

Minutes of the Montana Synod Assembly



(to be approved by the assembly in June 2022)

“Meet the Future Boldly”
June 4-5, 2021
Electronic Meeting

Friday, June 4, 2021

Plenary I: 1-2:15 PM

The assembly began with a service of worship provided by Immanuel Lutheran Church in Missoula with a sermon from Bishop Jungling.

OPENING OF THE ASSEMBLY

Bishop Laurie Jungling opened the 33rd Montana Synod Assembly at 1:30 p.m. by welcoming the voting members and leading an opening litany.

CALL TO ORDER

Bishop Jungling called the Assembly to order.

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

The following people were introduced to the assembly:

Synod Council Officers – Vice President Dick Deschamps, Treasurer Sue Ost, and Secretary Amanda Liggett.

Staff – Pastor Jason Asselstine (Associate to the Bishop), Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger (Director for Evangelical Mission), Colter McCarty (Director of Technology and Communication), Candis Standall (Office Manager), and Jenny Kunka (Director of NRIT).

Parliamentarian – K’Lynn Harris

Churchwide Representative – Rev. Ruben Duran

ELCA Region 1 Church Council Representative – Loni Whitford

Special Guests – Kathy Marks and Nancy Marks

*Thanks – Members and Staff of Immanuel Lutheran, Missoula for providing the music.
Rostered ministers new to the Montana Synod were introduced.*

CREDENTIALS REPORT

Rev. Jessie Obrecht presented the Credentials Report:

Lay: 100

Active Clergy: 63

Retired Clergy: 8

Total Voting Members: 176

Motion

Second: Receive the Credentials Report

SA.21.06.01

VOTE: RECEIVE THE CREDENTIALS REPORT

Adopt Agenda with Privilege of the Chair to Adjust

Motion

Second: Adopt the agenda with privilege of chair to adjust

SA.21.06.02

VOTE: ADOPT THE AGENDA WITH PRIVILEGE OF CHAIR TO ADJUST

Adoption of the Rules of the Assembly

Motion

Second: Adopt the rules of the Assembly

SA.21.06.03

VOTE: ADOPT THE RULES OF THE ASSEMBLY

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Pastor Amanda Liggett presented the secretary's report, directing the assembly to her printed report.* The minutes of the 2021 Montana Synod Assembly are available on the assembly website, in the reports book, and links have been sent out in the synod weekly newsletter.

Motion

Second: Adopt the minutes of the 2021 Montana Synod Assembly

SA.21.06.04

VOTE: ADOPT THE MINUTES OF THE 2021 MONTANA SYNOD ASSEMBLY

Plenary II: 2:30-3:45 PM

CREDENTIALS REPORT

Rev. Jessie Obrecht presented the Credentials Report:

Lay: 114

Active Clergy: 61

Retired Clergy: 7

Total Voting Members: 182

Motion

Second: Receive the Credentials Report

SA.21.06.05

VOTE: RECEIVE THE CREDENTIALS REPORT

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING COMMITTEE

Barbara Arensmeyer presented the slate of candidates. Delegates were invited to vote electronically.

Synod Council

Allen Hansen (Beartooth), Rev. Scott Hedegaard (Russell Country), Celeste Pogachar (Five Valleys), Rev. Doris Tollefson (Fort Peck), Rev. Gretchen Wagner (Northeast), Kevin Johnson (Bearpaw), John Sheppard (Crazy Mountain), Rev. Peter Erickson (Flathead), and Lana Buerkle (Southeast).

Nominating Committee

John Mundinger and Barbara Arensmeyer

Committee on Discipline

Rev. Scott Thompson, Rev. Marlow Carrels, Kyle Lefler, Don Buerkle, and Luke Kloker

Kogodus

Tamara Bushnell and Arlene Kaurin

Churchwide Assembly

1. VP Dick Deschamps
2. Dane Castleberry or David Anderson
3. Meredith Johnson or Margie Fiedler
4. Laurie Vennes or Carla Rustad
5. Bishop Laurie Jungling
6. Rev. Megan Hoewisch or Rev. Jessie Obrecht
7. Rev. Cheryl Muncy or Rev. Darren Paulson
8. Colter Murphy or Kyle Lefler
9. Sally Webers or Kristopher Schock

PRAYER

VP Deschamps led the assembly in prayer.

