



“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’” (John 12:20-21)

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

When I first moved to Chicago, I lived downtown and in my 90 min one-way train commute every day, I would see the same homeless woman. She sat right beside the opening of my stop at street level. I never saw her make eye contact with anyone. She was severely deformed and face sunken in. Occasionally I would drop some money in her cup.

One day, I made my commute and came up from the subway and there she was. Instead, this time there was a large group of loud fundamentalist Christians, yelling and pounding their hands on their bibles. They were holding up signs about the multitude of sins that were going to send everyone, but them to hell. I was shocked. I watched this humble, meek, and poor woman who the world never truly saw but only looked at. She had scribbled on cardboard, got up from her space, walked over to the loud condemning Christians and say right in the middle of them. She spoke no words. On her sign; it read “I hear you. We all hear you. Now, show me Jesus.”

Sir, ma’am, child, we wish to see Jesus.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

This plea from these early seekers to the Christian community is one that we still ask today. To see Jesus, to be seen by Jesus, and to experience Jesus in one another.

In a world that seems to have gone mad; many struggles to see Jesus or any remnant of his ministry. In the Christian church and even in the Lutheran denomination of this faith, we often spend a lot of time on words and not always actions. We often forget that when things die that death is not the worst thing to ever happen. That there are times death need to occur for new things to emerge, for ministry to happen, and for people to fully see Jesus.

As Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury once said, “God is never at the end of God’s resources when we are at the end of ours. We really die, and God really re-makes us. Creation and resurrection are inseparable activities in God’s response to the death of God’s loved ones.”

Sir, Ma'am, child, we wish to see Jesus.

Do we show people Jesus in our actions and daily living? Do we feel that Jesus is shown to us? There is a popular cultural mantra that exists that says, "Seeing is believing". How many of you have ever heard this?

If this is true; it's no wonder people don't want to join the church or become Christian: if we are to believe from what we see. Just look at how we treat one another! As Ghandi has often been quoted saying, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Sir, Ma'am, child. We wish to see Jesus.

Many pulpits have that verse, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" So that prior to preaching, the preacher remembers to, as one put it, "Pastor, we wish to see Jesus." Show them. Show them, big time. Or to put it another way, "go big or go home."

What if we all posted sticky notes in our homes, cars, grocery stores, hands, feet, mouths, that reminded us, "Show them Jesus."

A few years ago, I was watching the popular, *Americas Home Makeover*. You may remember this show. Ty the host would come in to a family's home and make it over and at the end for the big reveal, they would all yell together, "Move that Bus" and behind would be a better home and better future for a family that was in much need.

There wasn't a single episode of this show that I didn't walk away with tears in my eyes from being moved by the compassion and humanity that people showed to one another.

This particular episode that I was watching I vividly remember. There was a young man in his mid-twenties that was born blind and without the ability to walk. They made over his home to accommodate his needs. When he was being interviewed by Ty the host, Ty asked him, "What is it like to go through life and not be able to see?" The young man responded, "Who said I couldn't see? I can see better than you or anyone else." Ty stunned said, "Aren't you blind?" The young man laughed and smiled and said proudly, "I may not be able to see with my eyes, but I see through my heart. The wonderful thing about my life is, I have never judged anyone by the color of their skin, their differentness, their sexual orientation, gender identity, economics, or anything else that those who "see" with 20/20 vision are so capable of." He went on to say, "So, to answer your question, what is it like to go through your whole life and not be able to see? It's wonderful because it helps me get out of my own way to see God in others."

"Seeing is Believing" they say! No, I think, "Believing is Seeing!"

So, show them. Show the world, show your family, show yourselves Jesus.

Friends, we don't have to wait for God to love us, empower us, given to us what we need and then believe. We have already been loved, empowered and gifted to share in this immeasurable greatness and glorious inheritance.

As we walk together as a synod, may we continue to allow the eyes of our hearts opportunities to be enlightened and surprised by all that is before our eyes. Looking towards the cross, knowing that in great love, God poured out God's self so that our hearts could no longer be broken, our eyes would behold each and every living creature as God's own design of beauty, that our hands and feet would provide service to our neighbor, and that our tongue be that which proclaims God's love story to the world and not a weapon of hurt or hate.

