

2019 Annual Bishop's Report
Bishop Paul D. Erickson,
Greater Milwaukee Synod

Good morning; every day, I'm grateful for the chance to serve in this office. I'm not always grateful for everything that happens in the midst of serving, but I'm grateful for this call, I'm grateful for the chance to imagine together with all of you how God is calling and sending us as faithful followers of Jesus in a world that desperately needs the Gospel of love and reconciliation, and I'm grateful for all the amazing and talented leaders I get to explore this with—all of you, pastors, deacons, and leaders of our congregations, our partners and colleagues across the ELCA and in the global church, and the delightfully talented staff who make it an enjoyable experience just to show up at work, day after, most days. Thank you.

I'd like us all to lift up a work of thanks to the fine team of leaders we have assembled in the synod office. As I call their names, I'd like them to stand and you will see on the screen some photos of the staff that are more, say, youthful, and then you will have a chance to see more recent pictures.

- Mary Romskog, Executive Assistant for Administration and Candidacy
- Phil Smith, Administrative Assistant
- Sarah Christiaansen, Synod Communicator
- 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
- Maripat Monahan, Advancement Director for Outreach for Hope

Let's thank them all for their great work!

Our theme for this assembly is "For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table," and I've asked each of the three assistants to share a few comments about how they are engaging in that theme in their daily work.

❖ Pastor Jennifer Arnold, Assistant to the Bishop for Missional Leadership

Good morning. It has been a privilege to serve in this role as assistant the Bishop for Missional Leadership these past 20 months. What I have learned and observed in this time is that we have been blessed in countless ways for the work God has called us into. Our synod is filled with gifted people who bring experience, insight, and curiosity, all of which God uses to equip us to bless and build up the body of Christ. I have seen this at our Anti-Racism Trainings, at gatherings of our Rostered Ministers, and in my work with congregational leaders. I have also observed this within our Together In Mission event held in February each year.

We started this format for gathering our congregational and rostered leaders in 2018. That first year over 200 people came to explore the ministry opportunities and challenges before us. Then this past February almost 300 people came to continue conversations and to begin others.

Though it is nice to see large numbers of people, what is remarkable to me is how much we have to offer one another. The workshops at Together In Mission are generated largely by ideas, passions, and interests that you identify. The facilitators of the workshops are mostly people from within our synod who are willing to lead us in

significant and substantive conversations that impact our faith journey and our ministry. And the participants come with faithful hearts and a profound wondering about how we can most effectively share the Good News of Jesus Christ. It has been a joy to share in the Spirit's movement in and through us.

If you haven't yet attended a Together in Mission, please mark your calendars now for Saturday, February 15 at St. Matthews In Wauwatosa. If you haven't yet shared an idea for a workshop we need to consider, please watch out for an online survey we'll put out by early September and share your idea or just contact me directly. We are pulling up chairs together, sitting around the big table that God has set for all of us to be Church together. And there is a place for you.

❖ Pastor Matthew Short, Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission

I love the theme of this year's assembly because a table...especially a round table...is a great image of how Christ gathers us in the church. No head of the table, other than Jesus himself, and the rest of us in an expanding circle where there's always room for another chair, and no disciple is over another. That image...of a round table...is actually a good snapshot of what is the most rewarding work I get to do in this role. For a lot of years, I think by default, many congregations across the country have operated more like competitors than members of the same body. If a neighboring church was doing well, we might be afraid members from our congregation might leave and go there. But there's a new Spirit in the room these days, and I use that word very intentionally. I believe one of the things the Spirit is doing is reminding us that we are better together. I mean just look at this room today. 120-plus ministries in the room together today...this begins to look a bit more like Jesus than a bunch of independent non-profits competing with each other. No, we are a body. Christ's body. And there's a new Spirit of collaboration, resource sharing, and banding together in cohorts.

I have had the opportunity to help invite several of these cohorts together, where congregations work together to learn by doing. So that's the second shift. We're pretty used to trying to talk or "committee" our way into new actions, but these congregations are reversing it; acting their way into new innovative models of ministry and learning together along the way. They are living into the truth that "what we practice we become." I believe that's true. What we practice we become.

So, I just want to name a couple of the cohorts that are currently practicing what it looks like to be the body of Christ together as they participate in various renewal processes. One of those groups is called "Stewardship For All Seasons." Right now, there are 14 congregations, over 10% of our synod, working together to re-imagine a holistic approach to stewardship. If you have been, or are just now joining, this effort, would you please stand? Thank you.

