
BISHOP'S REPORT

Synod Assembly



Three years ago, we gathered for an in-person assembly. That was June of 2019. Our guest speaker lifted the value of storytelling. Who knew then that we would have quite the story to tell in the years to follow? The pandemic of Covid-19 has dominated our lives since early March 2020. We emerge after two years of this virus and hopefully, we are moving to the endemic phase. (continued)

Lutheran & Episcopal Leaders gathered in May to discuss ways to further our partnership throughout New England

What has changed?

The landscape of the ELCA Lutheran Church continues to change. I noted this nearly ten years ago when you first elected me as your Bishop. The trends that have been in place since 1967 continue. Yes, 1967 was the last year the Lutheran bodies that now make up the ELCA experienced a net increase in participation in congregational life. In recent years, this has meant the closing of congregations. In 2012, we had 183 congregations. Today that number is 166. While we do not have precise statistics, general indications indicate that most of our congregations have experienced a decrease in participation, ranging from 10% to 40%.

Currently, 61% of our congregations are served by full-time ministers, while 39% are part-time. As I write this the end of April, nearly one-third of our congregations are in some form of transition. That includes interims, congregations discerning their future sustainability and the traditional call process.

In addition to congregational ministries, we have more chaplains serving in various institutions from hospitals, senior care centers, campus ministry and the military. This continues to be a growing area of interest for pastors and deacons. Last fall, I ordained Rev. Jessica Chicka, who is called to University Lutheran Church and deployed to Boston University as Associate Campus Minister. A month later, I traveled to Saranac Lake, NY, for the ordination of Rev. Garth Olsen, who, following a brief stint at Redeemer Lutheran in Plattsburgh, NY, will be deployed to serve as a chaplain in the United States Army Reserve. He'll serve as a Pastor in the New England Synod upon his completion of service in the Army Reserve. In addition, I presided at the ordinations of Abigail Johnson, Raphaella Mueller and Cassie Hartnett, all are serving here in our synod.



Musicians at Igreja Luterana in Providence, Rhode Island. Recently ordained Pastor Victor Cabrera is pictured on the drums.



Resourcing Congregations

A central piece of our work in the Office of the Bishop involves resourcing congregations. In the time of Covid19, this has taken on unusual new consulting services. Rather than the futile attempt to become expert in all matters, we have opted to resource congregations by connecting them with others who have the knowledge and expertise. Even with this approach, we have found ourselves overwhelmed with requests that include technical advice for live streaming, legal advice regarding property issues, SAFE church practices, governance questions, conflict mediation, common sense consultation, security matters, financial and

accounting questions and a never-ending list of other questions. In the three years since we last met in person, the Office of the Bishop, which includes Associates and Office Support staff, has never been busier. Like you, these changing and challenging times have also been challenging for us.

The Synod Council has stepped up to the plate by organizing a series of online meetings with council presidents and this spring, added one for presidents and treasurers. In addition to providing the resources available from the ELCA, Pr. Erica Kennedy, Mr. Bill Parchen and Ms. Cassandra Wilson agreed to plan a Town Hall via Zoom. Synod Treasurer and CPA Jeff Swanberg made a presentation and answered questions. We will continue to find ways to make these and similar resources available.

Matters related to congregations in transition are the bulk of our work these days. I encourage you to read the reports of the Associates to the Bishop, where they address this topic. Here I'll note the significant transitions that have happened in congregations. Since 2012, nearly 85% of our congregations have called a new pastor. And more recently, since we last met in person for Assembly.

29 New Calls to Congregations

19 New Calls to Synod Council Specialized Ministries

We have done a great deal, yet I hasten to point out that we also have a clergy shortage. The days when we could provide multiple candidates for call openings are gone. With 51 ministries in transition in the Synod and 14 of those for full-time, we often have only one pastor available for those calls. This is not just a New England Synod situation. It's true across the ELCA. The rest of the country has experienced the "Great Resignation," resulting in a shortage in the labor force for education, finance, trades, etc....the same is true in the church. The trend is likely to continue as the average age of an ELCA pastor or deacon is 64 years of age.