Sir, Ma'am, child. We wish to see Jesus. Show them Jesus!

I have seen Jesus being shown to many across our synod and this church over these many months. Here in this report are just a few ways. For these, for so many others unnamed, and for you, I give God great thanks.

Synod Staff:

I am more grateful than ever for the incredible synod staff I get to work with. In them, through them, and with them; they show me Jesus. To think that eleven months of working remotely and with one another only digitally and yet the incredible amount of ministry being accomplished. This is not what or how we envisioned our work, but for such a time as this; we are who God has called and I am thankful.

Synod COVID-19 Response and Resources:

With the aid of the ELCA, we as a synod have been able to give away over 90k in grants to individuals, congregations, ministries, etc. Where this pandemic has wreaked havoc like no one could have ever imagined, I give God great thanks for the abundance of generosity that has been given to so many in need. As well, I have witnessed resiliency like no other from our rostered ministers, congregations, and ministries. Our COVID-19 Team continues to meet regularly to update guidance for our synod COVID-19 page: <https://www.elca-ses.org/covid> and we will be offering new guidance for the January 25th congregational leaders zoom at 7pm ET. The synod staff travel has been shut down for the past couple of months, the synod office, and any in person meetings until January 18th. I will then access to see if that level of extreme care needs to continue for the remainder of Lent.

Stewardship and Abundance:

There are much more details to share about this in the verbal and written reports that will be shared during this Synod Council meeting. But I wanted to personally thank the Mission Think Tank group, Pastors Boda and Axel, and others for their commitment to this important work of changing the narrative from scarcity to God's abundance in our synod. We are already seeing the narrative change. The percentage of congregations making intents for mission support is

increasing. The 26 congregations that participated in the “Creating a Culture of Generosity” event that Rev. Mike Ward led back in the Fall is already proving beneficial for them and then for us as a synod and the wider church. I would also like to personally thank you the synod council, our staff, and deans for your commitment to the Special Abundance Appeal for Mission Support. These gifts will enable us to do the work God has called us to and help other see Jesus in and among them. Thank you! You will see a request to begin a new Stewardship taskforce as well during this meeting.

Prayer Team:

Pr. Patti Axel and I meet monthly for the Synod Prayer Team. It is a holy hour of praying for the needs of the world, church, neighbor, and all. Various people sign-up to lead each month. I encourage you to join us one of these times or let Pr. Axel know how we might pray for you.

Evangelism:

For far too long evangelism has been an unwelcomed word in so many of our conversations, but I am thrilled that we are reclaiming it and reclaiming what it means to be good news people, as Lutheran-Christians. Pastor Patti Axel, *Assistant to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission*, has been hard at work in helping to design our efforts on a new Evangelism Strategy for the Southeastern Synod: IGNITE. Click here to read more: <https://www.elca-ses.org/newsdetail/ignite-evangelism-initiative-for-2021-14858337>

Faith Formation Resources:

We were able this fall to offer four-week opportunities each Sunday in October for laypersons around various topics in congregational life. We also offered an Advent Lectionary study led by Rev. Rachel Wrenn to rostered ministers that was four-weeks long. Once a month, I lead a “Children’s Time with the Bishop” on Facebook live with a reading from a children’s book, prayer, and scripture. We also offered an Advent Craft opportunity that was intergenerational. I would like to thank Pastor Jill Henning, Pastor Lewis Groce, and Pastor Michael Jannett for their work on assembly the Synod Advent-Christmas devotional and for all who contributed to it: <https://www.elca-ses.org/advent-christmas-devotional> As February 8th from 9-12noon, The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis will be offering a Lenten Lectionary study via zoom for anyone interested in attending.

Congregational Transitions:

We continue to have a large number of congregations in transition. Be that from retirements, resignations, change in call, or discerning where they will be after this pandemic. We currently have anywhere between 21-25 congregations at any given time that fall in this category. There is also a need for more interims. To be noted the number of Rostered Ministers Profiles (RMP) for mobility has also greatly slowed down in this pandemic and offer an even smaller pool of candidates who are open for call in our synod and those within our synod who are open to moving.