Another cohort that has been very exciting is a group going through a process of congregational spiritual renewal we call "Faithful Innovation." This process is about empowering the lay members of our congregations to continue erasing the line we draw between the church and the world. So that the communities our churches sit in know we are there, know we are neighbors, and know that the gifts we too often keep inside the church are meant for the outside. Right now, another eight congregations are walking through this Faithful Innovation process, and another 4-6 I have spoken to are ready to

begin a second cohort sometime later this year. If you are currently in the Faithful Innovation process, or you're considering being a part of the next cohort, would you please stand? Thank you.

If you want to learn more about either of these two cohorts, or want to learn more about the other collaborative initiatives that I don't have time to name today, please seek me out. I really do believe the Spirit is up to something here. The world is changing rapidly, and the only way we are going to be able to innovate our way into the future is the same way the Spirit's been innovating for 2000 years – by calling us to be the church together. Thank you.

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

My main responsibility is to accompany congregations in times of leadership transition. As you can imagine, leadership transitions are a time of high emotion and anxiety. When a pastor or a deacon leaves a congregation, there are often different ideas within the lay leadership about how best to respond to the leadership void created by the rostered leader's departure. Roles and power dynamics shift within the congregation, and it can get a bit unsettling. Sometimes, out of a love for the congregation, lay leaders vie for decision making power and influence without paying attention to who is included or not in the process. I have noticed that when congregational leaders create intentional space for as many people as possible to be at the tables of discovery and discernment about who they are, who is their neighbor, and what is God calling them to do, the more engaged and prepared the congregation will be when they call a new leader. Intentional invitation to everyone to come to the tables of discernment makes a difference in the long-term engagement of a faith community.

I have also noticed that just because you get invited to a table doesn't mean that you will have voice. There are times when people with more experience, knowledge, and/or influence in the system, control the conversation. So, what I have observed is that communication tools, like the RESPECT guidelines that we have learned from the Rev. Dr. Eric Law at the Kaleidoscope Institute, are very important when we need to listen deeply to one another. They are simple guidelines, but they take intentionality to put into practice. When we talk about being mindful of living into our synod assembly theme of "For Everyone Born a Place at the Table", I find myself coming back to the importance of the RESPECT guidelines. I keep introducing, and reintroducing, them over and over again. Intentional communication guidelines allow everyone at the table to be part of a discovery and discernment process.

As congregations explore who they are, who is their neighbor and what is God calling them to do, eventually they need to ask what kind of leader they are looking for next. I am discovering that many people have assumptions about what the next rostered leader should look like. The challenge is to create space and place to hear what people are imagining, and at the same time, to invite them to expand their imagination regarding what a leader's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and/or experience. We want congregations to be ready to consider all the amazing leaders who have been preparing for and are ready to receive a call to congregational ministry. Intentional conversations about our assumptions helps to prepare us to collectively discern God's leading and guiding.

Finally, in my synod role of relating to the Cross+Generational Ministry Network, I get to learn from an amazing and creative group of ministry leaders each month. As I do this, I am becoming more aware that as we accompany congregations in transition, we need to pay close attention to bringing all the different generations to the tables of discovery and discernment. Intentional listening to all the generations transforms and enlivens our ministries. Well, I shared a lot! It is all amazing, and it is a gift to accompany you! Thank you.

Transitions. You may recall that last year at this event, I had folks stand who belonged to congregations in a time of pastoral transition, and about 1/3 of the room stood up, as 44 of our 121 congregations were in transition. This year, as of May 29, when these numbers were compiled, that number stands at 26. That's because a total of 27 congregations have called a new pastor within the past 12 months, and if you are one of those pastors who have accepted a new call in the past year, please stand up. We're grateful for your partnership in the call process, and we look forward to many years of fruitful ministry with you.

The complete transition report of all the changes in the past 12 months is posted on our website and on the guidebook app. Please note that we also have three other candidates for ordination with whom we are working to help them receive their first call: Char Giuliani, Amanda Christenson, and Anders Nelson.

We also want to take a moment to give thanks for the life and ministry of eight of our rostered ministers who died in the past year: Pastor John Schumell, who died September 1, 2018; Deacon Bill Bravener, who died September 20, 2018; Deacon Norma Herbrand, who died October 4, 2018; Pastor Howie Knox, who died December 5, 2018; Deacon Merle Boos, who died December 11, 2018; Pastor Ed Winters, who died December 23, 2018; Pastor Ted Romberg, who died February 26, 2018; and Pastor Justin (Joe) Silvius, who died on May 18, 2019. Please rise as 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 John, Bill, Norma, Howie, Merle, Ed, Ted, and Joe. 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, and 60 years), as well as congregations that are observing milestone anniversaries of their founding (25, 50, 75, 100, etc.). We held our annual anniversary lunch on Monday, May 6 at St. Matthew's in Wauwatosa, and we gathered for prayer, a meal, and a time to share wisdom and give thanks to our faithful leaders and congregations for their many years of witness and service. Here's a photo of the folks who were able to join us that day, and they are all listed on pages 40-45 of the assembly booklet. Please stand as I call your names:

- 25 years of ordained ministry: Walter Baires, Brian Halverson, and Vicki Watkins.
- 40 years since ordination: Jeff Barrow, Kathy Boadwine, Myron Deschaine, David Echelbarger, Joan Jacobson-Wolf, Stephen Kersten, Janis Kinens, and Christine Thomas-Echelbarger.
- 50 years since ordination: Albert Guetzlaff, Stanley Hanna, Ed Ruen, and Erv Uecker.
- And, finally, 60 years of ordained service in the church: Adolph Kappes, Paul Lee, Justin Silvius, and William Truby.