ELECTION – FIRST BALLOT

REPORT OF THE TREASURER

Treasurer Sue Ost presented the treasurer's Report.*

Motion

Second: Receive the Treasurer's Report

SA.21.06.06

VOTE: RECEIVE THE TREASURER'S REPORT

PRESENTATION OF THE 2021 AND 2022 BUDGETS

Treasurer Sue Ost Presented the budgets.*

REPORT OF THE FIRST BALLOT

Rev. Jessie Obrecht presented the report of the ballot for positions other than bishop.

Synod Council

Allen Hansen (Beartooth) Rev. Scott Hedegaard (Russell Country), Celeste Pogachar (Five Valleys) Rev. Doris Tollefson (Fort Peck), Rev. Gretchen Wagner (Northeast), Kevin Johnson (Bearpaw), John Sheppard (Crazy Mountain), Rev. Peter Erickson (Flathead), and Lana Buerkle (Southeast)

Nominating Committee

John Munding and Barbara Arensmeyer

Committee on Discipline

Rev. Scott Thompson, Rev. Marlow Carrels, Kyle Lefler, Don Buerkle, and Luke Kloker

Kogodus

Tamara Bushnell and Arlene Kaurin

Churchwide Assembly (by position)

1. VP Dick Deschamps
2. Dane Castleberry
3. Margie Fiedler
4. Laurie Vennes
5. Bishop Laurie Jungling
6. Rev. Jessie Obrecht
7. Rev. Darren Paulson
8. Kyle Lefler
9. Kristopher Schock

Kogodus

Tamara Bushnell and Arlene Kaurin

CLOSING WORSHIP

The people of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Missoula led the assembly in a closing worship.

The Assembly was recessed. Delegates were invited to participate in a delegates' hour with the Bishop and/or a budget Q&A with Treasurer Sue Ost and VP Dick Deschamps later in the evening.

Saturday, June 6, 2021

The members and leaders of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Missoula, led the assembly in morning prayer. A slide show was shared honoring those who have completed the Lay Pastoral Associate program in the Montana Synod.

Plenary III: 9:10-10 AM

REPORT OF THE ELCA REPRESENTATIVE

Rev. Ruben Duran brought greetings on behalf of the ELCA. A video from Bishop Eaton was shared prior to his report. Rev. Duran is the senior advisor for new ministry development in the ELCA. He reported that mission dollars given to the ELCA are used to grow the church and address issues around the world, develop current and future leaders in the ELCA, and to grow the ELCA in the US. He also highlighted the fact that many of our mission support dollars are put to work within the synod. Churchwide responded to the pandemic by raising and distributing money to synods. He gave thanks for all the congregations who are working to address the needs of people within their communities. He gave thanks for the work of our leadership and highlighted some of the ministries that are supported through churchwide funding.

REPORT OF THE CARE FOR CREATION AND CHANGING CLIMATE TASK FORCE

Rev. Eric Huseth brought a report on the progress of the task force in the form of a pre-recorded video. He highlighted that the group was carefully constituted to include people from many backgrounds and avoid a homogenous voice. They seek to define a shared experience and goals that all Lutherans in Montana can support.

REPORT OF THE RACIAL JUSTICE AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY TASK FORCE

Rev. Stacey Heggem brought a report on the progress of the task force. Pastor Melanie Martin-Dent also joined to talk about the process of creating the task force. They highlighted the challenges face by indigenous people. Covid made their start slow, but several lay leaders, clergy members and leaders of color have joined the group. They are still searching for more people who want to participate. Their goals are to build trusting relationships in congregations to foster learning opportunities and build trusting relationships with indigenous and tribal leaders. They described a careful plan for various ways that individuals and congregations can be involved.

