

2021 Annual report to the Synod Bishop Paul Erickson

It's been quite a year, hasn't it? When I looked back at some of the messages and letters that we sent out in the past 12 months, I had to chuckle a bit at what I wrote on March 30 of last year: "While it remains unclear just how long the restrictions on public worship gatherings will remain, it is increasingly likely that this crisis will last for weeks, if not months." It's now been almost 14 months, and while vaccinations are increasing and new cases are declining, we're still not out of the woods yet. With vaccines only at around 40% in this country and much lower in other parts of the world, variants will continue to develop, and we're seeing troublesome increases in cases among young people. Our colleagues in the Minneapolis Area Synod met in assembly last weekend, and they featured a presentation with Dr. Michael Osterholm, a member of one of their congregations and one of the nation's leading experts on the pandemic. We shared the link to the video recording of that presentation with our rostered ministers on Monday and posted it to our Facebook page, and I think it's safe to say that Dr. Osterholm still urges caution. Even if most of the folks in your congregation are vaccinated, worship is still a public event, and it will still be a while before we can safely gather without restrictions indoors. Outdoor or drive-in worship looks to be the safest way to gather this summer, and I hope that by the fall things will start to look a little more like what we used to know.

Like most of you, the synod staff pivoted to working remotely in mid-March of last year, and we continue to primarily connect via Zoom. As of next week, however, we will all be fully vaccinated, and we anticipate returning to working mostly from the office at that time. We will remain closed to the public, however, until further notice. Before I go any further, however, I want to express my deep appreciation for all the ways this staff has worked diligently, creatively, and patiently under very challenging circumstances. If we were in person, I'd have them come stand and be recognized, but we'll have to post their pictures for now.

- 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,
- and our two newest members,
- Robyn DiGiacinto, Communications Specialist, and
 - Pastor Chris Manke, Executive Director of Outreach for Hope

I'm grateful and proud to be a part of this team.

As our theme for this assembly is "We form communities; gathering as people of the promise," I've invited each of the three assistants in the office to share a few comments on how they have found and fostered community in the past year.

Jennifer Arnold, Assistant to the Bishop for Missional Leadership.

I have had the privilege of meeting some of you while working with you and your congregation through a time of pastoral transition. It is a part of my work to accompany congregations and leaders through the call process and I enjoy that work very much.

Yet, a large part of my work as Assistant to the Bishop for Missional Leadership involves facilitating opportunities for our lay and Rostered leaders to develop and strengthen their gifts and skills for ministry. This means there are times I may serve as a connector, pointing people to resources beyond our synod and within the wider community. Many times it means that I am helping us to develop and create events here that respond to the needs and interests we name for ourselves.

Since early 2020, the challenge of ministry in the time of pandemic has altered both HOW and WHAT we have done together:

*First the HOW. I can tell you that we in the synod office used Zoom before Zoom was cool, but that begs the question, Is Zoom cool? However you answer that question, Zoom and other platforms like it have become necessary tools for ministry and I am grateful for them. Without Zoom we would have been severely limited in our ability to wrestle **together** with the issues before us. Because of Zoom we were able to convene our annual Together in Mission event, to meet with congregational leaders at critical moments to discuss how to navigate key questions, to meet regularly with Rostered Ministers, and to offer various trainings and webinars.*

The WHAT has changed as well. As I mentioned, we were able to hold our annual Together in Mission event, but we offered 5 workshops and 1 worship over three Saturday mornings rather than on one full Saturday. We narrowed our focus on five areas that seemed most needed and most relevant to what we have seen and heard from you. The five workshops were on:

- Innovation- as we wonder together about the new ways to share the Gospel*
- Digital worship and ministry, as we reach out beyond our walls*
- Conflict, as we bring our many values and understandings to the issues of the day*
- Anti-Racism, as we continue to long and necessary journey toward racial equity*
- Trauma and ministry, as we seek compassion for ourselves and others*

These are not “one and done” events. We didn’t learn all we needed to know in 90-minute workshops so we continue to explore these areas as we continue in 2021 and beyond. And if I have learned anything through this time, I know that I cannot anticipate everything we may need or want to explore going forward so we will stay nimble and responsive as God leads us forward.

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

What my job title really means is that I am called to, and I consider it an awesome opportunity to...serve at the intersection of the three expressions of this church. There’s the Churchwide expression, in Chicago, there’s the Greater Milwaukee Synod, and then...there’s the over 120 ministries that call southeast WI home.

There has never been a year when the connections between those three have been more important...or more vital. Never been a year when we needed more to be reminded...we are not alone. It is God who forms us into community...blesses us together...so that together, we can be a blessing to others.