We also give thanks for the ministries of our congregations celebrating milestone anniversaries, all of whom are celebrating 175 years of ministry this year. Would the members of these congregations please stand as I call your names:

- St. John's in Stone Bank
- St. Olaf in Rubicon
- And St. Matthew in Palmyra.

Candidacy. You may also recall, those of you who were present at last year's assembly, that we made a big push for new candidates for ministry. We lifted up the fact that us baby boomers were retiring in increasing numbers, and the numbers of folks entering candidacy were not sufficient to meet the needs of the church. So, how did we do? In the past 12 months, we have welcomed 9 new individuals into candidacy, bringing us to 27 candidates in all. Good job, people! Resources on how to begin this journey are on the synod website, and we still encourage you to invite folks to consider answering God's call in this way.

We recognize, of course, that not everyone is called into rostered ministry as a pastor or a deacon, but all of us are called through our baptism to serve, love, and grow in our faith, and I pray we can find ways to support, encourage, empower, and prepare all the baptized to live out their callings in the world.

As we will be discussing later this morning, our synod has been involved in a process of articulating a statement of our vision, mission, values, and practices that we hope will guide our work as the Greater Milwaukee Synod in the coming years. Our staff also took some time to consider the what, the how, and the why of our work during a retreat in the midst of the polar vortex this past January (note to self: fall retreats are better). We crafted the following statement: "The staff of the Greater Milwaukee Synod works to connect, facilitate, and inspire the leaders and congregations of the synod with honesty, creativity, and prayer." This is, of course, an aspirational statement, and I'm pretty sure that we won't always live up to it. I invite your feedback to let us know when we have and when we have not lived up to this statement as we strive to be church together for the sake of the world.

Let's take a look at the verbs of this statement. We work to connect. That is, we recognize that the challenges and opportunities facing us are far greater than any of us can manage alone, and we need each other to do what God is calling us to do. We also recognize that the answers and resources and strategies we need cannot and will not come from on high, but rather from gathering the wisdom among us. So, our job, as the synod staff, is to convene, to gather, and to connect folks with one another so that together we can travel the path that God is inviting us to walk.

Another arena of our work is to facilitate. That is, we don't just get people into a room and leave them to their own devices, we are often called to provide processes and guiding principles that help shape the work of those in the room. Call processes, stewardship and mission consultations, conflict resolution, leadership development, and the like are situations in which we try not to determine the outcome of the process, but we do facilitate it, keeping it on the right path and making sure that things keep moving along.

And finally, we hope to inspire. We recognize that the challenges that face us, as congregations and communities, are large, and the answers that we used to turn to no longer work, if they ever did. Ministry is hard, following Jesus is hard, organizing faith communities filled with sinful people is hard, and it often seems to be getting harder. But this crazy life to

which we are called is also joyful and life-giving. I pray that one of the things we do as a synod staff is to help us all remember that what we do matters, and it's often really beautiful, and even though it's hard, it's worth it. I hope that we can, at least on our good days, inspire one another to dream big, work hard, and remember that this is God's church, and God ain't done with us yet.

The other significant initiative that we've been working on in recent months is exploring whether or not we should engage in a synod-wide mission appeal. We'll be hearing the report of the feasibility study and the recommendations later this morning, and I don't want to steal too much of Mike Ward's thunder, but...

One of the central findings of the study was that there is much more energy around innovation than there is around maintenance. I suppose that's not that surprising, as innovation sounds so...creative, new, energizing, so, innovative. We have long known that the traditional ways of being the church have been changing for some time now, and we're still in the midst of a period of significant transition in the life of the Church in this country and around the world. I honestly don't know what the congregations of this synod, or the synod as a whole, or the ELCA itself will look like in 10, 20, 30 years. All I know is that, whatever path we travel, it's going to involve change, and change is often perceived as loss.

And Jesus said, "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." (Mark 8:35) What would it feel like if we insert the word "church" in place of the word "life"? For those who want to save their *church* will lose it, and those who lose their *church* for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to find out what that looks like, for the sake of the Gospel, and for a world that so desperately needs it.

Thank you for the privilege of serving as your bishop.