Plenary IV: 10:15 AM – 12 PM

Credentials Report

Rev. Jessie Obrecht presented the Credentials Report:

Lay: 109

Active Clergy: 63

Retired Clergy: 6

Total Voting Members: 178

RATIFICATION OF THE 2021 BUDGET

Motion

Second: Ratify the 2021 Budget.

SA.21.06.01

VOTE: RATIFY THE 2021 BUDGET.

ADOPTION OF THE 2022 BUDGET

Motion

Second: Adopt the 2022 Budget.

SA.21.06.01

VOTE: ADOPT THE 2022 BUDGET.

REPORT OF THE BISHOP

Bishop Laurie Jungling presented her report.*

CLOSE OF ASSEMBLY

Bishop Jungling declared the Montana Synod Assembly closed at 11:58 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Pastor Amanda Liggett
Secretary, Montana Synod

*Addendums

2021 Montana Synod Secretary's Report

Below is a summary of the actions taken by the Council of the Montana Synod since the assembly held in June of 2019. Due to the pandemic, there was no assembly held in 2020, so this report encompasses a two-year period. The Council of the Montana Synod met nine times in the past two years. The Synod Council is commissioned to conduct the business of the Synod between Synod Assemblies, as well as set the direction for the Synod. The Council conducted the following business:

- Approved the new mission start in Missoula, *Conspire* (later renamed *Confluence*), as a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community.
- Appointed Pastor Lindean Barnett Christianson as churchwide voting member, replacing a member who could not attend.
- Elected Robin Matthews, Tonja Erickson, Allen Hansen, and Pastor Anna Merritt to the Montana Synod Council Executive Committee.
- Approved the changes to the 2019 and 2020 budgets.
- Approved the recommended minimum salary guidelines for 2020 and 2021.
- Allowed Messiah Lutheran Church (Billings) to move to Saint John's United for their worship space and a mailing address; and to operate with a council of the whole for one year (effective November 1, 2019), extended for another year in September of 2020.
- Ratified the appointment of Rev. Sean Janssen to serve out the term of Rev. Linda Webster on the Synod Council.
- Asked the stewardship task force to investigate a fiscal partnership with the ELCA foundation and the GSB proposal and make a recommendation to the council.
- Recommended the 2021 budget to the Synod Assembly.
- In March of 2020, chose to make interest only payments on the Synod House mortgage in accordance with an offer from Mission Investment Fund.
- Canceled the 2020 Montana Synod Assembly.
- Recognized the Covid-19 pandemic as a disaster and authorized the use of disaster response funds for congregations who had unmet needs.
- Approved the opening of a new account with the ELCA Federal Credit Union.
- Ratified the appointments of Kevin Johnson, John Sheppard, Rev. Peter Erickson and Kristi Lobdell to serve one-year terms on the Synod Council until the 2021 assembly.
- Approved \$1000 to be added to the ELCA Credit Union checking account to be used as a discretionary fund.
- Accepted the recommendation of the stewardship task force to enter partnership with the ELCA Foundation.
- Entered into agreement with Dennis Trotter to act as consultant for mission support.

