



Southeastern Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Report of the Bishop

September 2020

Synod Council

The Reverend Kevin L. Strickland, Bishop

My pastoral care professor in seminary, created a bumper sticker, “WIGIAT.” It stands for, “Where is God in all of this?” The “this”, being: life, the world, the church, the good, the bad, the ugly, the joy, the fear, and so on.

It seems to me like an appropriate question to ask evermore these days. Over this past year, we have witnessed violence rip and tear through this world and this country. Horror by what we see through the terror of the evening news or the breaking of hearts at the natural disasters around the world and oh so close to home. Not to mention this global pandemic of COVID-19 which has and continues to shape us into to a new normal beyond our wildest imaginations. And these aren't even the list of personal things, we could add to the list.

William Sloane Coffin reminds us, *“The world, of course, is in a frightful mess, but because of us, not because of God. God could only clean up the mess by taking away our freedom. But without freedom where could love be? So paradoxically, it is because God is a loving God that there is so much suffering in the world. But because God is a loving God he is suffering too, and suffering also through the bodies and souls of his creatures, which is why Paul writes, ‘For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake.’”*

Each and every time we gather for worship, we have in our midst a profound opportunity that the world cannot give. We gather around the gifts of God's grace; these gifts that remind us *“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”* (1 John 4:16,18) Worship provides us with that profound opportunity to be reminded that we are not alone in the “this” of life. Worship provides us with an opportunity to be reminded, “WIGIAT” that God was, is, and will be forever with us.

The God with us dwells in, with, and among us. We are not alone. This is made so beautifully manifest, each time we gather as the assembled body of Christ. We bring the brokenness of our own lives, the brokenness of this world, and the brokenness of our relationships with on another; we bring this and join it together with Christ own broken body, and we are re-membered. We are made new. We are fed. We are sent forth to remind this broken world that God is in our midst. We need not fear, for perfect love has already cast that aside.

“WIGIAT” is a great question and yet even amidst the civic and civil unrest, the pandemic, and so much more, I have seen and experienced God ever more present in the ministry we have been called to do as a synod and as God's people here in these four states. Here in this report is a brief glimpse into where I have seen God in all of this.

Advocacy:

Through the good work of Pastor Matt Steinhauer, Assistant to the Bishop for Advocacy; we have brought back the work of the Synod's Advocacy Policy Council and included new members on this council to ensure we have representation of all four states. In addition to meeting with them now twice this summer, I have also sent letters to all four governors in our synod, twice. These letters were to encourage them to take the COVID-19 virus more serious and call for a statewide mandate on mask wearing. I also participated in a conversation that Pastor Steinhauer hosted on reviewing the ELCA's new Social Message.

Candidacy:

Due to the COVID-19 virus, we have had the Spring and now August candidacy meeting virtually. Where this has not been ideal and it was long; it worked very well. I remain thankful for the diligence of this committee and of the work weekly to make all this happen of Pastor Jill Henning and Melissa Fuller Sims. We have over 90 persons who are in our process and for each of them, we pray for God's discernment in their lives.

Conference of Bishops and Churchwide:

The ELCA Conference of Bishops has been meeting via zoom each week since the beginning of this pandemic. I am grateful for this weekly check-in with these colleagues. We have used this time to share ideas and concerns more expediently about what is going on across the church. Most recently, the Presiding Bishop announced that the ELCA would be presenting a restructuring with a new emphasis and all based on the Future Directions 2025 Plan:

VISION:

A world experiencing the difference God's grace and love in Christ makes for all people and creation.

PURPOSE

Activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love.

It has been announced that there will be approx. 20% staff reduction of the Churchwide staff, but that full plan has not been made public or announced as of yet. Mission support is extremely low and that along with the need for aligning the structure of the church with its current mission are reasons for this.

On another note, I continue to serve on the Bishops New Assignment Task Force that is currently working on a new way to do the ELCA assignment process for new candidates for ministry. This hopefully will help streamline how people find calls and eliminate some of the waiting that specifically affects minority communities.

Congregational Transitions:

When I along with the synod staff started, we had over 42 congregations in some form of transition. I am pleased to say, we have brought that number down quite a bit. Where there are and will always be congregations in transition, I am really pleased that we have been able to streamline some of these processes and continue to think creatively of what are the best ways to

help congregations. I give thanks to our staff for this work and specifically to Pastor Karen Boda for her work in editing our call process manual.

COVID-19 Response:

From the beginning of this virus, I was saying that this would be a marathon and not a sprint. Little did I realize just how long this marathon is and would be. I am so proud of our synod, it's rostered ministers, and congregation members. All of who have and are weathering this storm in strong and wise ways. However, I worry about the weariness that I sense from many. I continue to meet with our COVID-19 team and thankful for their wisdom. All of our guidelines and response are listed here: <https://www.elca-ses.org/covid>

We have held four council leaders zooms and another is scheduled September 21st at 7pm. We have also hosted webinars for seniors, youth and children workers, and our mental health task force had two opportunities in August for Rostered Ministers. We will continue to offer these webinars and update our synod guidelines.

