

Synod VP Report – May 21, 2022

A question that can be common as an icebreaker or team-building question in Christian gatherings is “Where have you seen God at work?” It can be nuanced with parameters of time and place, but it is a basic question that is rooted in our ability to listen and breathe and be attentive to the work of the Spirit and God’s presence.

So, when I was supposed to be putting together this report so the tech people could have the slides and we would be good Lutherans to have everything in good order, I procrastinated and went for a walk at Riveredge Nature Center in Newburg. And God was all around me. I’m not good at bird sounds, but I know that many different voices were represented, and I could see the goldfinch and woodpecker and bluebird and sparrows and hawks. And I saw turtles out sunning on logs and a deer taking it’s time for each of us to pause and stare. And wildflowers of many different varieties.

I regularly see God at work and feel God within the wonder, beauty, and diversity of nature. Those pictures of the wonder and diversity of nature shape my picture of who we are to be as the church, as God’s Beloved Community. How can God be anywhere but in a wide diversity of people of every age and race and size and gender orientation and gender identity and nationality and ability? God’s Beloved Community is a glorious vision of diversity.

The vision of who we are to be within the diversity of God’s people and the tensions and challenges of living into that vision were the strongest recurring theme voiced by the approximately 180 rostered and lay leaders who met in person within our six conferences and virtually in two online gatherings this past fall. Together we named where and how we have lived well into our vision, mission, values, and practices, and where we have struggled to live into our mission. The strongest recurring theme was our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Across each of the conference gatherings, racial and LGBTQIA+ diversity, equity, and justice were noted as important values and practices of our synod, but depending on geography, there were differences in how that commitment stood alongside the recognition of racial inequality and covert and systemic racism within congregations and across the synod. The commitment to values of diversity, equity, and justice stood in tension with the lack of fully embracing voices and presence of leaders and congregations who are not white, straight, and cisgender. In other words, we don’t always practice what we preach.

We have a long history of claiming identities as an anti-racist and Reconciling in Christ (RIC) synod, but those who participated in the conference gatherings also acknowledged our continuing struggles to fully live into those identities.

As examples of some of our commitments, at the February “Together in Mission” event, we lifted up the names of over 80 people who have participated in the work of antiracism within our synod for the past 20+ years. We have also passed seven resolutions at our synod assemblies that have focused on anti-racism.

Our commitment to the work of full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities was established in 2006 as the Synod Council recognized Reconciling in Christ (RIC) as a ministry committee within our synod. Four synod assembly resolutions since 2006 have been focused on anti-bullying and full inclusion of the LGBTQIA community.

The anti-racism and RIC teams have coordinated and led many educational events, provided times for dialogue, and developed and distributed resources throughout these past years. Many of you in this room and online have been part of this work and the lifelong journey it requires.

Last year, at our 2021 Synod Assembly, we passed Resolution 1 that called for the appointment of a task force on Authentic Diversity and Inclusion. That task force was appointed by the Synod Council last September with a charge to consider changes to the synod’s life in policies and procedures and to explore further educational events and leadership development around issues of inclusion and justice in areas of race and gender and sexual identity. The task force is to develop a plan to measure and achieve progress toward Authentic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with structural accountability, and to provide a report to the 2024 Synod Assembly.

With our commitments and our challenges, we continue to struggle forward.

This past February, members of the Synod Council and the Conference Deans met for a daylong retreat to focus on the meaning and living out of our two identities as an antiracist and RIC synod. Pastor Bill Beyer led us in Dwelling in the Word in the Lazarus text and it seemed important for us to engage that text here in our assembly. With the leadership of Pastor Bill Marilyn Miller, we shared stories of a person who is racially different from us who has affected our lives and stories of a queer person who has affected our lives. We spent time Dwelling in the Word and examining definitions and systems of oppression. One image that was used to describe our synod’s challenges and opportunities to live out these identities was that as a church we are in the belly of the whale. Like Jonah, we have heard God’s call, but we find it too hard and aren’t ready to be part of the call for repentance and change. The spirit may be willing, but the courage is weak.

Based on the work of that day, at the March meeting, the Synod Council passed a Continuing Resolution to the Synod Constitution that authorizes and supports the Synod Antiracism Team and the Synod Reconciling In Christ (RIC) team.

As noted on the slide, that Resolution states that

- The Synod Council shall authorize and support the teams and ratify the chairperson of each.
- Each team shall identify appropriate leadership to ensure the delivery of programs and events, including accompanying congregations on their justice education and strategy development.
- Each team shall identify a non-voting representative to the Synod Council for regular dialogue and reporting.
- Each team shall serve as an accountability partner with the Synod Council and Synod staff to continually review what we are doing and how.
- Each team shall include rostered ministers and lay leaders from across the synod to carry out the team's work.

The work of the two teams was also affirmed at the March Synod Council meeting with

- 1) The identification of new leadership for the RIC team and the ratification of Pastor Char Guiliani as chair of that team, and
- 2) The approval of a charge to a newly forming antiracism or racial justice team. Persons interested in serving on this team gathered for a first meeting on May 3.

As questions of race and gender identity swirl around us and as our world is caught up in making decisions that impact people's lives, we return to the question of God's vision for God's people. I wonder how we are living into God's Beloved Community and where we are falling short. As Pastor Marilyn asked in her sermon in our opening worship, where are afraid to get off our mats? I regularly need to stand back to reflect on where I see God at work and what I am missing because of my own biases and short sightedness. As we stand in the aftermath of the shooting in Buffalo, we need to confront our complicity as church in a long-standing history of white supremacist thinking and culture.

As a synod, I welcome two opportunities to see with new eyes and prod us in new directions.

- 1) You have heard references to an Authentic Diversity Audit. During the past two months, an interview team of Synod Council members and Conference Deans reviewed proposals from three different organizations to conduct an Authentic Diversity Audit of the synod. At their recent May meeting, the Synod Council authorized the hiring of Gold Enterprises, with funds from the *Equipping the Saints* campaign. This audit will build on and collaborate with the work of the Task Force on Authentic Diversity & Inclusion. The audit will review governing documents, policies and procedures, and existing programs to understand where we as a synod currently are on a Multicultural/Anti-racist Organizational spectrum. The audit process will include surveys, facilitated dialogues,

and one-on-one interviews to determine where we want to be, with an outcome of strategies and steps for change management.

- 2) The *Equipping the Saints* mission appeal will provide funds for the hiring of a Racial Equity Organizer as an Assistant to the Bishop to work alongside other synod staff, rostered ministers, and lay leaders to grow in our collective understanding and ability to work toward racial equity, and with that toward equality and full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Having grown up on a farm and being grounded in the land, I regularly see God at work in nature. I also grew up in the church, but sometimes I have to squint to see God at work in the church. I have to squirm to see God at work as I come to know where we have fallen short. I have to shed tears as I listen to stories of pain and betrayal and another racially motivated mass shooting. I have to live and die daily through baptismal waters. I trust God's vision of Beloved Community that can only be experienced in the fullness and wonder and beauty of all God's people. If we squint, we can see God at work, pointing us to where we need to go. I pray that we can trust and grow and go with one another on this journey to be God's people at work in the world.