

## 2021 Report of the Bishop

### 2019 Election and Transition

I begin my report with a word of thanks to all who worked with and walked with me through the transition period after my election to the Office of Bishop of our Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod. I am especially grateful to Bishop Emeritus Ralph Jones who gave me a framework to work within and then stepped aside and supported me by answering my phone calls and having what became all too soon due to the pandemic in person conversations about our synod, region and the churchwide organization. Another deeply appreciative note of thanks goes out to everyone who planned and supported all that went into my installation as Bishop of our synod. What an incredible day!

As I moved from congregational life to the “life of a bishop” I found myself asking a simple but profound question. Where is God leading me? Where is God leading us? Transitions are good times to pause and reflect. To review the past and to seek a future. Where is God leading us? I posed the question to myself and then to our Synod Council and I began to put into place a plan for us to delve into this question through small group settings, individual conversations and conversations across our synod with the plan that at our 2020 Assembly we might come together to discern a set of answers to the question.

### COVID-19

And then COVID-19. Suddenly we were all faced with a unknown virus which caused us to ask a whole new set of questions and to take actions to protect our communities, our families and our loved one. To act to protect the least, the littlest, the last, the stranger. I do not need to retell the stories and how we reacted to the beginning of the pandemic. I am deeply grateful to our congregational and rostered leaders who acted to not only protect our communities but then acted to continue to provide care to those in need. To gather the faithful in so many creative ways. To adapt, to respond to a seemingly ever-changing environment and over the course of the pandemic to show a remarkable resiliency.

The early days of the pandemic were filled with conversations among our synod staff, our Synod Council and rostered leaders. Letters providing guidance were sent, our website was filled with information to provide support to our synod, advice and counsel was sought by me and given to you. And we learned to become a digital, virtual synod. Early on my hope, our hope, was this virus would pass. Our Synod Council made the decision to cancel our 2020 Assembly as the pandemic grew. And we began to experience the effects of COVID-19 with family and friends contracting the virus, some being hospitalized and then we mourned the death of loved ones and sorrowed with our friends and family as they grieved.

In the midst of all of this the question remained. Where is God leading us? God did not lead us to this pandemic, but God was leading us through it. God is a God of promise. We remember the words of our resurrected Lord, “I will be with you always.” As Luther might phrase it our hidden God reveals God’s self in our suffering. God is with us.

I continued, from time to time, to ponder the question and you did too. In the fall of 2020 our Synod Council gathered in a socially distanced and virtual gathering to do the work of our synod.

## 2021 Report of the Bishop

At the meeting I presented my thoughts on the question. I found through listening to you and to God the following five areas we as synod could gather around: Faith Formation, Evangelism, Developing Leaders, Stewardship and Zeal. I will note here that about the same time the answer to the question was coming into focus our ELCA churchwide leadership was embarking on the Future Church project. God moves in mysterious ways and reveals God's plans as God sees fit. Both the churchwide Future Church project and the five areas I found share some overlap and are still being developed.

A word on each area. As I listened and pondered I realized Faith Formation is fundamental. We have a deep understanding of God which allows us to face such major events as a global pandemic or the ages and stages of life in such ways as to be able to embody and express such words as grace, mercy, faith, justification to name a few. Faith Formation is a continuing event from baptism to entrance into the Church Triumphant. And Faith Formation is not just words, but actions lived out for our neighbor's sake. How then can we as synod lift up and support one another as we form and live our faith across the generations?

Along with Faith Formation I heard the need to Develop Leaders. How can we as synod develop leaders in our congregations and in our communities? What opportunities are we providing for individuals to step into to learn and live into being leaders on the local, synod, regional and churchwide level? How do we support our leaders both congregational and rostered? What opportunities do we provide for education, reflection, sharing of stories and resources? What models or training plans might we adopt in our synod to provide a continuum of learning in for individuals who say yes to serving in various leadership positions in our congregations, our Synod Council and committees, our various social ministry organizations and living our faith by serving in our communities as volunteers, appointed or elected leaders?

