Steven Rutter, John Berg, Charles (Chip) Lutz, Gene Talley, Afi Dobbins-Mays, Sara Gillespie, and Robert Kosky.

We also want to take a moment to give thanks for the life and ministry of 13 of our rostered ministers who have died in the past 12 months:

- The Rev. Marvin Oechler died August 17, 2022
- The Rev. Fred Hofer died October 19, 2022
- The Rev. Edward Weiskotten died October 29, 2022
- Deacon Carol Lauterbach died October 31, 2022
- The Rev. James Peters died December 3, 2022
- The Rev. Alan Lindberg died December 16, 2022
- The Rev. Paul Lee Died March 16, 2023
- The Rev. María Avilés-DeJesús died March 17, 2023
- The Rev. Lowell Timm died May 4, 2023
- Sister Rose Kroeger died May 13, 2023
- The Rev. Frederick Marks died May 21, 2023
- The Rev. Kara Skatrud Baylor died May 25, 2023 and
- The Rev. William Mains died May 27, 2023

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 Marvin, Fred, Carol, Edward, James, Alan, Paul, Marie, Lowell, Rose, Fred, Kara, and Bill. 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.**

While each of these deaths is significant, I feel it is appropriate to note that with one of these deaths also comes the end of an era. Sister Rose Kroeger, who died at the age of 103, was installed as the Directing Sister of the Milwaukee Motherhouse and served in that capacity for over fifty years, helping to direct the health care mission of the Deaconess Society at Lutheran Hospital in Milwaukee. She was the last living member of Lutheran Deaconess Motherhouse of Milwaukee and now joins her sisters in glory. We give thanks to God for the life and selfless service of Sister Rose and all members of the deaconess community.

We have also been experiencing a bit of a baby boom here, at least among the rostered ministers of the synod. You may recall that, several years ago, we adopted a recommended policy for parental leave for rostered ministers, and it has been put to good use. We give thanks to God for every new life, and especially the following:

- Milo Schlake-Kruse, born to Pastors Delaney and Matthew Schlake-Kruse;
- Zoë Kretzmann-Farrar, born to Pastors Alissa and Kevin Kretzmann-Farrar;
- Zeiah Barker, born to Pastor Jonathan and Rae Barker;
- Gabriel Beebe, born to Pastors Kelsey and Kevin Beebe;
- Jonah Flucke, born to Pastor Daniel and Christin Flucke; and
- Linus Linberry, born to one of our candidates for ordination, Juniper Linberry, and their spouse Rebecca.

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 of racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and more. 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 Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church on Monday, May 8. These names are also listed on pages 33-38 of the assembly booklet, along with photos and brief reflections.

- First, Ministers of Word and sacrament who have served for 25 years: Pastor Helen Nickel, Pastor John Berg, Pastor Kelly Taylor-Schaus, and Pastor Sarah Stumme.
- Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 40 years: Pastor Cheri Johnson and Pastor Jonathan Breimeier.
- Ministers of Word and Service, 50 years: Deacon Jan Janzow
- Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 50 years: Pastor Dennis Jacobsen, Pastor Frank Janzow, Pastor Gary Johnson, and Pastor Gary Erickson.
- Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 60 years: Pastor Myron Olson, Pastor Richard Weeden, and Pastor Robert Trendel.

We also have two congregations observing milestone anniversaries, Gethsemane, Brookfield, and St. Mark, Waukesha are celebrating 75 years, Holy Communion, Racine, is celebrating 125 years, and one that we missed two years ago, Cross, Milwaukee, celebrated 150 years back in 2020. We receive this information from the ELCA database, and we are learning that this database is not always complete or accurate, so if your congregation is having a milestone anniversary coming up, please let us know, as we'd hate to miss it.

You may have heard that we will be organizing the themes of this year's and our next three synod assemblies around the four core values we adopted back in 2019: curiosity, courage, compassion, and collaboration. My hope is that these words do more than just look good on a website, but that they guide our work every single day. I've heard it said more than once that a distinguishing characteristic of the folks who work with congregations in our office is the frequent use of the word, curious, or curiosity. "What I'm curious about is," or "Here's my curiosity..." To be honest, I find this rather delightful, and if that's how we're known, fine by me. I learned a long time ago that we do not and cannot have all the answers to the perplexing problems and challenging situations into which we are called, and I am well aware that this can be frustrating for you all, the congregational leaders of this synod. We are all in the midst of a period of significant adaptive change, and while there are certainly technical dimensions to this change, things for which we do have answers, much of what we are facing defies simple solutions and ready-made fixes. What we can do, however, is try to find the right questions, those that drive our work forward and help us work together to respond to the many perplexing issues of our time.

As for me, here's what I'm curious about. I wonder what will happen with the authentic diversity audit we are in the midst of. We have invested a significant amount of time, energy, and money in this initiative, and I wonder if we will have the courage and the resolve to do the hard

and holy work that it calls for. And, while this may seem a bit redundant, I wonder how well we will be able to remain curious as we live into these next phases of this work. Too often, we are tempted to rush to judgment and jump to solutions, when what may well be called for is a deep reflection on how we got to where we are, and it may take us time to sort out what we are called to do and how we are called to change. Balancing reflection and action, curiosity and courage, is what I believe we are called to.

Another thing I'm curious about is how we will be able to identify, train, and support enough rostered ministers to meet the needs of the church going forward. Even though the number and size of our congregations is still in flux in the wake of the pandemic, the number of deaths and retirements and rostered ministers leaving parish ministry for other kinds of work is far surpassing the number of folks entering seminary. I recognize that folks at the beginning of their professional lives might be hesitant to pursue a career in public ministry, and it's hard to predict just what the church will look like in 5, 10, 20 years. But I am convinced that God is not done with us yet, and that God's mission will have a church and God's church will need leaders, regardless of how that looks or what it is called. As for those currently in parish ministry, I wonder if we are going to figure out how to support them well enough so that they stick around. Parish ministry has always been stressful, and the demands of recent years, when many of our congregations are facing declining numbers and increasing polarization and conflict, are taking a significant toll on the mental, emotional, and physical health of our rostered ministers. Check in on your leaders; ask how they're doing, and how you can be supportive as they seek to listen, lead, love, and serve.

On a synod level, we are providing a small level of financial support through the Equipping the Saints mission appeal, making grants of up to \$1,000 available for every rostered minister in the synod for continuing education, debt relief, or retirement contributions. I'm a bit surprised that, even though we had set aside \$55,000 for this first round of grants, we had only received applications for \$17,600 by the May 24 deadline. No worries, we've extended the deadline to June 30, and we encourage you to apply before the funds run out. It's likely there will be additional funds available next year.

Finally, I'm curious if we will be able to trust enough in the power and promises of the living God to let go of everything that is preventing us from being and doing all that God wants and needs us to be and do. I wonder if our need for self-preservation will win out over the call of the gospel and the needs of our neighbors. As Jesus says in the 8th chapter of Mark, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." What would it look like for us to risk losing our institutional life for the sake of the gospel? What would it look like for us to fully embrace the vision lifted up in the words of the Magnificat, in which the mighty are cast down, and all who have been beaten down and kicked out are not only lifted up, but placed in the center of our common life? What would it look like for us to worry less about how to attract more people into our pews or more dollars into our offering plates so that we might be freed to love all our neighbors, listening and working and struggling and celebrating so that, together, we might actually experience the abundant life promised not only to the church, but to the entire world? What would it look like for us to live as if we actually believed that God is alive, and the resurrection is real? These are the questions that get me out of bed every morning, and I can't wait to explore them all, together. Thank you once again for the honor and privilege of serving as your bishop.