2024 Synod Assembly
Vice President's Report

Last month I had the privilege of spending time in Italy and one of the places that touched me was Pompeii. Many of us have heard the story of the destruction of the city of Pompeii by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 79 CE. This city of 10-20,000 people was destroyed over the course of two days as 13-20 feet of volcanic ash and pumice rained down on the city along with blistering hot gases, that robbed people of breath. For the most part, Pompeii and its people who had not escaped lay buried under piles of ash for about 17 centuries. Excavations over the last two hundred years have revealed the vibrant life of a city with coffee shops brilliant frescos and mosaics ovens still containing loaves of bread and villas with interior gardens of fountains and flowers. It had been a place of vibrant daily life and community—until it wasn't.

So, what does the story of Pompeii have to do with us today? As we walked through the now uncovered ancient streets and saw evidence of the abundant life that had once existed there, I wondered what ash covers us and hides the vibrant life within us and our congregations and communities? What robs of us breath?

Are we still covered with ash of the pandemic that has hindered our congregations from vibrant life and ministries? Does the ash of scarcity clog our giving and keep us from giving generously? Does the ash of polarization and fear—or the ash of comfort—bury our life of full community? Where and how do our congregations find it difficult to breathe fully and deeply with abundant life?

And how do ashes of loss cover us as individuals and as communities? How does loss of spouse or child or parent; loss of employment; loss of health or mobility; loss of friends or support systems take our breath away and keep us from vibrant living? Who or where are we as church when we need to walk together through the depth of ashes to find signs of life and hope?

How does a consumer-based economy and large inequities in wealth create ashes of poverty and soul sucking emptiness and loneliness? How do we find our way through the deep and longstanding ashes of oppression? How do systems of racism and heterosexism and classism press down with the heaviness of ash and toxic gases to make it oh so difficult to breathe?

If we are standing on the top of a pile of ash, how do we recognize, and know, and understand the struggle to breathe that lies underneath the ashes of time and loss and injustice and oppression? How do we hear our neighbors, our siblings, and even our own selves?

I struggle with these questions. I know that as church we have often failed to listen with our whole heart and spirit to those who may be struggling to breathe. I know that living within my own comfort can hinder me from hearing my neighbors' struggle for breath and from seeking and knowing the full vibrant life and breath of the beloved community. And I know that unless I am open and intentional, I can be oblivious to all the ashes of life that lie around me, under me, on top of me, and within me.

I invite you for a moment to just breathe Close your eyes. Sit up tall. Relax your shoulders, and take three deep breaths, taking a long deep breath in, holding it for a moment, and releasing it slowly. Feel that breath of life that stirs dry bones and connects us and gives us courage and hope.

As church across this synod, we breathe in different spaces We breathe in different geographic conferences; in white spaces and BIPOC spaces; in different socioeconomic places; in straight spaces and queer spaces; in places where we embrace pronouns and where we resist pronouns; in spaces where we are comfortable with our white ways of being and in spaces where we work diligently to break down racism and systems of oppression. And yet we breathe with one breath of life. Life begins and ends with a single breath, but most of the time we are oblivious to how we breathe and how we might impact the breath of others in each of our breaths between that first breath and our last breath. Just as we breathe together in this space, we are mindful that we breathe together

in each of our individual spaces and our different congregation spaces, and we are connected by the spirit breath that gives us life.
As a synod, we have been working to be mindful of our breathing and how each of our individual breaths are linked together, understanding that when any one of God's people struggles to breathe freely, all of us struggle to breathe.

Last night we celebrated the impact of additional dollars raised through the *Equipping the Saints* mission appeal. We began the appeal just as the deep ashes of the pandemic began to rain down on us. Little did we know then how much life and breath would be sucked out by the falling ash and toxic gases. Too many people lost their lives and many of our congregations struggled to continue to breathe through that ash. In many ways and places, we continue to dust off the ash.

As you heard and saw last evening, funds from *Equipping the Saints* are uncovering new life as we learn to listen more fully and deeply to the neighbors around our congregations. Coaches are available through innovation grants to help dig through the ashes of comfort and complacency and the ways we have always done things to discover new ways to grow and be church. Collaboration grants are moving partner congregations into deeper relationships in breaking down old barriers and recognizing our common needs and life together. Leadership grants are helping rostered ministers breathe more deeply through sabbaticals and continuing education and being freed from some financial strain. Those gifts of new life will continue as gifts continue to be received.

