

Report of the Bishop

Our synod continues to experience a decline in membership and, correspondingly, in resources. Last year ended with 111 congregations and one Synod Authorized Worshiping Community, three fewer than 2023, and Mission Support from congregations fell short of our budgeted need by over \$30,000. With this in mind, the synod council revised our budget for this year, dramatically reducing our projected income from Mission Support and cutting some expenses. Nevertheless, we remain committed to supporting our congregations with faithful leadership. Part of this commitment is to have a well-functioning staff: In 2024, we increased the Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership and Formation to ¼ time.

Considering the challenges we face as a church, our synod has been seeking ways to develop more effective leaders. The Lay Ministry Institute offered two days of workshops in 2024 focused on both continuing education for our Lay Worship Leaders and training opportunities for congregation leaders. We will continue to provide these opportunities in 2025.

Go Tell It IN The Mountains, the Lilly Foundation funded compelling preaching initiative with Allegheny and Northwest Pennsylvania Synods is moving into full swing. Through this grant, which strives to improve preaching of both rostered and lay leaders, our three synods are redeveloping our Lay Worship Leader training, offering opportunities to our preachers – lay and ordained – to grow in their ability to proclaim the Gospel, and providing other resources for preachers. Watch this year for opportunities in which congregations as well can engage in this initiative to become better hearers of the proclaimed Word.

In 2021, our synod council committed to growing ministry with and among youth and young adults in our synod. Through a contract with Camp Mount Luther and the work of a synod youth committee, this commitment is coming to life. Youth events have taken place at Camp and in synod churches, providing opportunities for young people to gather for fun, fellowship, and spiritual growth.

Last year I had the pleasure to visit our companion church in Bavaria, the Kirchenkreis Ansbach-Würzburg, and Regional Bishop Gisela Bornowski. On the way, I visited a couple ancestral towns in the Baden Württemberg region. After preaching in the St Gumbertus Church in Ansbach, I traveled to Wittenberg to attend, along with Lowell Litzel, the 25th Anniversary seminar at the ELCA Wittenberg Center. You can read more about this visit in the report of the Global Mission Team.

I continue to look for opportunities to visit our congregations and expect to have completed my goal to visit each congregation at least once by the end of this year. Most of these visits take place during Sunday worship; however, I believe for some congregations, a visit to a council meeting or other gathering might provide a better venue for conversations that need to happen. If I have not been to your congregation yet, please reach out and invite me, especially if there is something significant happening in which I can participate.

Thoughts on the State of our Synod

"I am about to do something new." Isaiah 43:19

For the 2024 synod assembly, I provided some statistics describing the state of ministry in our synod. That report clearly showed the decline that our church in this area faces, a decline that shows no signs of abating. As I visit congregations and speak with leaders, our conversations often turn to this decline and our inability to reverse or at least slow it down. Our answers to the challenges we face most often lie in remembering the past glory of the church as a powerful influence in culture and politics. We speak of restoring prayer in schools or teaching the Bible in the classroom, of Sunday blue laws, and of sports-free Sunday mornings as we seek to lay blame for what we see as a crisis for our church.

I wonder, however, if God truly desires that we make the church great again, returning to some remembered glory; or does God seek something else from us? Are we not called to testify to the power of God made manifest in weakness? Are we not called to unite ourselves to the suffering one, the dying one, who gave himself, his very life, on the cross?

Scripture teaches us to rely not on the power and status given by the world, but to put our trust in the Word made flesh who, taking on human flesh, was not recognized as God. The one in whom we place our trust is the one rejected by the powers of this world. Perhaps God is making of our church something that looks much more like the bruised and bloodied body of Christ than the powers and principalities of this world.

I believe the answer to the problems we face as a church together and as congregations is not to be found in our past fifty to one hundred years but in a return to prayer and listening for what God's word says to us today. As in Isaiah's day, God is doing a new thing. We are called to observe this new thing and bear witness to it: For God works first in those who believe and, through these witnesses, works in the world for the sake of all creation. We believe and we testify to the one whose resurrection brings a new age, not of domination but of service to the weakest among us.

Can we accept that we are not among the powerful of this world?

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies. 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

I give thanks for my staff, Rev. Stina Schaeffer, Rev. Karla Leiby, Sue Ellen Spotts, Brenda Krouse, Chad Hershberger, and Linda Aurand, who keep our synod running and serve with love and compassion. I also thank those who give their time and energy to this synod without compensation, our conference deans, synod council members, committees, teams, and task force members. Our synod ministry is richer for all these, as well as for the volunteers in congregations who give time and treasure to the ministries we share.

The following are some goals I have set for 2025

- Synod Assembly
 - Plan and carry out successful assembly
 - Revise reporting schedule to have complete Bulletin of Reports by end of April
- Pastoral Care
 - Meet with congregation leaders (councils and others) 25% in 2025
 - Meet with “struggling congregations” leaders collectively
 - Plan for and implement recognition of rostered leader birthdays
 - Increase response rate for rostered leaders annual report to bishop
 - Double rate by developing better report format
 - Respond to all reports received
 - Establish and implement transition plans for St Matthew, Bloomsburg, and Good Shepherd, Berwick
 - Provide at least one opportunity for retired rostered leaders to gather with the bishop
 - Establish regular online gatherings for synod leaders
- Lay Ministry
 - Continue to hold lay ministry workshops for both LWL and congregation leaders two times in year
 - Complete and implement plan for distributing and scheduling Lay Worship Leaders.
 - Improve process for training Lay Worship Leaders
 - Develop process for assigning authorized lay worship leaders to congregations on regular basis, including rationale and effects.
 - Evaluate plan with LMI at six months and one year.
 - Streamline process for authorization renewal
 - Incorporate ELCA Candidacy process amendments
- Finance & Stewardship
 - Complete budget amendments for 2025 and proposal for 2026
 - Develop plan for use of funds designated for DEM and Faith Church Loan Funds
 - Complete revision of USS Fund For Leaders policy
 - Develop and implement plans to communicate with congregations the importance of Mission Support, including purpose and use of Mission Support contributions.
- Committees & Teams
 - Identify and appoint members to Committees and Teams
 - Finance Committee
 - Task Force for USS Fund for Leaders
 - Lay Ministry Institute Board
 - Candidacy Committee
 - Global Mission Team