

September 2020

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After being landless for nearly 500 years – nomads in the land of Canaan, slaves in Egypt, wanderers in the desert – the People of Israel stood at the edge of the promised land. They were afraid to go forward. They were scared. Overwhelmed. Unsure.

But here God gave Joshua his marching orders. *Be strong and courageous, do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go.* (Joshua 1:9)

We stand in the midst of this pandemic. Perhaps like the Israelites we too are scared to go forward. Overwhelmed. Unsure. Ahead there are continued fears of the virus, a shaky economy, job losses, and children in school. There is the unknown. If you're like me, I need to hear God say: "Be strong. Be courageous. Don't be scared. Don't be discouraged. I am with you." I need to hear God say "I've got this."

Despite the virus, God's got this and the work of the synod has not slowed down. My primary focus in the synod is that of mobility – congregations and rostered ministers in transition. We currently have 18 interim pastors serving 20 congregations plus six synod authorized ministers (SAMs). Four congregations are in the interview process and five others are actively writing their MSPs. Since June, nine rostered ministers have been called by congregations.

We have definitely been more creative in this unknown time – and courageous - in how we work through each of processes! None are the same and it has been a real joy to walk this journey with each call committee, each council, and each rostered candidate. We still aren't traveling, so we have guided congregations in all things virtual. Meetings with call committees have been over ZOOM. Interviews and even Meet and Greets between congregations and candidates have been done virtually. Congregations have voted to call rostered ministers using email, ZOOM polling, voice votes, and written ballot drop boxes. One installation was done via a ZOOM service and then the congregation held a drive by reception for the pastor - a *Honk and Wave!* As we have said so many times, just because our buildings might be closed, the work of the church goes on!

God has been very present in providing for congregations and individuals struck particularly hard by the virus, helping to lessen the fear of what's next. We've used \$40K from the synod's Strategic Initiative Fund. We applied for and received another \$30K from the ELCA COVID-19 Fund. With these funds, we've been able to provide grants to 19 congregations and seven rostered ministers. Our support has been heavily focused on our multi-cultural ministries, some of whom are experiencing severe impacts from both health and economic challenges. Some of this grant money has gone to pay for rostered minister salaries, thus allowing the congregation to continue the critical ministries in their community, feeding and sheltering those truly in need.

We have also utilized the LifeLine Fund to assist congregations with stewardship, and rostered ministers with education debt. On September 3, more than twenty of our congregations began a program called *Beginning a Culture of Generosity*. This is a 6 session ZOOM program put on by the Rev. Mike Ward of GSB Fundraising focused on stewardship during a pandemic. This is a fabulous opportunity to focus on God's abundance in our own lives and in the congregations. This program has received rave reviews by both the North and South Carolina Synods, and is

also being used by Indiana/Kentucky. As long as the congregations attend the sessions, the program is fully funded by the LifeLine Funds. What an opportunity and a gift!

The LifeLine funds are also being used to assist with the education debt of our rostered ministers. This is our effort to help pay down seminary debt, take our rostered ministers on a path to financial well-being through financial education and counseling, and reduce their stress as they journey in ministry.

It has also been a joy to serve as the staff liaison for women in ministry. In this year of the 50/40 anniversaries of ordained women, we give God thanks for their distinctive gifts and proclamation of the gospel. Stay tuned for a celebratory video and worship focus later this fall. During these last months, we've had frequent gatherings for women to have a safe space to take a breath, support each other, and reflect on God's word. These ZOOM meetings hosted by rostered women for rostered women have served as a haven for many. In early September we welcomed Barbara Keller to spend an afternoon over ZOOM with our women discussing how to identify and also avoid emotional, physical, and sexual harassment. She has been the consultant for the prevention of sexual misconduct to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American since 2006.

It has been an honor to serve as the staff liaison for the Compensation Guidelines Committee. I have been inspired to be amongst this group as they completely rewrote the current guidelines into a worksheet which will enable the congregation and rostered minister to have an open and honest discussion about compensation, either in the initial call process or with a yearly review. It hasn't been easy, but has required conversations with other synods, leveraging best practices from across the ELCA, gathering feedback from the Synod Council and the Deans, holding two review sessions with congregation leaders, and then incorporating the feedback. We look forward to the final approval by the Synod Council in September.

We joke about the asterisk at the end of our job descriptions – *and other duties as assigned. These “duties” are non-trivial, but fill in the remainder of our time. It seems that these last months have created an increasing number of constitution questions as congregations navigate through virtual congregation meetings and voting processes. I've spent more time buried in the constitutions than I ever anticipated!

I've been blessed to call many of our retired rostered ministers, checking in on them during this time of potential isolation. Each conversation has been a gift to me, as I've been inspired by their continued passion for ministry. Their pastoral presence showed me, yet again, that God's got this!

I've been involved in the rotation for the synod staff sermons, preaching once every six weeks or so. These sermons have been provided to give our rostered ministers a needed break, plus provide a low tech option for those who need/desire it. And finally, it has been a joy to worship with many of our congregations – over ZOOM or in a parking lot – socially distanced, of course. These services have been a boost to me, as I glimpse into your communities and see the glory of God shining through.

For all these things, I give God thanks. Pastor Karen