Candidacy:

Seeing Jesus alive and active in the discernment of our 90+ candidates who are discerning a call to ordained ministry in this church is a great joy in this call. It is also one of the busiest committees we have and for their work, Pastor Jill Henning, and Ms. Melissa Fuller Sims, I give

God great thanks. There are times that hard and yet faithful conversations have to occur with candidates that is not easy, but needed. The ELCA Conference of Bishops has just approved a new First Call Process: <https://www.elca.org/Resources/Candidacy#FirstCall> Where this will hopefully help candidates receive a call sooner and more effectively; it will also require more work on the part of bishops, candidacy committees, and staff.

Strategic Vision Taskforce:

“To equip, empower, and engage all to love and serve.” (based on Ephesians 4) Our vision statement for this synod. This taskforce has been very helpful in getting the vision kicked off and the 2021 goal of Diversity and Justice. Which we now have a taskforce for. This group has also been instrumental in helping to develop a new synod logo. That logo and information on it can be found at: <https://www.elca-ses.org/synod-logo> My thanks and deep appreciation for Mr. Chris Clay of St. John’s Lutheran Church, Knoxville, TN for his work in designing this logo and Pastor Michael Jannett.

Information about the meaning of the logo:

The Southeastern Synod is one of 65 synods in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as depicted in our logo, through the **four parts of the cross**. We are **on our way together – pointing people to the cross** - scattered across Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

As disciples of Jesus, we seek to **equip, empower, and engage all to love and serve**. The **circle is not closed, but remains open**. For we have been called to draw the circle so wide that no lines of exclusion exist; **so that all may know God’s grace, love, and mercy**.

Pastor Michael Jannett and our communications team will be working on redesigning the synod website over the next few months. So stay tuned for more great things to come!

The Strategic Vision Taskforce will be meeting in late January to begin working on vision plans for 2022 and 2023. Then a further report will come to the synod council at the June 2021 meeting.

Diversity and Justice:

We are pointing people to seeing Jesus in our work with Diversity and Justice as a synod. I am thankful for the dedicated group that makes up this taskforce and for its chair, the Rev. Devin Strong. More information can be found at: <https://www.elca-ses.org/diversity-and-justice> We meet once a month as a taskforce and in the process of creating events, resources, and activities for our synod and congregations for 2021. There will be forthcoming a monthly newsletter article from a different member of this group each time. In January through the combined work of the synod Worship team, ADLA (African Descent Lutheran Association) Southeastern Synod chapter, and the support of this taskforce; there will be a digital Bishops Commemorative Martin Luther King, Jr. Service available to the synod on Sunday, January 17th at 4pm. We are thrilled to have our very own, Pastor Ron Bonner as the preacher. In February there will be a social media daily moment of highlighting an African Decent leader in our synod to celebrate Black History month. As well a webinar hosted by this taskforce in February around Racial Justice. In March this taskforce will work with the Women in Ministry group in a daily

social media post in uplifting a woman in ministry or leadership in our synod. March 13th there will also be a joint ministry day for diversity and justice training.

Advocacy:

Be on the lookout during Lent for 2021. There will be a new emphasis “40-40-40” 40 days, 40 miles, and 40 dollars. To encourage anyone to walk 40miles during Lent with the Bishop and to donate 40 dollars to ELCA World Hunger.

Through special action of the Southeastern Synod Council, we were able to move for Synod Council Resolution to be given to name Mr. Hilton Austin at the Robert and Jean Graetz, Jr. Advocacy Award Recipient. A presentation of that resolution and gift were presented to Mr. Austin and his wife, Patti on Wednesday, December 16, 2020 by Bishop Kevin L. Strickland and Southeastern Synod Advocacy Director, Pastor Matt Steinhauer.

