

Greater Milwaukee Synod
Bishop Paul Erickson
Annual Report
May 2024

As always, 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: Mary Romskog, Executive Assistant for Administration and Candidacy; Phil Smith, Administrative Assistant; Pastor Kristin Nielsen, Assistant for Congregations in Mission; Pastor Matthew Short, Assistant for Evangelical Mission; Pastor Afi Dobbins-Mays, Assistant for Authentic Diversity & Leadership; Robyn Bayland, Communications Manager; and Pastor Chris Manke, Executive Director of Outreach for Hope.

I can't tell you how much I love and appreciate working with this team; their wisdom, experience, patience, good humor, and commitment to the work we share is remarkable. We shared last year that we were about to transition the work of financial administration to an outside firm, supported by some additional bookkeeping work done in our office. We recently signed a contract to transition this work to a different accounting firm, and we hope that this new staffing arrangement will serve us well for years to come.

As we gather under the theme, "Courage: May Courage be our Daily Breath," I've asked each of the three assistants to share a few words about how their work intersects with this theme.

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

It's wonderful to be with all of you for this year's synod assembly. It's been nearly a year and a half since I began working with you and have been richly blessed! I have been blessed by every opportunity to meet, to talk to and to build relationships with so many of you.

I've been blessed to walk as a witness and at times a companion with many churches within the synod who are earnest and committed to being communities of faith which are inclusive, loving, and committed to the work of justice.

Some of you may be wondering – "Yes, but what does this really mean? What does a church which is striving to be authentically diverse look like?" Well, in the Greater Milwaukee Synod I've seen it look like a church which is in a primarily White community forming a group to address their own biases, and the roots of racism in this country. They were prompted to urgent action after being deeply disturbed by the murder of George Floyd, a fellow human being.

I've seen it look like a congregation who has had no prior conversations with one another about authentic diversity invite me to do a forum introducing new concepts and information. I've seen it in the bold and courageous congregations who have formed their own RIC and Anti-racism teams. Some even going so far as to do their own audit of where they stand on the spectrum of being a safe place for all people and especially those who are LGBTQIA+, African American, Asian, and other People of Color.

I have seen this authentic diversity in the powerful group of people that you'll hear from later today, the Strategic Planning Task Force - and in working with members of the Anti-racism and RIC teams. What courage and passion it has taken for them to remain committed to creating

spaces where equity and welcome – where relief from the pain and trauma that being excluded creates can be found. I’ve witnessed them doing this work even as many of them are hurting or exhausted from their own experiences of being othered. I continue to be blessed and more to have hope and courage for the road ahead!

I invite you to join in! I am here to walk with you on this unfolding journey. So, call on me if you need resources to share with your groups or congregations. I can walk with you if you are just beginning to learn and have conversations or if you have been at it for a while and are looking to take your engagement to a deeper level. I will walk with you if you are discerning for yourself how you can get involved with one of our teams. We are in this together as we continue to do this work which, though at times can be so heavy, is also work that in daring to be courageous is a great blessing! To God be the Glory!

Pastor Matt Short, Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission

Evangelical just means we have good news. And mission just means...it’s not just for us. So, I understand my entire job to be...supporting you as you find ways to BE that good news in everyday life, so even those outside your congregation feel it.

To live into that, I want to tell you today about a bank of resources we are developing called “Adventures in Renewal.” This process involves go-at-your-own-speed training videos and a mission coach to help you learn mission renewal by doing it in easy, bite-size steps. The process is simple. Listen. Try. Reflect. And Share. First, we LISTEN to God, each other and our neighbors. Second, we TRY small low-risk mission experiments to connect with those outside the congregation. Third, we REFLECT on what God is teaching us through those experiments, and then fourth, we SHARE stories of how God is touching our lives, and the lives of those around us. I can tell you, this process reawakens an excitement for ministry, and helps us build deeper relationships with those outside our churches. And I don’t know about you, but I can’t think of anything more important right now than finding a renewed sense of energy & building better relationships with those who aren’t here yet.

Because of the generosity of all those who are participating in the “Equipping the Saints” mission appeal, any congregation who wants to have a mission coach to help them along this journey can have one, for free. We also now have two coaching coordinators to help shepherd this, Danette Braun and Pastor Andy Fetters.

And the spirit of renewal is alive. Already, we have been in conversation with 58 congregations. Seven are forming renewal teams right now. Fifteen sent people to an afternoon “Co-Lab” event just a few weeks ago. And there are more of those events coming, where anyone can come to just test the water, and see what one next step might be for your congregation. Later this summer, we’ll gather for our next event, where we’ll practice a prayerful neighborhood walk together, and we’ll see how even that simple practice can awaken our imagination for mission.

I want to close with a quote I recently heard in a science podcast, of all places. The host said, “the scientists I most admire...their curiosity outweighs their fear.” I can think of no better summary for what I feel called to as your partner in ministry. May our curiosity about how God can use us to bless others outweigh any fears we have. I look forward to being your partner in that work.