Evangelism. We need to reclaim our evangelical roots. We need to remember the root of evangelism is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. There are many studies on evangelism and where the people are who need to experience the Good News in their lives. One of the fascinating observations I have made as I have reviewed these studies over time is the unchurched, the under-churched and the de-churched make up seventy-five percent of any given population. We the church are the remaining twenty-five percent. If there is a blessing from the pandemic it is this, while our church buildings were closed we the church found ways to be church in our communities. We continued to serve our neighbors, we found ways of gathering to worship be it weekly mailings of home devotionals which we could share with family and friends or virtual church gatherings through various media platforms, or parking lot worship or localized FM broadcasts. We proclaimed the Good News and many and various ways outside of our buildings where the seventy-five percent live and work and relax. And they heard us. I know because you have told me the stories of the people in your communities both local and beyond who responded to your witness. Thanks be to God! Now how do we continue to Evangelize? How do we continue to reach out beyond our buildings and into the world? What creative ways old and new can we find to live out the story of God's amazing grace into the world around us? How can we as synod support one another in proclaiming the Good News?

The one question, "Where is God leading us?" Leads to many, many more. As I reflected on the feedback I received I began to use the word synergy. It's a secular word where two or more

## 2021 Report of the Bishop

come together in a combined effort that produces something greater than the individual alone could do. Synergy takes energy, it takes passion, desire, a working together to bring into being and to sustain something greater than the individual. As I spoke about this at our Synod Council meeting, I was reminded by Pr. Sandra Jones that the church word for this is Zeal. A zeal for the Lord. A zeal for walking together (the root of the word synod) to be something greater than the individual member of a congregation or pastoral or diaconal leader, to be zealous is to have a spirit-filled love of God not for ourselves but for others. Working together let's find ways to be a zealous synod to show our zeal for God and neighbor.

As a young teenager I learned a simple definition for Stewardship. It is our time, our talents and our treasures. Stewardship is much broader than our individual selves. Stewardship is lived out as we care for creation, as we tend to the legacy's others have left us such as the buildings we gather in to worship, earn and fellowship, and it is looking to the future. We are a synod of good stewardship. We have resources to support our work together and we have the vision to be good stewards into the future that God is leading us into. Stewardship is an ongoing process of evaluation and tending to what God has given us and how we can use these treasures, our time and our individual and group talents to support one another and the work of God's Church. Learning to be and being good stewards is fundamental to our local, synod, regional and global work, it unlays all we do as we live out our baptismal calling to proclaim the good news, form faithful people and develop leaders to work in the vineyard and to be passionate for God and the opportunities God shows us to live out our lives of faith until that day when we shall see God face to face.

### AN END TO COVID?

As 2020 progressed and our Synod Council continued to do the hard work of our synod. We began to consider the ways we might carry out these five areas in our synod. I began to consider how the Office of the Bishop might be organized to live into these areas. And a plan began to take shape. I began to organize my thoughts around Faith Formation and Education, Faithful Leaders and Communities of Believers, Operations and Advocacy and Mission. As we entered into the spring of 2021 I proposed the following break down of the Office of the Bishop with Prs. Jacobson and Jones and Ellen Rutherford-Shulin and I taking on working in and into these areas. Working with the strengths our Synod Staff I assigned us each an area.

Rev. Sandra Jones has a zeal for Faith Formation & Education. Under this area Pr. Jones will shepherd and report us at our staff meetings the work of our Authorized Lay Worship Leaders, our training of Authorized Lay Distributors, Convocation for Rostered Leaders, the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) program, the Institute for Ministry Education (a partnership with the Northwestern Pennsylvania Episcopal Diocese), a new area under develop called Understanding Diversity. This naming underwent several iterations as it comes out both a longer past and the results of the summer of 2020 when we witnessed the pandemic of racism alive in our nation. Understanding Diversity encompasses programs we already have in place for continuing education for rostered leaders and will begin to develop opportunities for all to understand the diversity of peoples, cultures, ethic groups, orientations, social and economic settings in our synod. A final area in which Pr. Jacobson and I will work on but Pr. Jones will watch over is the Adult Catechumenate process.