Diversity and Justice:

In June we hosted a movie watch with small group conversation of the movie "Emanuel", synod wide Commemoration of the Emanuel Nine on June 17th, creation of Nine Action steps for Racial Justice for Children and Adults, ADLA Music celebration, and two children's times with the bishop on Facebook Live with books and prayers about racial justice. Also, in June, I met with about 85 members from our predominantly African-American congregations in the synod for a listening session. In July synod wide movie watch with panel discussion on "Just Mercy" and a conversation with the Rev. Robert W. Lee. As well as another Children's time with the bishop on a book about inclusion. In July, the Deans and Staff attended a training on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity from Executive Director of Reconciling Works, Aubrey Thonvold. There will be a Racial Justice training for Staff and Deans in September taught by Pastor Linda Manson from New York. Then in October we will offer two sessions on Racial Justice Boundary training taught by Dr. Catherine Meeks from the Center for Racial Healing of Atlanta. This will be for pastors and deacons.

Formation of Diversity and Justice Task Force- Background:

At the June 2020 Synod Council meeting, the bishop alerted the council that he would be putting together a task force/committee for Diversity and Justice for the synod. Web platform was designed and a number of events have already taken place.

At the July 2020 Executive Committee of the Synod Council; 10,000 was designated from the Strategic Int. Fund for the work of Diversity and Justice in the synod.

Committee Makeup:

Bishop Kevin L. Strickland [GA]

The Rev. Dawn Bennett [TN]

The Rev. Devin Strong [GA]

Mr. Jabari Bulger [GA]

Ms. Jessi Graser [TN]

Ms. Elaine Bussone [TN]

Mr. Stephen Schrader [AL]

Mr. Jimmy Sanders [GA]

Ms. Bethany Feyard [MS]
Ms. Kim Anthony [GA]

Members would serve a one-year term. But no more than two consecutive terms.

Synod Staff Lead:

Bishop Kevin L. Strickland

Budget: 10,000 (designated)

Description:

This taskforce will work with the synod bishop in addressing areas of diversity and justice primarily. To focus on four primary areas:

- Racial Justice/combating bigotry-white supremacy-racism
- Gender Justice (women and especially the role of women in ministry and the work place)
- LGBTQIA+
- Disabilities

To work intersectional with other committees/task forces/etc within the synod/region/wider church around these four areas that are umbrellaed under the theme of “Diversity and Justice”. To work with the Synod Strategic Vision Team with 2021’s major goal being Justice and becoming a more authentically diverse church. To hopefully create a monthly educational opportunity for the synod based one of these four areas and do so with the work already being done. To act as a resource for the synod in helping each congregation build their own “Diversity and Justice” teams. In that resource sharing to continue to update the synod website with these resources. Working with the bishop, synod council and strategic vision team in goal setting for the next 3-5 years around this important area.

We are also building a web platform for this work: <https://www.elca-ses.org/diversity-and-justice>

Ecumenical Relationships:

I have now met with 5 of the 7 Episcopal Bishops in our synod territory to discuss how we can partner and strengthen our relationships. We are hoping to share some ministries in a more concrete way around congregational, campus ministry, and Latino Ministry. It is my hope in 2021 to work on developing relationships with historic Black denominations throughout our synod, as we build tables of conversation in our authentic diversity work.

Formation and Leadership:

Lay Faith Formation Classes 3-4:30pm EST/2-3:30pm CST (via zoom)

October 4: “*Worship 101: Why we do what we do!*” [Led by: Deacon John Weit and Deacon Jennifer Baker-Trinity]

October 11: “*Say Her Name: Naming the Witness of Nameless Women in the Bible.*” [Led by: Pastor Mary W. Anderson]

October 18: “*With glad and generous hearts: a look at stewardship of self, congregation and church.*” [Led by: Pastor Mike Ward]

October 25: “*Telling the story of Jesus: Evangelism in the 21st century.*” [Led by: Pastor CeCee Mills]

Late October and early November, The Rev. Dr. Rachael Wrenn and myself will be offering a four week class on Wednesday mornings for preparing for Advent: Preaching and Worship Planning.

Latino Ministry Strategy:

At this synod council meeting, I will be recommending a synod council call for a *Assistant to the Bishop for Latino Ministry Strategy and Associate Pastor of Amazing Grace in Lawrenceville, GA*. This person will serve part-time on the synod staff and part-time for Amazing Grace. Working to build a Latino Ministry Strategy for our synod. This would be a three-year term call. I will be presenting the person recommended for call, the strategy and job description, the funding proposal, and compensation package. All of this will be in an Exhibit.