- Adopted the 2021 budget.
- Called Pastor Christina (Trina) Johnsten to serve as an intentional interim minister for the synod.
- Resumed paying principal and interest on the mortgage beginning in October, 2020.
- Approved an experimental plan for the Synod Council to meet every other month until June of 2021.
- Voted to hold a virtual Synod Assembly over the weekend of June 4-6, 2021.
- Authorized the Stewardship Task Force to pursue a crowdfunding platform for ministry fundraising.
- Approved revisions to the 2021 budget.
- Recommended the 2022 budget to the Synod Assembly.
- Approved the use of funds from the Ruyard Lutheran Church telephone cooperative capital credits to support the Racial Justice Task Force.
- By unanimous vote, approved the council resolution for holding the assembly by virtual means.
- Requested the use of space at Bethel Lutheran (Great Falls) for the 2021 Synod Assembly.
- Designated the Synod Assembly Offering to First Call Theological Education, Care for Creation Task Force and Racial Justice Task Force (divided into thirds).
- Approved On Leave from Call Status: Pastor Roberta Smythe, Pastor Mary Morgenstern, Pastor Linda Webster, Pastor Jean Hay, Pastor Stacey Siebrasse Heggem, Pastor Natalie Faltin, and Pastor Kristi Bummer
- Approved Retirement Roster Status: Pastor Mark Taylor, Pastor Roberta Pierce, Pastor Steven Paugh Leuzinger, Pastor Kim Wilker, Bishop Jessica Crist, Pastor Char Schmiedeskamp, Pastor Steve Loy, Pastor Larry Stappler, and Pastor Steve VanGilder. The annual review of 1/3 of this roster was completed in 2020 by Bishop Jungling.
- Reviewed Synod Council Calls as of May 2019.
- Synod Council Calls to Special Service: Pastor Stacey Siebrasse (Director of Bridges and Leaders), Pastor Al Jensen (Chaplain, Immanuel Lutheran Communities, Kalispell),
- Removed Susan Penn (deacon) and Bob Nilsen (pastor) from the roster.
- Approved funding to continue our work with Dennis Trotter (Synod financial consultant) in 2021.
- Added funds to the 2021 and 2022 budgets to cover the cost of a stipend for the synod Candidacy coordinator.
- Approved the slate of candidates from the nominating committee (2021). Nominations from the floor will not be accepted.
- Appointed: John Mundinger and Pastor Steve Loy to the Candidacy Committee; Dr. Ashley Quanbeck, Vicky Nytes, Linda Nelson, Pastor Elizabeth Liggett, Pastor Seth Nelson, and Mindy Christensen (Grants Committee) to the Hetzel Foundation; Allen Hansen to the Freedom in Christ board as Synod Council liaison; Rev. Arne Bergland to the PLU Corporation board; Pastor Sean Janssen to the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary board; and Marilyn Hall as the volunteer Montana Synod coaching coordinator; .
- Ecumenical Appointments: Pastor Anna Viehland (Methodist) to Shepherd of the Valley, Townsend; Pastor JP Carlson (Presbyterian) to Christ the King, Bozeman; Pastor Jamie Schmelling (Presbyterian) to Hope American, Fallon.

- Received reports from Bishop Laurie Jungling, Associate to the Bishop Jason Asselstine, Director for Evangelical Mission, Peggy Paugh Leuzinger, Director for Technology and Communication Colter McCarty, Office Manager Candi Standall, Synod Treasurer Sue Ost, Director of NRIT Jenny Kunka, Secretary Amanda Liggett, Pastor Stacey Siebrasse (Racial Justice Task Force), Pastor Eric Huseth (Creation Care Task Force), Pastor Kendra Wilde (Montana Association of Christians), Trudi Paulson (Saint John’s United Family Services), Pastor Dave Brauer-Rieke (Region 1 Lutheran Disaster Response), Beth Adams (ELCA Foundation), Dennis Trotter (Mission Support Consultant), Pastor Jessie Obrecht (World Hunger Coordinator), and Loni Taylor (ELCA Church Council and Our Saviour’s Rocky Boy).

Some topics of discussion throughout the year were: our synod mission partners, Mission Support, disaster response, vision and mission, support for the synod task forces, and of course the pandemic. The council was asked to meet more regularly than in the past, via electronic meeting, so that we could stay informed and help guide the synod through a time of uncertainty. Significant time was spent discussing how to support congregations and pastors through the pandemic, as well as strategies for the synod to deal gracefully with any issues that arose.