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

My main responsibility is to work with pastors, deacons, councils, and congregations during all stages of a Call Process. Currently 28 of our 115 congregations and ministries are in

some stage of leadership transition. As we accompany congregations, we ask them to reflect on four general questions:

1. Who are we?
2. Who is our neighbor?
3. What is our specific mission in our next season of ministry?
4. What are the gifts and skills we seek in our next Rostered Minister?

The first two questions seem simple enough, yet it takes courage to explore them with the intentionality and honesty that will unlock new understanding and possibilities. When you ask good questions, you can discover where you have assumptions, blind spots, and unclear expectations, along with affirming your gifts, assets, focus and passion. When focusing well on the first two questions, the third question becomes clearer. You can affirm the things in your ministry that you want to keep doing. You can decide what things need extra support, and you can decide what things you need to say thanks for and let go. This takes courage, right? To end something, and let it go, and focus on a new area. Congregations that are willing to do this kind of exploration, most often find that it energizes the whole congregation before the next Rostered Minister is called.

When reflecting well on the first three questions, ultimately the last question about what are the gifts and skills that we need in the next called Rostered Minister become clearer also. Some people will say to me... “Just get us the next great pastor. You are making us jump through all these hoops! It takes so long! Ugh!” What they are missing is the gift of an intentional time of exploration, and how it can engage and energize your congregation’s curiosity and mission. Yet it does take courage to imagine what we might do differently, and what needs attention.

There are so many things that I have noticed that I am grateful for, but I am especially grateful for our interim pastors. They do the hard work of helping you to ask those good and deep questions.

The other thing I want to say, for those of you who are not in an interim process at this time, is that you can also explore those first three questions. That is what we are all invited to constantly consider. Please don’t think you must wait until there is a time of leadership transition before you can dive into these questions. It takes courage, but you are amazing. So don’t sell yourselves short of the possibility that you can do courageous and amazing things for the sake of sharing the gospel. Thank you for your ministry!

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. I’m grateful for the leadership of Pastor Kristin Nielsen, Assistant for Congregations in Mission, as she leads us in this work. 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 21 call processes. I have had the privilege of ordaining seven new pastors since we met in assembly last year, and we have welcomed nine new pastors to the synod, some of whom are returning to the synod after a time away. As I read the names of those newly ordained or new to the synod, I invite them to stand and be recognized and welcomed to the Greater Milwaukee Synod:

Becca Laabs, Juniper Linberry, Jessica Kowalski, Myron Crawford, Edwin Aparicio, Mike Skunes, Debbie Hartfield, James Ahlquist, Tom Gaulke, Marcus Kunz, Amanda Applehans, Nikkeya Berryhill, Erin Coutts, Jane Crawford, Chris Thomas, and Cheryl Peterson.

We have also had eight rostered ministers retire this past year, and we currently have 28 congregations that are seeking a pastor.

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

- Rev. RW (Pat) Anderson 8/31/2023
- Rev. Gerald Goodrich 9/1/2023
- Rev. Fran Odden 9/3/2023
- Rev. Dr. Melvin Miritz 11/29/2023
- Rev. Dale Erickson 12/14/2023
- Rev. Ned Dorau 1/23/2024
- Rev. John Gugel 2/19/2024
- Deacon Ken Bischmann 4/8/2024

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 RW (Pat), Gerald, Fran, Melvin, Dale, Ned, John, and Ken. 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 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. (SLIDE with photo of group at lunch) We held our annual anniversary lunch this year at Ascension Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, on Monday, May 6. As I read the names of those being recognized, I invite them to stand if they are present and remain standing until all the names are called, and I will then invite us to offer our gratitude for their faithful service. These names are also listed on pages 43-49 of the assembly booklet, along with photos and brief reflections.

First, Ministers of Word and Service, who have served for 25 years: Deacon Janice Nararro.

Ministers of Word and sacrament, 25 years: the Rev. Sharon Georgi

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 40 years: The Rev. James Ahlquist, the Rev. Steven Clingman, the Rev. Thomas Kent, the Rev. Steven Kuhl, the Rev. German Novelli, the Rev. Deborah Ohrtman, the Rev. Paula Ramcke-Wilke, the Rev. Steven Rutter, the Rev. Cristy Schoob, the Rev. David Schoob, and the Rev. Mary Ubuntu

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 50 years: the Rev. June Eastvold, the Rev. Stephen Engelstad, the Rev. John Fredriksen, the Rev. Ronald Matter, the Rev. Paul Schwan, and the Rev. Mark Syre.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 60 years: The Rev. C. Richard Becker, and the Rev. Joseph Lewandowski.

New this year, we are also recognizing rostered ministers who have retired from active service, including Deacon Sherie Kruse, Deacon Marian Wasierski, the Rev. Jennifer Arnold, the

Rev. John Horner-Ibler, the Rev. Steven Kuhl, the Rev. Marcus Kunz, the Rev. Tom Smith, and the Rev. Greg Van Dunk.

We also have congregations observing milestone anniversaries: Ascension, Waukesha, celebrating 75 years of faithful ministry, Christ, Jackson, celebrating 125 years, and St. Mary's, Kenosha, celebrating 150 years.