LTCA:

The Rev. Dr. Everett Flanigan’s last day as the Director for LTCA was August 31, 2020. We give thanks for the 10 years of service that Dr. Flanigan has served. On Sunday, September 13th 4pm EDT via zoom there will be a retirement celebration for him. You can sign-up for this on the synod website. Myself and the Rev. Dr. Phil Hersh, Executive Director of Domestic Mission for the ELCA have put together a small working group to discern next steps for LTCA. Members from our synod include: Pastor Matt Henning, Pastor Ron Bonner, and Pastor Beverly Brown Shaw. Pastor Matt Henning will serve as my liaison for LTCA until a new director is appointed.

Mission Support and Stewardship:

Mission support has been lagging by a growing percentage. This is alarming because it will have a profound effect on how we do ministry as a synod; if this does not improve. I have sent a letter to the synod and rostered ministers. More intentional concern will need to be given to this and a shared responsibility of synod council, staff, deans, and other. The Budget and Finance Committee have met prior to synod council and we will spend time during the September meeting discussing this. We will also hear from the Rev. Anna Lugo of the ELCA Foundation who will present to us what it would look like for us to have a gift planner work with us on building an endowment and increasing mission support. This could be a huge help in following up with the over 50k needed from the Living Lutheran Legacy Fund.

I am also thrilled to report that in the midst of what might feel like scarcity, we have been able to show forth God’s great abundance in the form of now three rounds of COVID-19 grants for congregations and rostered ministers, Life-Line Grants to help with student loan debt of our rostered ministers and congregational debt, and Disaster food ministry grants.

Mutual Ministry Team:

This team has met with me twice this summer and I am thankful for the opportunity for their mutual support, prayer, and insight.

Pastoral Care:

We have had a number of rostered ministers and their families who have been ill recently. Along with myself and staff, we have been checking in with the folks quite often. Staff also have had two rounds now of calling retired rostered ministers and checking in with them.

Personnel Committee:

I am thankful for the diligence of this important committee for our synod. I give thanks for Ms. Lindy Frietag who has agreed to serve on this committee and as its chair. We also give thanks for Ms. Doris Underwood who is new to this team. I will be doing staff annual reviews in September and then meeting with Personnel in November. They will then make recommendation to the synod council in regards to the 2021 budget for staff salaries and anything needed to note about performance and such.

Prayer Ministry Team:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything make your requests to God ..by prayer, thanksgiving and placing your request to God, the peace of God will guard your heart and mind fully beyond understanding (Phil. 4: 6–7)

I am putting together a synod prayer team. This team will meet with him once a month via zoom to pray. Praying for the needs of ourselves, our neighbors locally and globally, the needs of the church and world, and for what else might be in need that day of prayer.

We will meet September 21st, October 19th, November 16th, and December 14th from 9:00-10:00am EDT.

Rostered Ministers:

I have put together a small group to work on respite care for rostered ministers. That group has met now twice and will meet again in September. Part of this care was, I sent respite packages to every active rostered minister that included a letter of support from me, letter from portico, a Luther Rose Mask from Old Lutheran, and a 30-day devotional on the writings of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I ordained Nyahaley Labor on Sunday, August 15, 2020 as Associate Pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Conyers, GA.

I will ordain Jason Davis on Sunday, September 20, 2020 as Associate Pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Huntsville, AL.

Staff and Synod Office:

I could not do what I do without our amazing synod staff. I remain grateful for them and their diligence. Please take a moment and thank them as well. The synod office has been closed since March. Members have used the space sporadically. We will look into slowly opening back up the office for staff in September.

Strategic Vision Team:

VISION STATEMENT:

“To equip, empower, and engage God’s people to love and serve.”

(Based on Ephesians 4:12)

2021

Major Goal: *Intentionally becoming a more authentically diverse church in caring for others and the world God made; as we work for justice and peace.*

Sub Goals:

EQUIP: making disciples of Christ who live out their baptismal callings.

EMPOWER: living out and inspiring others with confidence in God’s grace.

ENGAGE: building intentional and inclusive communities of love and service.

Focus areas: Diversity, Gender Justice, Racial Justice, Advocacy, Disabilities

Task force to lead: Synod Diversity and Justice Task Force

The Strategic Vision team has met three times now and will meet again in September. We are working on getting a proposed new synod graphic and graphic for synod vision to present at the November synod council meeting. We are also working on spelling out in greater details the major goals and sub goals to fit into the three active verbs of: EQUIP, EMPOWER, ENGAGE. Ms. Rhonda Clay, Vision Team member will present a verbal report and presentation to the September 2020 synod council.

Young Adult/Youth and Campus Ministry:

Thankful for the good work of Pastor Michael Jannett, *Assistant to the Bishop for Formation and Communication* and all he does to care for the youth and young adults of our synod. Since our last Synod Council meeting in June, I have brought greetings and devotions to the virtual AFFIRM gathering, SESYLO annual meeting, and met with our synod campus ministry team and offered devotions.

Worship:

I will be hosting a synod wide livestream All Saints service on Sunday, November 1st at 4pm EDT from Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Atlanta, GA. We will mourn all those who have died since last All Saints, mourn the countless deaths caused by COVID-19, racial injustices of our nation, and all the small losses we have encountered in the midst of this pandemic. This will be shown on our synod Facebook page.