Respectfully Submitted,



Pastor Amanda Liggett
Secretary, Montana Synod

2021 TREASURERS REPORT TO THE ASSEMBLY

Thank you to all the congregations in the Montana Synod for your steadfast and generous support of your Synod and the ELCA. I am honored to serve as your Treasurer, and to report to you on the financial condition of the Synod. Since we did not have an Assembly in 2020, I’ll be talking about both 2019 and 2020 Financial Reports.

Mission Support is the undesignated financial gifts from your congregations to the Montana Synod. For the past two years, 2019 and 2020, the Synod has been able to stay not only within our budget, but within the Mission Support that we received from our congregations. In 2019, Mission Support of \$942,567 was received. Income and expenses are monitored so that we can adjust the budget if necessary.

We expected Mission Support for the year of the COVID-19 pandemic to be lower than usual as congregations struggled with virtual worship and their members struggled with all the issues related to the pandemic, and it was lower at \$906,269. The Synod’s expenses were carefully monitored throughout the year, and we did end up with a positive operating balance when we closed the year on January 31, 2021 – meaning we spent a little less than we received. We applied for and received a PPP loan which really helped our stress level regarding our staff – we knew there would not be any reductions required because of the assistance we received through this loan. The loan has subsequently been forgiven, meaning repayment is not required. One reason operating expenses were lower is that staff members worked from home. They did not

travel but met instead by Zoom as they performed their duties. The Synod Council also met by Zoom, as did the numerous committees and task forces.

As the Montana Synod moves into the future, we are looking closely at our priorities and how we do ministry. In 2021, our staff will be travelling a bit more, but we have learned some good lessons from 2020 about how to do ministry in new and different ways. Decisions were carefully debated and prayerfully considered when creating the 2021 and 2022 budgets, which I will present later today. Those budgets do include increased Mission Support estimates.

All the Synods of Region I are audited annually by an independent accounting firm, and I participate in those audits through email and conference calls. The Montana Synod is financially healthy and has again received a clean audit report. We thank Alyce Bakker and Karen Dickon of the Region I Financial Services Office for their work on our behalf, in keeping good records, providing regular reports and any financial information and analysis that we request.

During the past year and a half, our Synod House has not been used as we had originally envisioned. With our staff working remotely much of the time, and meetings taking place on Zoom rather than in person, the building has seen much less use than in the past. However, as we settle into a new routine of doing ministry, we are using the building more and more, and our staff members are back at their desks most of the time. Donations toward the mortgage payments have diminished as well, and the Synod Staff, Synod Council, and Stewardship Task force are working on ways to address this. Mission Support dollars are not currently being used to make the building payments, although we may need to adjust the budget in the future to include the building payments.

Again, I would like to thank the congregations. I am so grateful for your support, your faithful generosity, and your prayers for the Montana Synod.

PRESENTATION OF THE 2021 AND 2022 BUDGETS TO THE ASSEMBLY

6/4/21

EQUIPPING MINISTRY FOR CHANGE

We have learned a lot about change in the past year and a half – figuring out how to continue to worship and do all kinds of ministry while quarantined, shut down, unable to gather in groups, and later while maintaining social distancing and wearing masks. Congregations have had to get creative, and the Montana Synod has gotten creative, too. We have had so many Zoom meetings, we lost count long ago – but we did learn that it’s possible to continue ministry even in the midst of all these changes.

Since we did not have a Synod Assembly in 2020, the Synod Council performed some of the business activities that would normally be done at the Assembly, including adoption of the 2021 budget. During this Assembly, you will be asked to ratify that action, as well as adopting the 2022 budget. You should have both of those budgets in a spreadsheet that was included with the Assembly materials.

Each year, it is a challenge to determine the best use of your Mission Support dollars. How are the ministries we support financially being equipped for change and for the future? What other sources of financial support do they have? Some ministries, such as Luther Seminary, PLTS, and St. John’s United, have multiple sources of income, and large overall financial structures. The

Executive Committee and the Synod Council spent a lot of time in the process of re-thinking how we use the limited amount of resources we have to support the ministries that are listed in our budget.