Resolution:

Whereas Hilton M. Austin, Jr. opened the first State Public Policy Office in Atlanta, Georgia, and,

Whereas through his organizing and leadership the first Human Trafficking Bill was passed in the state of Georgia, and,

Whereas his tireless work for criminal justice reform and racial reconciliation continues to inspire public advocacy in others, and,

Whereas he took on the role of Director of Advocacy of the ELCA Southeastern Synod, and successfully developed a network of advocates and advocacy across the four states of the ELCA Southeastern Synod: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee, and,

Whereas he was one of the founding organizers of the Georgia Interfaith Public Policy Center, and served as its Chair of the Board of Directors, and,

Whereas his willingness to answer God's call to “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,” has led to engaging, and inspiring, countless others to do the same,

Be it resolved: to award to Hilton M. Austin, Jr., the Robert S. and Jean E. Graetz Advocacy Award, in honor of his courage and faithfulness to the Gospel, in establishing a vibrant advocacy program in Georgia and the Southeastern Synod, that will continue for years to come, to provide a voice for the voiceless,

And be it further resolved: to award Hilton M. Austin, Jr., \$1,000 to be donated from the Synod to the non-profit of his choosing.

Latinx Initiative “En Conjunto”:

Pastor Justin Eller, *Assistant to the Bishop for Latinx Ministry*, has hit the ground running and off to a blazing start in this new ministry. A full presentation will be made by Pastor Eller at this synod council meeting and he will introduce you all to the new initiative, “En Conjunto”. As well there will be an ask to form a new taskforce for this work. I am grateful to Pastor Eller and all who have made this new ministry a possibility and see God mightily at work in it.

Rostered Ministers:

I am daily in awe of the pastors and deacons in our synod. Their fortitude, resiliency, and creative ways they have engaged ministry in these hard days of pandemic living. It has been a real honor to get to know them better. I continue to offer roster minister check-ins with me about every six-eight weeks. The staff and I continue to offer weekly sermons and will continue doing so. We hosted a Retired Rostered Ministers Advent worship service via zoom and were honored to have Pastor John Tirro offer music for that. I mailed out over 400 Advent-Christmas cards with a message from me to all our rostered ministers and congregations. We also continue to check-in regularly with any in need and our retired list of rostered ministers. Currently the rostered ministers are in the process of turning in their annual reports to the bishop. It is a joy to read of the ministry they are doing and to be given a small window into those moments of bane and blessing. Over the past few months, in addition to the offerings that have already been mentioned, our synod staff have also offered racial justice boundary training, grief counseling, stewardship classes, bible studies, and disaster training, and mental health webinars specifically for rostered ministers. I will also be scheduling a renewal of vows service during Holy Week (via zoom) for all our rostered ministers.

Since our September synod council meeting, I have also had the pleasure of ordaining W. Tina Trice Culpepper and Rachel Kaufman Patterson to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

ELCA and Regional Updates:

As you may have heard the ELCA Church Council in November approved a new restructuring process for the churchwide office. Here is information regarding that and its process that I have as of now to share:

- The Gospel of Jesus Christ and its proclamation grounds all that we do as a church.
- Future Church is based in the belief that members, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization must work together to share a powerful witness of the Gospel in the world; inviting more new, young, and diverse people to experience God’s grace in action.
- In February 2020, nearly 90 ELCA leaders participated in the re:Route™ survey to determine the church’s innovation readiness. The survey indicated strong agreement that the ELCA must innovate to survive. However, there is confusion about who should drive change and act first. It found that “The ELCA’s complex, hierarchical, slow-moving structure makes it difficult to act quickly and autonomously, and as a result, a sense of urgency is lacking throughout most of the organization.” Only 30% of respondents believe it is safe to take the risk to speak their own mind and many feel rejected for thinking differently due to regional and cultural differences, personality clashes and too much politeness.

