

2021 Synod Assembly – VP Report: Joyce A. Caldwell, PhD

I read Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart* when I was in Kenya and Tanzania in 1997. It was a book that touched me deeply then and I re-read it in the last couple weeks for our congregation's Social Justice Book Club. When I suggested it to the Social Justice Book Club, I didn't remember the details of the book, but I was thinking about how it has felt that things have been falling apart in so many different ways during this past year, and how much we have to learn in HOW things fall apart both in our own lives and in our communities—and the role we play in that.

As 2020 began, I had an appointment with my ophthalmologist who was incredibly excited about what the year 2020 meant to an eye doctor! As I saw him later in the year and I recalled that early optimism, he said he couldn't wait for the year to be over. It wasn't a year of perfect vision and seeing things more clearly; it was a year of seeing things fall apart—individually and collectively.

In some ways, the year 2020 DID help us see things more clearly, even as we felt pressures of trying to hold things together. For our Black and Brown siblings here in the U.S., things have always been falling apart. The history of slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration and all of the accompanying realities of violence, oppression, and discrimination have damaged and diminished our siblings in so many ways seen and unseen, but have also left each of us damaged in different ways and have left us broken as a beloved community of God's people. In his book Achebe addresses both the internal and external forces that get in the way and destroy the possibilities of living into the beloved community. We have much to explore together and deep questions to ask about our brokenness and our striving together to find healing.

The year 2020 has impacted each of us individually, and all of us as a society. As we have waded through this year, we need to ask the good Lutheran question, "What does this mean?" What does it mean for us collectively as God's people? As Congregations? As a Greater Milwaukee Synod?

In 2019, as we gathered for our last regular assembly, we passed a Statement of Vision, Mission, Values, and Practices which has served to guide us as a synod during these past two years.

When I hear our mission words of "we follow Jesus," I hear words that guided congregations and ministries during this past year to re-double efforts to provide food and support as resources for some have been more limited. I hear words that led individuals and congregations in Kenosha and across the synod to raise voices for justice and calls for an end to violence.

When I hear our mission words of “form communities,” I hear words that moved all of us to form communities in ways none of us had ever imagined. Rostered ministers began to meet weekly on zoom. Congregations were able to reach new people who would show up to watch a virtual service who might never show up in a building. Some people found that a phone still worked to regularly check on people who lived alone or needed a word of support.

When I hear our mission words “love all,” I hear words that continue to prompt us and challenge us to notice those who have been overlooked, unheard, and diminished in the eyes of those with power and privilege. I hear our past commitments and resolutions to be an anti-racist and Reconciling in Christ synod. To love all means I have to take notice of the people and the times and ways and places in which I feel uncomfortable and to sit with my discomfort to listen more deeply. At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, the British colonial commissioner decides on the title of the book he will write about the Igbo people and that he could probably write a paragraph—only a paragraph—about the man whose fullness of character and life and culture the reader has come to know. “Love all” requires sitting quietly, listening with humility, and hearing deeply the stories of our neighbors, and striving to change our lives as that is needed to bring fullness of life for everyone.

I am grateful for our Greater Milwaukee Synod and the commitments to justice through the years. I am thankful that we have passed resolutions and stated our intentions to be anti-racist in who we are and how we act and that we welcome and affirm our LGBTQIA+ siblings as a Reconciling in Christ Synod. And yet I know that we regularly and constantly fall short. I know how deeply ingrained white and straight ways of thinking and being are inside me and how easily they pop up.

Unlearning and re-learning things I have been taught in so many ways by so many people requires deliberate attention and intentionality. I am well aware of how difficult it is for me to remember and shift my use of pronouns. I was an English major who was ingrained with matching singular and plural pronouns. That deeply ingrained response repeatedly catches me in my failure to use preferred pronouns of “they/theirs.” It is something I need to focus on and work on within myself. If I am to live in beloved community, I shouldn’t need someone to remind me of their pronouns. I need to take my own responsibility to learn and change.