Our Saviour's Lutheran Church at Rocky Boy called a new pastor, Tom Gehring, right in the middle of the pandemic and their 100th anniversary year. A significant portion of their income previously had come from a system of retreats that Pastor Linda Webster had created and organized. During the pandemic, of course, those retreats couldn't happen, and other sources of income also decreased. Pastor Tom has some new ideas on the direction of that congregation in the future. Therefore, the Synod Council wanted to lift up and empower that congregation by increasing the financial support of Our Saviour's from \$1,400 in 2019 and \$2,400 in 2020 to \$7,600 in 2021 and 2022. As a Mission Congregation, they do receive some assistance from Churchwide, but it is limited and our support is crucial to them.

A relatively new partnership for the Montana Synod is Intermountain Children's Home. We have supported them financially with about \$1,900 per year and increased that to \$3,000 per year in the 2021 and 2022 budgets. Intermountain serves over 1,200 children, youth, and families in need of improved mental and behavioral health and healing. Although this is a small increase, it demonstrates our commitment to the important ministry of this organization. Trudy Schmidt serves on Intermountain's Board of Directors as the Montana Synod's representative.

The Northern Rockies Institute of Theology, or NRIT, has been flexible and responded well to the pandemic. This arm of the Synod supports pastors and lay leaders with continuing education that is varied and relevant, helping them grow and learn as they lead our congregations through uncertain times. Long before the pandemic, NRIT Director Jenny Kunka was working with Colter McCarty to develop on-line coursework that reduced the cost of traveling for participants. In these two budgets, we have maintained our previous level of financial support.

Campus Ministry organizations on the two main university campuses in Montana provide important resources to college students. The Synod provides significant funding to these ministries, and the ministries also do fund raising throughout the year to support their operating costs. During the pandemic, a major fundraising event at MSU Campus Ministry could not be held. Because of your generous contributions to the Disaster Relief Fund for COVID-19, the Synod was able to help them with additional one-time funding. This enabled them to continue their ministry to students who needed them even more during the past year.

At the 2019 Synod Assembly, two resolutions were passed, creating two task forces within our Synod. You will hear reports from the Care of Creation Task Force and the Racial Justice and Cultural Competency Task Force tomorrow morning. Their work is important to us all, and the Synod Council feels that they need some financial support to equip them to do the work that the Synod Assembly assigned. We must support their work with more than our words. Due to an unexpected gift that originated with the closing of the congregation in Hingham a few years ago, we were able to allocate just over \$3,000 to the Racial Justice and Cultural Competency Task Force. The Care of Creation Task Force has received a designated gift of \$1,000 that they are using currently, but in the future we will need to allocate some funds to their projects.

Within the 2021 and 2022 budgets, we have maintained the level of Churchwide Support at \$350,000. The gifts we pass on to the ELCA help fund many ministries, including those in Montana such as Our Saviour's at Rocky Boy and the salary of our Director of Evangelical Mission, Pastor Peggy Paugh-Leuzinger. Travel and operating expenses were low in 2020, but we know that as things return to a more normal state, those costs will increase. The budgets for 2021 and 2022 each show a slight increase to get us back to previous levels. Our staff members

received a small salary increase in 2021 and will receive another in 2022. We've added a \$2,400 stipend for the Candidacy Coordinator, as a token for the many hours that are spent preparing and walking beside our future leaders in ministry.

As you can see by the budgeted Mission Support figures, it takes all of you and your financial gifts to support the work of the Montana Synod. We are frugal, but we also must look to the future and equip and support our many ministries. The actual amount received in 2020 was about \$906,000. For 2021 we need \$952,400 and for 2022 the estimate is \$967,400. We are so appreciative of all the congregations who are supporting us with their Mission Support gifts, and I am asking you to continue those gifts and, if your congregation is able to increase your support, the Synod will use those gifts to Equip Ministry for Change as the future unfolds.

You will be voting on these two budgets tomorrow morning, and this evening at 7:00 there's a Zoom meeting where you can ask any questions. This would also be a good time to have and discussion on the two budgets.