- In April 2020, the Presiding Bishop appointed a Future Church design team.
- The design team concluded that three of the five Future Directions 2025 goals to be most urgent for our future church efforts to focus on now. Those three are:
 - A Welcoming Church: Engaging new, young and diverse people
 - A Thriving Church: Rooted in tradition and radically relevant
 - A Connected, Sustainable Church: Raising the bar – together
- The new design establishes a common purpose “To activate each of us so that more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love.” This is what we will all strive to achieve together, regardless of where our location in the church (congregation, ministry, synod or churchwide). We want to set this as a new direction for our church, together. If we are successful, it will be because we have been able to bring new, young and more diverse people into the church challenging the decades long trends of decline.
- The only way we can do this is together. The Churchwide organization is striving to set a new priority and direction but it cannot produce programs that will reach people in every changing context. Individuals, congregations, ministries, colleges and synods will do that much better. We need to create an environment where the best ideas are shared, tested and implemented.
- The ELCA is establishing this new direction by setting out to collectively connect with a million new people. Together, we need to work out how to best do this and what the appropriate rolls are for the national church, the synod and the local ministry. No one has the answers, what we have is the calling of God to join together in this great cause.
- It is our deep desire that every ministry will recognize there is substantial support behind them, accompanying their efforts to connect with the communities and bring new people into the faith.

In reality, the ELCA continues in a pattern of macro decline, with aging members and a membership profile that does not reflect the diversity of the United States or the hope of the Kingdom of God. Thirty years on, the ELCA has enjoyed a rich history of ministry together. Yet disruption trends persist. In light of that the ELCA envisions a world experiencing the difference God’s grace and love in Christ make for all people and creation. In response to these continuing trends and specific data from the re:Route™ innovation readiness survey, the design team embraced the following design criteria:

1. Prioritize the engagement of new, young and diverse people
2. Unite all expressions into one church – together
3. Align decision-making, accountability and leadership where best suited
4. Operate in agile, flexible and expedient ways
5. Act based on data and measurable impact
6. Eliminate silos and divisions

This new design is about both culture (sense of community) *and* structure. See below:

Now	New
<p>Centralized, hierarchical leadership with one top organization-wide leadership team creates decision-making bottlenecks</p> <p><i>Data point: <25% people think the right people at the right level are involved in decision-making</i></p>	<p>Shared leadership – three organization-wide leadership teams</p> <p><i>Design feature: individual collaborators from across the ELCA ecology, including synods and congregations, will be part of these teams</i></p>
<p>Multiple mini-cultures, silos and priorities defined within unit/office/location or position level</p> <p><i>Data point: There was unanimity and passion about the ELCA’s theological mission but confusion about the organization’s shared purpose.</i></p>	<p>One organization, one church culture</p> <p><i>Design feature: New collective ELCA Purpose “Activate each of us so more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love “</i></p>
<p>Static and stayed workflow means there is little opportunity to try something new or collaborate</p> <p><i>Data point: only 13% of respondents felt the ELCA is structured to facilitate collaboration or that people excelled at it. 41% felt the organization does not seek to be cutting edge.</i></p>	<p>Dynamic, flexible collaborative environment and processes</p> <p><i>Design feature: transitioning from six units and offices to four home areas, including the new home area of innovation to assist with culture and process transformation</i></p>

HOME AREA LEADS

- Christian Community and Leadership: Phil Hirsch
- Innovation: Mikka McCracken
- Service and Justice: Rafael Malpica Padilla

OTHER:



THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

A Worship service led by the ELCA bishops elected in 2019

Wednesday, January 6, 2021
 8pm Eastern | 7pm Central

LIVE on synodical Facebook pages and websites across the ELCA

The thirteen bishops of the class of 2019 led a joint synodical Epiphany of Our Lord service. This service was streamed on all the synod social media platforms and on the Southeastern Synod's Facebook and YouTube channel. Joining together, as we confess, lament, lean into the light of God shining brightly in Holy Scripture, proclamation of the Word, and musical offerings from across the church. The following synods and bishops, representing the class of 2019 will be participating: Bishop Laurie Larson Caesar (Oregon Synod), Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee (Northwestern Washington Synod), Bishop Laurie Jungling (Montana Synod), Bishop Lorna Halass, Western Iowa Synod), Bishop Michael Lozano (Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod), Bishop Bill Tesch (Northwestern Minnesota Synod), Bishop Susan Candea (Central States Synod), Bishop Yehiel Curry (Metropolitan Chicago Synod), Bishop Leila Ortiz (Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod), Bishop Regina Hassanally (Southeastern Minnesota Synod), Bishop Constanze Hagmaier (South Dakota Synod), Bishop Paul Egensteiner (Metropolitan New York Synod), and Bishop Kevin L. Strickland (Southeastern Synod).