The Youth Listening Task Force that was called for in a resolution at last year's assembly is working to listen deeply to age groups that are increasingly underrepresented in our churches. As noted in their written report, the task force is focusing on age groups of those who are 12-18, 19-22, and 23-35. They aren't asking questions about where these youth and young adults would like to fit in the church as it currently exists, but they are seeking to get under the ashes to discover the vitality of life that already exists so that our churches can put aside the time-honored expectations of church and draw deep new breaths. Questions the task force will be asking are questions we all need to be asking ourselves in order to breathe more deeply and experience abundant life. Questions such as:

- When you have a bunch of free time, what do you love doing?
- Who in your life makes you feel loved for who you are?
- Where do you experience a sense of community where you belong?
- What gives you hope in your life?
- Where could the Church show up and make a difference?

What might the church look like in the future if we listen deeply and maybe learn new liturgies and worship outside of buildings? What if the church sings a new song? Will we want to stifle it, or learn how to sing along? Would the church look and be different if we each asked ourselves similar questions and paused for self-reflection to uncover our passions and separate what we love doing from what we think we "should" be doing? Do we regularly take time to appreciate those who love us just as we are? Do we recognize the gifts of community, and do we hold on to hope? Sometimes we need to examine our own ashes that we have allowed to cover us.

As a synod, we have been deliberately working to recognize and dig through the ashes of racism and heterosexism that have shaped our churches and communities. It can be painful for those of us who are white to come to see and know that the message of love that I heard in the church growing up wasn't a message of love that fully and completely included people of color and queer communities. It is challenging to recognize what it means to be white and how my white ways of being and doing can stifle the life and breath of others when those white ways are consciously or unconsciously enacted as THE way of being human and being and doing church.

The Resolution 1 Task Force presented a report on ways that our governing documents, polity, and ways of being and doing church make breathing easy and unconscious for some while hindering the breath and full participation of others. We have serious work ahead to excavate the deep ashes of so many things we do that we simply take for granted. It will be a difficult and challenging task as we unearth the layers. As we dig through those ashes, we do so to find the vibrant life of new community.

The Authentic Diversity Audit unearthed six themes that will require diligent and intentional focus and work. We will need to be synod together in becoming something

new where we take time to build self-awareness and actively self-reflect on race, racism, and social justice; where we work to ensure that all identities and backgrounds and experiences have full life and breath; where we work to increase our knowledge of LGBTQIA+ identities and the intersections with race; and where we learn to communicate openly and break down gaps and barriers in communication, reaching beyond rostered ministers to communicate directly with lay leaders.

Archeologists work deliberately to brush aside years of accumulated debris to discover the stuff of life. The work we are doing as a synod will require our focused attention and synod-wide participation. You have heard the report of the Authentic Diversity Strategic Task Force on some of the first deliberate steps for action. At their March meeting, the Synod Council began a deep and what will be ongoing conversations about the findings and calls to action from the Resolution 1 Task Force and the Authentic Diversity Audit.

Synod Council goals for 2024-2025 include strengthening communication with congregations through lay leaders. On your table is a form to fill out with the contact information for your congregation's officers. If you haven't already done so, I encourage someone from your congregation to fill it out now and put it in the box next to the box where you will leave your nametag lanyard when you exit the assembly. You will also be receiving a link after the assembly to send any contact information that you don't have available today.

One of the gaps identified in the Diversity Audit was the lack of visibility of the Synod Council. These are leaders in our synod who have stepped forward to lead and guide decisions and actions between assemblies. The Synod Council approves synod calls, receives financial reports, recommends a synod budget, takes action related to moving or closing congregations, appoints task forces as needed, hears staff and ministry reports, takes action on synod assembly resolutions, and any other items needed to guide and direct our collective work and ministry.

You have been seeing their names and faces on the slides. All of their names and pictures are on the synod website. I encourage you to get to know your Synod Council members, and if you only know one, may it be the Synod Council member elected by your

conference. Feel free to invite that person to your congregation annual meeting, or to a congregation council meeting, or to share a mission moment or temple talk at a worship service, or maybe an adult forum to learn more about our synod life together.

The work we do together as church is life-giving. We share the Gospel to follow Jesus, form communities, and love all. And we do that with curiosity, compassion, collaboration, and courage.

Where the ashes of time and "that's the way we've always done it" cover us, may we have the courage to name the ashes, to dig through them, and to live in the full and abundant life given us by our Creator God. When we falter, may we have the courage to get up and try again. When we want to make excuses and seek our own comfort, may the Spirit that breathes in and through us, give us courage to breathe deeply and follow where the Spirit leads.