Please note that we receive the information on congregational anniversaries from the ELCA database, and we've learned that this isn't always accurate. If your congregation is celebrating a milestone anniversary, basically any multiple of 25, please let us know in the synod office, and we'll make sure you're included. Let's offer our thanks for these faithful servants and congregations.

Courage

Courage is the theme of this year's assembly, the second of our synod's four core values. As I mentioned in my sermon last evening, I would hope that we can begin to see courage as central to who we are called to become as God's people in this time and in this place. I would also hope, however, that we do not see the four values we share, curiosity, courage, compassion, and collaboration, as separate and distinct, but working together to create the kind of environment we believe God is calling us to create.

Last year, when we focused on curiosity, we took time to listen to the stories of folks who had felt included or excluded from various groups, and we were encouraged to take in what we heard and honor the experiences of others. I would hope that we see this not as simply an exercise in intellectual curiosity, but that we take those stories and reflections to heart, the seat of courage, and then boldly and fearlessly examine our own lives and the lives of the congregations and groups and systems in which we participate, and courageously ask, "what am I doing, what are we doing, to exclude and include others?" This is what courage looks like, not to defend or deny or explain away someone else's feelings or experiences, but to honor their stories and then to work with them and with others to imagine a new way of being community.

What else does courage look like? It looks like congregations recognizing that doing the same things we've always done just isn't working any more, that we can't just turn back the clock and hope that more families with young kids will somehow visit our church and decide to stay and save us from institutional decline. Courage looks like taking the time and finding the energy to take some risks, get outside our walls and get to know our neighbors. The work that Pastor Matt Short described in his report, related to the process now known as Adventures in Renewal, is courageous work. Rooted in curiosity, it requires taking some risks, getting out of our safe and comfortable pews to figure out how to not just recruit our neighbors, but to be neighbors, working together and walking together to build communities of justice and hope.

Courage also looks like finding a way to have hard and necessary conversations, to ask the tough questions and to speak the truth in love. This is at the heart of our Authentic Diversity work, as described in the strategic plan we will be considering later this morning. We recognize that folks in this synod have been at this work for decades, and this plan helps us build on the work already accomplished and focus our time and energy and resources in such a way that make real progress in becoming a more antiracist and fully inclusive church. When we began this work on the Authentic Diversity audit two years ago, work that has led to the creation of the strategic plan, we created a page on our website to describe this work. On it, we describe the various steps in this process and then we ask, "But will anything really change?" The answer we wrote two years ago is the same as the answer today: that's up to us. Will we have the courage to do the

work laid out for us? Will we have the courage to dedicate the time, energy, and resources to fulfill the commitments we have made? Time will tell, but I certainly hope so.

Courage can also look like taking the time to have hard and honest conversations with your rostered ministers and lay leaders to ask, “how are you doing?” Many of our congregations are finding that the load of leadership, both in terms of financial support and time and energy, is being carried by fewer and fewer people, and the risk of burnout and misconduct is high. Sometimes, this looks like rostered ministers or lay leaders over-functioning, taking on more and more responsibilities, in fear that if they don’t do it, no one will, and they end up doing more than any one person can or should handle. Sometimes, this looks like rostered ministers and lay leaders feeling hurt by criticism or alone in their work, and they pull back or shut down or simply walk away. Sometimes, this looks like folks engaging in behavior that is harmful and destructive, to themselves and to others. While this is certainly not new, in the life of this synod or this church, it breaks my heart when I see the pain and division caused by such behavior.

While every situation and every individual is unique, and the challenges we face are different, I pray that we will all find the courage we need to ask for help when we need it, and the grace to recognize that every single one of us is broken and bruised, and in need of mercy and healing. There may be times when the sharp edges of our brokenness cause so much pain to others that we need to be removed from a community, at least for a time. I would pray, however, that we might find the strength and the courage to recognize that, while the challenges of life and ministry are many, the choices we make to seek help and healing can make all the difference.

Finally, I think that courage looks like living as if we actually believed that what we do in this imperfect church matters. It can be dis-couraging to look at the numbers and trends and the challenges facing all of institutional religion in this day and age, but I believe in my heart that what we do still matters. One of the unique dimensions of work in a synodical office is that my staff and I are in a different congregation almost every week, and my own experience is that I am encouraged by what I see and hear, week in and week out. I see people caring deeply for one another and working hard to make sure that everyone is welcomed and included. I see people giving generously of their time, their energy, their creativity, and their resources to strengthen their congregations and their partners in ministry. I see people who are young and old and every age in between asking hard questions and working together to find the answers. Of course, I also see lots of frustrating and challenging things, but what gives me hope, what gives me the courage I need to keep going, is you. You help me remember that the beloved community, the righteous reign of God, is something worth fighting for, and working for, and praying for, together. Our courage comes from our connections, and you help me remember that what we do matters. It matters to me, it matters to the world, it matters to God.

As Paul wrote in Second Timothy, chapter 1: “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” May God grant me, and you, and all of us the wisdom, and the courage, and the love to keep moving forward, inching our way into God’s beloved community. Thank you once again for the honor and privilege of serving as your bishop.