

Greater Milwaukee Synod Assembly  
Annual Report  
Bishop Paul D. Erickson  
June 2, 2017

**Thanks:** I'd like to begin this report by simply saying thanks. It's been 12 months since I was elected to serve in this position, and nine months since I took office, and while there remain many things I need to learn, many challenges yet to confront, and many mistakes I will likely be making, I am grateful for this opportunity to serve as your bishop. I'm grateful for your love for this church, and for your love for the people we are called to serve; I'm grateful for your patience with me and the synod staff and your willingness to explore new ways of answering the ancient callings; I'm grateful for the many ways that you support our common mission: your financial contributions, your participation in meetings and events; and, most especially, I'm grateful for your prayers. We are partners in something that I believe to be very important, and we simply don't have a prayer if we do not ground ourselves in prayer, and root ourselves in the promises of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. So thank you.

**Staff:** I'm also grateful for very capable and committed staff that I inherited:

- Mary Romskog, our Executive assistant for administration and candidacy, who keeps all of us organized and connected with grace and humor;
- Phil Smith, our Administrative Assistant, whose cheerful voice and dry wit creates a welcoming atmosphere for all who call or visit the office;
- Sarah Christiaansen, our Synod Communicator, who creatively and skillfully makes us all look a bit better and sound a bit smarter than we really are;
- Lee Johnston, our new Financial Administrator, who has served as our synod's treasurer for eight years and who has now successfully shown up for this second day on the job.
- Pastor Kristin Nielsen, our Assistant for Congregations in Mission, who thoughtfully and compassionately cares for our congregations and leaders in transition;
- Pastor Matthew Short, our new Assistant for Evangelical Mission, who has already made an impact on our work through his insight, energy, and spiritual grounding;

- Pastor Jim Bickel, Executive Director of Outreach for Hope. Even though he's technically not on our staff, he's a part of our team, and we have greatly appreciated his wisdom, passion, and skill in helping to grow Outreach for Hope. You may know that Jim is retiring at the end of this year, and we'll be announcing plans for a proper send-off down the road a bit.
- Maripat Monahan, the Advancement Director for Outreach for Hope, has been with us for nine months, and she brings a big heart and a deep commitment to this work.

Of course, there are three other individuals who have served with great skill and dedication who are not continuing on staff for various reasons:

- First, Pastor Dave Daubert has served as interim Director for Evangelical Mission since July of last year on a part-time basis. Dave did some excellent work in our midst, conducting several ministry reviews for several of our congregations that receive funding from the Churchwide organization for new and renewing ministry, and he worked alongside Matt Short in recent weeks to help with Matt's orientation. This is just one way in which we are stronger when we are church together for the sake of the world, and I want to thank Dave and the entire Domestic Mission Unit of the ELCA for their partnership in God's mission.
- Second, Rhonda Hill. Rhonda has served for seven years as our Director of Discipleship, working with congregations and leaders, overseeing many leadership and wellness events, and her presence at our staff meetings and in our office and in our synod will be deeply missed. Rhonda has decided to explore other ways to serve God in the world, and she will be ending her time on synod staff on June 15. I hope you will take the opportunity in the weeks to come to offer your own words of thanks and appreciation to Rhonda for her creative and prophetic witness.
- And, third, Dave Groenewold. 14 years as our Director of Finance, and he still shows up for work every day before 7:00 am. Dave not only brings a great deal of skill and historical knowledge to his work, he also has a deep commitment and love for what we're trying to do. Dave is an active participant in our Salvadoran partnership, the diakonia program, and helps to manage the finances not only of our synod office, but also

Lutheran Campus Ministry, our two global companion synod relationships in Tanzania and El Salvador, our two new ministries, The Table and Breaking the Chains, as well as several other ministries of our synod. Dave's easygoing nature and can-do attitude have been great assets to our work together, and we will greatly miss him. Dave is officially retiring on July 5, and he will spend the coming weeks helping our new Financial Administrator, Lee Johnston, get up to speed on all things financial.

I'll be sharing a bit more about how I'm envisioning the work of the synod staff in the coming years, but I did want to remind you all that we are accepting applications for a new position on the staff, Assistant to the Bishop for Missional Leaders through June 15, and we hope to have that position filled by the end of the summer.

**Transitions:** We've had a number of rostered ministers come and go over the past 12 months, and I encourage you to review the complete transition report that is posted on our website and in the guidebook, taking special note of those individuals who are new to our roster in the past 12 months. (Please note that the Rev. Harvard Stevens, who just began his call at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Racine on June 1 is not included in this report, as we prepared this report prior to his call beginning.)

**Anniversaries:** We also need to recognize rostered ministers who are celebrating special anniversaries of their ordination or commissioning, as well as congregations that are observing milestone anniversaries of their founding. We did something a bit different this year, as we held an anniversary lunch on Monday, May 1 at Luther Manor, 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. These are all listed on pages 36-43 of the assembly supplement.