Thank you.

Greetings Assembly! And greetings to our dear friends in Christ across the MT/NWy Synod and across the ELCA,

This weekend we have gathered together in this digital way in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ with the purpose of doing the ministry of business of Christ's church in the MT Synod. As I stated in the written part of my report, these past 14 months have felt like a wild rollercoaster ride, with twists and turns, turned upside down in loops and whipped around in tight turns. Please turn to that part of the reports book for more information on how the synod staff has responded to the changes that have happened over the past year. But today, I'd like to focus us in on the present and then spend some time envisioning God's future, definitely through a glass dimly.

The Present

As we gather for this assembly, it's been almost 15 months since everything shifted under our feet because of a tiny virus we can't see without a microscope and the consequences it created. Other things happened to shake our world during that time, events and social realities that we are still trying to name, understand, and respond to with a love that seeks justice.

In fact, even before the pandemic, life in the church was changing, shifting in incremental ways toward a new way of being church together. But those were tweaks that, while noticed by some, were ignored by most of us as we wondered why our congregations were declining, our pastoral leaders were disappearing, our hair was graying, and our communities were ignoring us and the message we were supposed to be proclaiming.

Then the pandemic earthquake rocked our lives and everything changed. And all of us together as church were forced to do something we haven't had to do in a long time: let go of what we took for granted and change. We had to ask tough questions about things like online worship, Holy Communion, and how to best live with neighbors we disagree with so deeply. We had to explore new and old possibilities, see new opportunities, try new things, and experience a humility that we haven't felt in a long time.

As church, we had just assumed that God would keep things the same forever, that we didn't need to change – reform is what we call it in Luther-ese; we assumed that reformation was no longer necessary because we had finally got church perfect. Ha! In many ways, we the church got complacent, and perhaps a little arrogant, and it's been a hard road for us to face the truth that another reformation is what is needed for God's church in the world. In the past 15 months we have been pushed us into a present we never dreamed of and in many ways are still not prepared for.

But the present is here. When I look at the church, particularly the Lutheran Church ELCA, in this present time, I see many threads woven together to form an incomplete, constantly shifting fabric that strains the eyes and wobbles my mind as I try to get a sense of what is going to emerge out of Gods future. Here are just a few of the threads I'm seeing. You might see others.

Exhaustion – we are tired – tired of covid protocols, masks, social distancing; tired of the constant “something's new” decision-making; tired of words like innovation, crisis, adapt and “you're muted.” We're tired of zoom and having to learn new forms of technology to do our jobs and fulfill our mission, even though it's that very technology that got us through much of this and is allowing us to meet even today. We're tired of the polarization, the fighting on social media, the anger and the bitterness that has swamped our culture and infiltrated our communities and congregations, in spite of the reality that we can't seem to stop doing it. We're tired of change, especially in the church because for many it's the church that's supposed to be the stable rock in the sea of change. (Actually, that's Jesus, not the church.)

And it's not just a few who are exhausted. We all are tired – pastors, deacons, LPAs, council members, committee members, directors of ministries and so many others in our congregations. We are physically tired, yes, but I think we are mentally, emotionally and spiritually tired as well. The brain fog you feel is real. And some of these things that are exhausting us aren't going to go away any time soon.

Alongside exhaustion is the thread of **grief**. Most of us have experienced loss over the past months and year, loss of loved ones to covid or the many other illnesses that still plague us; loss of health and a former lifestyle; loss due to violence, rage and hate of human against human; loss of a job and economic security; loss of planned celebrations and family gatherings, loss of a pastor, loss of a home or a building or a crop or a herd of cattle, loss a sense of freedom, control, and stability. To feel grief over these losses, to want to mourn them is understandable and I assure you, that nearly all of us are feeling this grief in some way or another. You are not alone.