An example: At the beginning of the pandemic, our colleagues at Churchwide put out a nationwide COVID-19 relief appeal. And the response was truly incredible. Donations poured in from all over the country. And because of that generosity, as of last week, over \$1.5M has been shared with synods like ours for relief grants to congregations.

In our synod alone, with Outreach for Hope, Lutheran Disaster Response, and these synod grants from ELCA-Churchwide, we have been able to distribute over \$100,000 in COVID relief grants to congregations. That's incredible, not just because of the number, but because of the powerful sense of community it represents. The dollars that have supported people in this synod have come from our fellow Christians in Florida, and Alaska, and everywhere in between...because God binds us together in love. There's something truly beautiful about that.

There have been so many powerful examples this last year of how God forms us into community:

- ❖ Congregations who have worked together to offer confirmation or share each other's radio transmitters for parking lot services.*
- ❖ Ministries like The Table, Breaking the Chains, and Wayfarer's Faith Collective...where God is forming community in new ways to reach new people...where they are at.*
- ❖ Recently, we saw ELCA members together with MO-synod and WI-synod members all benefitting from the "Digital Reformation" trainings and grants.*

I could go on...actually, for a very long time, naming the ways I have seen God actively forming communities even in...or especially in...these difficult times.

Instead, I want to end with this thought: You and I have been given an incredible gift. A love that we don't have to earn and can never lose. A divine love that is always busy forming community for the healing of the world. May we never grow weary in finding new ways to blur the lines between the church and the world...new ways to be present in the wider community so the world knows...the church is here with you. God is here with you. The world has never needed us more.

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

My primary role on staff is to accompany congregations during a pastor or deacon transition. I work with rostered ministers, councils, call committees, and interim pastors, as they engage congregation members in a process to discover where God is calling a congregation next in its ministry. A heightened sense of anxiety and uncertainty is common during such a process, so the added challenge of doing this work during a pandemic has been especially difficult. Yet your siblings in Christ across the synod who have been going through a rostered minister transition, have been creative in staying connected with one another, forming community in ways that I am sure they were not anticipating:

- Using social media and car parades to say good-bye to beloved pastors*
- Creating phone trees to make regular calls to members to check in on them and get their input on their ministry*
- Learning how to use digital media in order to have Mission Exploration Team and/or Call Committee meetings*
- Getting new technology at home and at church to be able to have congregational listening sessions and congregational call vote*
- Doing small group Meet and Greet gatherings online with the recommended candidate for call*

These are just some of the examples of how I have seen community be fostered in congregations during interim processes this year, and I am especially grateful for the innovative and faithful ways that were used to keep moving forward in filling leadership openings in our churches.

One way that my colleagues and I sought to foster community was by gathering regularly with rostered ministers for prayer, information sharing, reflection, centering, brainstorming, mutual support, learning, and simply being with one another. It has been a hard year to lead, and there has been much grief, pain and loss. There also has been joy; places of unexpected grace that has surprised us to keep us moving when we are tired or uncertain. Rostered ministers have offered their wisdom and courage to one another, and to all of us, in these trying times, and I thank them for giving witness to God's grace and promises of hope and healing in Jesus. Truly they are a gift, and we are stronger together as a synod. Thank you.

Transitions. Even though the way that we have worked in recent months has changed significantly, the work continues, and one large piece of that work is accompanying pastors and congregations in transition. The complete transitions report is posted on the assembly web page, and it details that, since we last met in assembly in 2019, we have partnered in the completion of 30 call processes, and I have presided at 7 ordinations. As part of those transitions, we have welcomed 13 new rostered ministers to our synod, and we have prepared a video introducing them to you ([link to video](#)).

We also want to take a moment to give thanks for the life and ministry of 11 of our rostered ministers who have died since we were last together in assembly:

- ❖ The Rev. Frank Bauman, who died September 24, 2019
- ❖ The Rev. Robert Scheuermann, who died February 8, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. Paul Kuenning, who died March 9, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. William Truby, who also died March 9, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. James Davis, who died April 3, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. Stanley Hanna, who died June 24, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. James Swiecichowski, who died July 31, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. Lawrence Sandin, who died October 13, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. Donald Haines, who died December 19, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. John Keller, who died December 21, 2020
- ❖ The Rev. Kermit Lauterbach, who died December 26, 2020.

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 Frank, Bob, Paul, Bill, James, Stanley, James, Lawrence, Don, John, and Kermit. 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 celebrating special anniversaries of their ordination or commissioning (25, 40, 50, 60 and 70 years), as well as congregations that are observing milestone anniversaries of their founding (25, 50, 75, 100, etc.). I regret that we have not been able to hold our traditional lunch gathering these past two years, but we have mailed their anniversary certificates, and we have put together a brief video to celebrate these milestones. ([link to video](#)).