## 2021 Report of the Bishop

Rev. Jacob “Jake” Jacobson, DEM has a zeal for forming Faithful Leaders & Communities of Believers. Under this area Pr. Jacobson will shepherd and report to us the work of the Congregational Leadership Seminar (a model for developing local leaders), Ministry Starts, while Pr. Jacobson will report on Vocations the work of vocations in our synod is assigned to Pr. Jones who has 19+ years’ experience in the candidacy process. Pr Jacobson will also focus on Youth and Worship as part of this area along with his continued work as Director of Evangelical Mission (DEM) for us as part of the ELCA churchwide efforts.

Mrs. Ellen Rutherford-Shulin and I will focus on Operations. This area encompasses such topics as Audit, Finance and Property both of which engage our Synod Treasurer Mr. Ron King, Communications and Technology which engages our Synod Secretary Rev. Mark Fischer, Synod Assembly Planning which engages our current Synod Vice-President Ms. Chris Curran and many, many others, Consultation Committee, Discipline Committee, Nominations Committee, and other areas as assigned in support of the operational and administrative life of our Synod.

An as yet to be filled position will focus on Advocacy & Mission. Our Synod Council at their May 2021 meeting determined the position will be an hourly position, similar to Rev. Jones, and supported my desire for the person to be a lay person who has a zeal for supporting and shepherding the work of our synod’s advocacy and mission work as it relates to our Tanzanian and German Companion Synod relations, our Synod’s Green Team and Hunger Committee, Lutheran Disaster Response, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry of Pennsylvania (LAMPa) to name but a few of the advocacy and mission areas within and beyond our synod.

Looking at my role as Bishop in these first 21 months of my call I find my focus to be found in four areas. First, beyond our synod as I engage with our Churchwide organization, the Conference of Bishops, our Region 8 synods and our ecumenical partners and allied communities of faith. Second, our various institutions such as Bethesda and Glade Run and other Lutheran Social Services, the Lutheran Home at Kane, Lutherlyn and Thiel College to name but a few. Third, the four Focus Areas as noted above in my report. Fourth our Clusters/Conferences.

Continuing to think about how we can be effective in resourcing our congregations and ministries of our synod led me to consider proposing a structural change to our Synod Council early in 2021. Based on data provided by the ELCA Churchwide offices on evaluation and planning and various conversations based on the initial question and looking at our current and future congregation and rostered leader coverage I proposed to our Synod Council a move from a cluster center model to a conference centered model for governance and resource support to our synod congregations. After discussion and consideration and Synod Council recommendations the Synod Council approved the move to a conference model and the adjusted Continuing Resolutions within our Synod Constitution and moved the bylaw change be made to this Synod Assembly.

A simple question at the beginning of my tenure as bishop of our synod, “Where is God leading us?” has set many things into motion and I firmly believe as we live into these new areas and foci and ways of structuring our mission and ministry as a people walking together we are being led into new ventures and opportunities to tell the story of God’s good news. And we continue to

## 2021 Report of the Bishop

learn together the lessons that our pandemic time has taught us to be church outside the walls and in our communities and beyond.

AND CANCER.

I will not repeat what I have shared with you in the letters to you concerning my cancer diagnosis, treatment plan and outcome. I am as of this writing nearing the end of my second cycle of chemotherapy and working with my oncologist and care team to plan the next steps in my treatment of the multiple myeloma. As these next steps come into greater focus I will share with you what I know and the timeline for treatment and recovery. I continue to thank God for I am blessed by you. I thank you for your prayers, your cards, quilt, gifts, well wishes, and many other signs of support towards myself and my family. We are deeply humbled.

My cancer does not get the last word.

Paul writes in Romans: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And this is good news worth living and sharing in our daily lives in our homes, places of work and study and in our leisure. Dear people of God we have a mission, a calling, a purpose to share God’s Good News in Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Called to Serve,

Rev. Michael L. Lozano, Bishop