Addressing the Changing Church

Our candidacy committee continues to support the work of mentoring people who sense a call to ministry as a pastor or deacon. While numbers are down in this area, we have been creative in our efforts to make theological education accessible and affordable. In 2022, we awarded over \$50,000 in scholarships to New England Synod candidates to further their education in seminary. In addition, we partnered with Wartburg Theological Seminary on the launch of Caminemos Juntos: El programa TEEM basado en Competencias (Journey Together: A Competency-Based TEEM Program). This competency-based education model of Theological Education is explicitly designed for Spanish speakers. Rafaela Radcke and Hector Lugo Cuadrado are the first two participants in this program.

Additionally, we have a growing cadre of Licensed Lay Ministers (LLMs). These are lay people, who have received theological training via the School of Lay Ministry, or a similar program and have been invited by me, to serve congregations typically in rural or urban areas. LLMs perform under the supervision of a local pastor, while attending to pastoral needs.

We have developed a unique (in the ELCA) approach to Congregations in Transition. We have now trained over 50 pastors/LLMs since 2020. We use pastoral transitions as an opportunity for in-depth health assessment and discernment around missional sustainability. When a pastor/deacon leaves a congregation, we no longer have the church enter the call process automatically. This transition time has an intentional focus on exploring the opportunities and challenges for ministry. We've witnessed a better match for congregations that do call a pastor and the process encourages more honest conversation for those who choose another option.

This spring, the Synod Council approved a part time position of Church Legacy Planner, which will be funded out of the Mission Development Fund of the New England Synod. Pastor Maria Hammons has accepted my invitation to begin this work. Her role will be to coordinate with congregations that choose the Holy Closure option. Maria has worked closely with several congregations in these processes and I believe she will help relieve the time burden on the current Associates to the Bishop, so they will be freed up to resource congregations pursuing mission and ministry.

Social Justice, Anti-Racism, and Care for Creation

Ever mindful that we, like many in our church, are in the process of growing and learning about the impact of racism, we continue to deepen our exploration of this vital topic. Our Synod Council is focused on discovering the many ways racism impacts our work. Pastor Christophor Gilbert led the discussion at our April meeting using the Sacred Ground curriculum, developed by the Episcopal Church. The Synod Council intends to continue this anti-racism work on an ongoing basis. Our synod staff, including myself, associates and office support staff, meet monthly to discuss the book So You Want to Talk about Race by Ijeoma Oluo. Together the Council and the Staff will soon begin work on a Statement on Anti-Racism, displayed on our website and other appropriate venues. I'm also aware that many of our congregations and conferences are engaged in this area and some of that is highlighted in the Conference Reports by our Deans, which you can find later in this report.

The New England Synod's Care for Creation Team has a long history of important work around Climate Change. Recently, as Pastor Nancy Wright began planning for retirement, she approached me inquiring about ways she could be of service to the church. We discussed options and came up with a non-stipendiary role as Synod Pastor for Creation Care. Next fall, Nancy will be available to congregations as a resource and representative of the Care for Creation Team after she retires from Ascension in South Burlington, VT.

I'm always looking for ways the church can help carry forward its role in discipleship in both areas. So if you have suggestions for how we can do better, don't hesitate to get in touch with me.

Beyond the Synod in the ELCA

As a part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Conference of Bishops (CoB), I serve in several capacities. Currently, I serve as chair of Care for Rostered Ministers Committee of the CoB. This committee oversees a grant-making process via the Good Samaritan Fund, established to assist Rostered Ministers (pastors and deacons) in need of financial support, primarily for arrears payments for health insurance. I also chair the CoB First Call Committee, which recently, at my initiation, reformed the process of first-call candidates. The new system increases flexibility and honors candidates' needs in placement for their first call. It also saves money for the churchwide expression, eliminating travel costs for the bi-annual assignment process.

Collaborate for Christ's Sake

The theme of this Assembly and the emphasis of our ministry together for the future are centered on collaboration. We'll spend a good deal of time on Friday sharing stories, learning from one another and exploring ways in which we can partner with one another, local businesses, non-profits and other denominations. You'll hear lots of ideas and we want you to share what you're doing. If you are reading this report in advance of Assembly and cannot attend in person, consider watching it on our [YouTube channel](#)

Sincerely in Christ,

Bishop James Hazelwood

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.