As we now take a few moments to consider how our lives and ministries will be shaped in the months and years to come, I want to begin by acknowledging that many of the pastors, deacons, and other leaders I have engaged with recently are experiencing a deep level of

emotional, physical, and spiritual exhaustion. I've experienced this past year as the most challenging year of my more than 30 years of ministry, and I would guess that's likely true for most of you, as well. We've had to figure out new ways to lead worship, connect, learn, and serve, and often it seems like we're working twice as hard to get half as much done; we've had to deal with a constantly changing set of dynamics, such that any decision we make needs to be continually re-evaluated; we've engaged in a long overdue time of racial reckoning in this country; we're experiencing a political and cultural polarization that seems to grow in its intensity with every passing week; and all this and more has taken place while, at the same time, the very things that usually help us through the hard times, being able to gather to worship, sing, laugh, and cry are not available to us, at least not in the ways that we long for.

I'm grateful for all the difficult decisions and sacrifices that our congregations and leaders have made during the pandemic. You've saved lives because of these choices, and I'm proud of the ways that we have worked together to love and care for our neighbors.

But we've paid a price. Our fuel tanks are empty, and we're starting to see it all take a toll on our relationships, our congregations, and our leaders. We all know we have a lot of work to do to figure out what it means to be the church for this next generation, and I hope and pray we can figure that out together. But, before we roll up our sleeves and get to work, I'd like to suggest that we take some time to refuel our tanks.

I'm grateful that the synod's personnel policy allows me to take a sabbatical this summer. I'll be stepping away from my day-to-day responsibilities on May 23, returning on August 22. The rest of the synod staff will be working together to keep things moving in my absence, and while I will not be able to do the traveling that I had originally hoped to do, I've got a lot of books to read, some projects around the house to tend to, and I'll spend some time visiting family and friends.

I'd like to suggest, however, that we all need to pay attention to the need for sabbath rest. For those of you who are lay leaders, I recognize that many of you have been working in very challenging circumstances and going above and beyond the call of duty as you have led in this pandemic year, and I hope you can find a way to take a break and get some rest. I also believe that all of our rostered ministers could use a break; whether it's a mini-sabbatical, or additional vacation time, or at the very least encouragement to use the vacation time that they've got stored up, I'm asking all our pastors and deacons to find a way to take the time and do the things you need to do to get some rest and replenish your soul. I'm also asking congregations and councils to find a way to support your leaders in the important work of taking sabbath rest. As one small way to encourage this, we are setting aside \$10,000 of our dedicated funds for mini-sabbatical grants of up to \$500. Whether you use the funds to pay for pulpit supply to let the preacher take a few Sundays off, or you let the pastor or deacon use the funds to pay for a week at a lake cabin, that's up to you to sort out, and I challenge congregations to find a way to match this grant and double or triple this amount.

I'm so grateful for all the work that we do to recruit new candidates for ministry and to raise money for scholarships for seminarians, but I also want to make sure we do what we can to keep the leaders we already have. We'll be sharing instructions on how to apply for the mini-sabbatical grants in the coming days.

Other priorities that I see for the coming year relate to the need to deepen and expand our commitment to being antiracist individuals in an antiracist church. The events of this past year have shown us how far we need to go, but I'm pleased with how many congregations and leaders have taken steps on this important journey in recent months. I recognize that some of the letters

that I have written and some of the actions we have taken may have led to some uncomfortable conversations and some increased tensions, but I've come to believe that tension and discomfort are a small price to pay if we are moving toward the beloved community that God envisions for us all. We may well be at different points along the path, but wherever we are, we need to figure out how to take the next step.

When we last met in assembly in 2019, we adopted a synod wide statement of Vision, Mission, Values, and Practices. The last practice that we commit to is "Showing up," in which we pledge to "live out our faith by engaging in service, action, and advocacy around issues of poverty, violence, racial equity, gender, LGBTQIA+ issues, immigration, mental illness, and injustice." I'm grateful for all who have shown up in this past year, and I look forward to showing up with even more of you in the year to come.

All of these things connect with the work we are moving ahead with regarding the Synod Mission appeal, Equipping the Saints. You'll be hearing more about the campaign in just a few minutes, but I'd like to take just a few minutes to address the context surrounding it. You may well be wondering why we are embarking on an ambitious campaign to raise \$2.3 million in the midst of so much uncertainty and as we're still dealing with the impact of a global pandemic. While the events of the past year have impacted the timing and the focus of the campaign, I think this past year has also shown us that we need to come together and organize our resources to do the things that God is calling us to do. Innovation, collaboration, and leadership are more important now than ever before, and while it may take a little longer to reach our ambitious goals, I'm convinced that this is what we need to be about to live into the future that God has in store for us. I look forward to living into this future with you, as we figure out what it means to be church together for the sake of the world. Thank you for the privilege of serving in this office as your bishop.