**Mission and vision.** I'd like to take a few minutes now to share some thoughts on where we go from here as God's people in this synod, and how I imagine we might move in that direction. A year ago, when we were having conversations that led to the election of a new bishop in this

synod, I shared a definition of leadership that continues to shape how I understand my role, the role of the synod staff, and the role of congregational leaders. Alan Roxburgh of The Missional Network shares that the central task of leadership is “cultivating an environment that innovates and releases the missional imagination present among a community of God’s people.”<sup>1</sup>

I believe that the wisdom we need to help define and clarify our path forward is not going to come from on high or out there somewhere; the wisdom, creativity, energy, and the resources we need to do what God is calling us to do is right here in front of us. We are the people we need to be faithful to God’s call on our lives.

That’s why, instead of organizing a few workshops at this assembly, we created an environment using a meeting design called Open Space technology, in which all of you are helping to shape the agenda of what needs to be discussed and what needs to happen. That’s why, instead of having a keynote speaker at this assembly, we’ll be having table conversations tomorrow morning about how to take the next steps in our Congregational listening and community engagement process. I’ll be describing each of these times in more detail when we get to them, but the underlying principle is the same: our goal is to cultivate an environment that releases the missional imagination of God’s people. That’s you.

Another way in which we are living out of this vision is through the Cluster Listening Events. From October through January, we held listening days in each of our ten clusters. I held one on one conversations with rostered ministers during the day and got to meet 65 leaders in this way; we held a lunch for rostered ministers in the cluster to talk about our life together in the synod; and we invited congregational leaders to gather in the evening for dinner and conversation about the hopes and fears of our common life. Over 300 people from 70 congregations participated in these conversations. Tomorrow morning I’ll be describing how these conversations gave shape to the Congregational Listening Project that we kicked off at our first Cluster Assembly event on February 25, and what the next steps in that process will be, but for now I just want to lift up the three core practices that will give shape to this process and most everything we hope to do in the coming years, listening, imagination, and courageous action:

- **Listening.** We need to engage in deep, curious, and reflective listening, listening to God, through dwelling the word and prayer; listening to our sisters and brothers within the

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 5.

community of faith, find ways to discover our hopes and fears, gifts and longings; and we need to find a way to listen to the voices that are not yet in this room or in our congregations, voices of folks who are different from us, voices of folks we claim we want to serve, but don't know how. The first step in building relationships is to listen, with humility, curiosity, and compassion.

- **Imagination.** This is the second core practice that we need to cultivate, finding ways to think beyond our customs and traditions that have served us so well for so long to imagine new ways of creating life-giving, meaningful relationships that are sustained in the context of Christian community. We need to experiment, to try some new ideas, to explore how the Spirit of God is moving in our midst, to imagine new ways of being church.
- **Courageous action.** None of our attentive listening or creative imagining will get us anywhere if we don't find the courage to risk some bold, concrete actions of love. Not everything we do will succeed, meaning that it may not get us where we thought it would, but if it moves us to a new place, one that is closer to God's preferred future for us, then it's a risk worth taking.

As we seek to organize the work of the synod staff to live into this vision and embody these practices, we have crafted a simple mission statement that says: "The staff of the Greater Milwaukee Synod, ELCA seeks to accompany congregations and leaders as we engage in God's mission of love and reconciliation." Congregations, leaders, and mission. That's what we're about, so we will have three assistant to the bishop positions: one for evangelical mission, one for congregations in mission, and one for missional leaders. I'm looking forward to having the complete team on board by the end of the summer, and I'd like to highlight several areas of our common life that will occupy a significant portion of our time and attention in the coming months:

- **Accompanying congregations in transition.** We have a call process manual, describing the work of Mission Exploration Teams, interim pastors, and call committees, that has served us well for many years, but things are changing, and we need to take a fresh look at how we can accompany congregations at all stages of transition.

- **Accompanying leaders in transition.** We are in the midst of a period in which a significant number of our rostered ministers are retiring, and I think we need to take a fresh look at how we accompany retiring leaders and the congregations from which they are retiring, so that God's work can continue to flourish.
- **Developing leaders for mission.** One of the things I am hoping to work on with the new Assistant for missional leaders is the way that we provide leadership events in our synod. I'm hoping to move beyond some of the more traditional ways of teaching and learning, exploring adult learning methods such as dialogue education, that encourage mutual learning and create the space for a diversity of voices to be heard and give shape to the learning event.
- **Developing resources for mission.** One of the great strengths of this synod is the long history of supportive partnerships and collaboration among ministries. We have a history of congregation to congregation partnerships, along with some incredible resources in the Siebert Lutheran Foundation and our own Outreach for Hope creating a network of support for ministry that is the envy of other synods. It is also true, however, that many of our vital and vibrant ministries are quite vulnerable, and their long-term and even short-term sustainability is in question. I am hoping to convene a partnership summit this fall, gathering together representatives from all who participate in these ministry partnerships as we look for new ways to strengthen our vulnerable ministries.
- **Organizing our synod for mission.** Our synod was organized into 10 mission clusters some thirty years ago, when the synod was formed, and we've used this system as a means to gather congregations and leaders for mutual support, planning, and as a means to electing folks to serve in various capacities. A lot has changed in the past 30 years, and it seems that the cluster system's effectiveness varies greatly from cluster to cluster, and it is time to re-examine how we can best organize our congregations for mission.

I'll end this report as I began, with a word of gratitude. Thank you for all you do, in our congregations, in our communities, in your own families, to spread God's love and to bring people into ever-deepening relationships with Jesus Christ. It's why we do what we do, and we can't do it alone. Thanks.