The default of our learning and the challenge to recognize and call ourselves to new learning and action is at the foundation of our declared identities to be an antiracist and RIC synod. The Anti-Racism Team and the RIC Committee have been providing opportunities for all of us to engage in conversations and to continue our journey of learning. We are all on different paths and we need to respect our different experiences and backgrounds, but we also need to hold one another

accountable and be willing to journey together through the muddy waters of racism and homophobia in order to live together fully.

My roles as Synod Vice President and Campaign Manager for Equipping the Saints intersect in my hope that as a synod we will find new and innovative ways to be church; that we will enliven congregations with creative, life-giving ministries; that we will build deep, authentic partnerships of collaboration based in mutual respect and understanding; that we will be able to lift up and support Black, Indigenous, People of Color and LGBTQIA+ leaders; that we will hold ourselves accountable to an antiracist journey by calling a racial justice organizer onto the synod staff; and that we will continue to support all rostered ministers in each of their journeys, including recognizing the importance of Sabbath and sabbatical time for rest and renewal.

The year 2020 was a year in which old ways of being fell apart. Children didn't gather together in schools; adults faced a variety of circumstances from becoming unemployed, to working in vulnerable front lines, to being tucked away at home in front of a computer; congregations didn't come together to worship and sing; quilters needed to sew apart from one another in their own homes; rostered ministers responded and wept with those who died and were buried separated from the larger community. In many ways, it feels like things fell apart this past year. But with death comes resurrection. Some ways of being and living and thinking needed to die. As church, I am excited about the possibilities we have as individuals, congregations, and a synod to create something new. That will take courage. And it will take deep, care-filled listening. It will take humility and the willingness to give up old, instilled messages. And with that, comes new life and hope.

I know that there is no evidence that Martin Luther ever uttered the words attributed to him about the end of time and planting a tree. But whether he said them or not, they may express our Christian and Lutheran hope in the new possibilities found in our faith in Christ. The recent adaptation I heard of those words of Luther stated, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." It may feel some days that our world is going to pieces. We may wonder how we are going to hold things together, but still we hope. Always we hope. I give thanks that we are in this journey together as a synod and I cling to the promise that God's Spirit is alive in us and is guiding us.

I want to end by saying thank you to Bishop Erickson and each member of the synod staff who helped us navigate as a synod through this past year. There was no script to follow in how to live and lead as church in a pandemic and in what felt in so many ways that we were falling apart. Bishop Erickson helped to guide us with pastoral letters, and all of the staff responded to needs and continued to guide the work of ministry. I give thanks to each and everyone of you.

I give thanks for the rostered ministers and the lay leaders who led and guided congregations and waded through messy and challenging conversations about when and how to worship; who pivoted from in person worship to finding other ways to connect and be church; and who at times wanted to give in to exhaustion but somehow kept going.

I also want to say a special thank you to the outgoing members of the Synod Council. Your terms continue until August 31, so I am hopeful that we can still see one another face-to-face before your terms end. It has been a gift to get to know each of you during these past years, and I give thanks for your leadership and service. As a synod we say thank you to each of you and look forward to new ways you will use your gifts for leadership within your congregation and within our synod. I wish I could call them to the front of the stage for you to see and thank physically, but in our best virtual way, they are here with us for all of us to thank. [slides with photos]

Amber Anderson

Sara Booher

Mark Christiaansen

Pastor Elizabeth Jaeger

Josh Kuehn

Aliliywa Mbise

Bob Reinders, who has also served as interim treasurer

Pastor Sarah Stobie

Janet Wunrow

If you were here at a stage in front of us, I would present you with a gift and ask the assembly to thank you with applause, but know that you will be receiving a tangible expression of our thanks, and on behalf of the assembly, I want to thank you for the ways that you have brought insight and understanding to our meetings. In choosing to serve at the synod level, you have demonstrated your commitment to the larger church and to our collective ministry. As a synod, we are grateful for your willingness to serve.

As I close, I also remember Tom Gauthier with thanks and share our sadness at his loss. He served as our synod treasurer and was a valued member of our synod council. With his quiet and unassuming nature and positive outlook, his memory continues to live among us and to ground us in our calling to be about God's work of justice for all God's people.

May God continue to bless our work together as we follow Jesus, form communities, and love all.