I also see **conflict** in our present. It seems we are surrounded by polarization, anger, anxiety and divisions between people we are called to love – our fellow church members, our family members, our neighbors of all identities. Even though we are commanded to love one another no matter who we are or who are neighbor is, we find ourselves trapped in social and political unrest, in unwinnable arguments over who's right and who's wrong, in cynicism about the future of our planet and the life that dwells here, in suspicion of everyone and everything that lead us into conspiracies and falsehoods, in non-stop blaming of “those other them over there” for all our problems. I'm reminded of our communal confession of sin “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” We together and not just as individuals are trapped in this disillusionment and destructive behavior, perpetuated in a cycle of anxieties and reactions that rest beneath all of these problems.

Combined with this thread of conflict, I see the thread of **change** in our present. And this is a bold and thick thread running through our lives right now, whether we want it to be there or

not. The change we're experiencing now is moving faster than human history has ever experienced. It's hard to keep up, especially as we live longer and are able to see the changes fly by. I think of my first day in my first call in Buffalo SD 25 years ago this summer, and remember email only then just becoming a standard form of communication. Cell phones were still analog with minimal service and were used only for making phone calls. And now, these few years later, I can have a zoom conversation with my mom on Easter Sunday, text my friend a week later for her birthday, and conduct a synod assembly via Youtube. And yes, I realize that even these seem backward to our Gen Z friends out there.

The fact is that change happens and there's nothing we can do to stop it. It's part of life. And for true life to happen and for us to truly live, we and our world must change.

But we do have a choice in how we change. This choice is called transition and how we transition matters. We can resist tooth and nail, fighting a losing battle. We can cling to our pasts of "always doing it that way" and slowly (or quickly) die away, wondering why. We can drift away into apathy, not caring whether the church lives or dies.

OR we can transition well, opening our hearts, minds, spirits – our whole selves – up to the Spirit's work of transformation in our communal lives as well as individual lives. Now I know that such transition is hard; it's slow, painful, and uncertain work, but as I used to tell the congregations I served as their interim pastor, it's worth it when the transformation into a vital and vibrant community, enlivened by the Spirit, happens in our midst. More about what the synod's transition might look like in a few minutes.

In the midst of this exhaustion, conflict, grief and change, I encourage us to pray: pray for courage, for strength, for hope, for energy and visions of the future, for com-fort so that God will fortify you for the days ahead. Let us also find time and ways to lament the losses together, crying out to God with our pain and when we have no words, allowing the spirit to sigh our prayers for help and healing. As the pressure starts to lift from the present, even as life continues to change, I encourage us to take some time to rest, to support one another and uplift each other, be generous with your patience and forgiveness, and to seek safe and healthy ways to work through our exhaustion. And finally I encourage you to laugh as well as cry – laugh together and laugh alone; find positive things to laugh about (not people to laugh at) and tell the stories so others can laugh too. Me, I laugh every day about my 9 month old kitten's antics as he discovers summer things like birds and bugs and ceiling fans for the first time. And it's made all the difference in the world for me.

And finally, I encourage you to see **God** working love all around you. Which is another thread I see in our present, and the last I'll mention today, though there are many more. God is present and has been present throughout all we've been going through. Whether we see God's thread is bright and beautiful gleaming before you or hidden behind the exhaustion, grief, conflict and change we are experiencing, God's thread is there.

Yes, God is there. How do I know? First, because God promised. Jesus in the final sermon to the disciples in the gospel of John, proclaims that he will send the spirit to be our advocate, our helper, our truth-teller and change-maker. Jesus in the gospel of Luke promised to send what God, the Father had promised, the spirit of new life, new hope and a never-ending love to bring to fulfillment the Kingdom of Heaven that comes near.

But I also know God is present in our present by watching you. Throughout the pandemic I knew God was present in this synod, this church, in your congregations by the way you held onto hope to make ministry happen in spite of all the roadblock and stumbling stones that were being put in your way. You experimented, you adapted, you pivoted, you innovated so that the

people of God and the neighbor in need could be cared for. Yes, in the midst of that you wept and shouted and cursed the technology and the pandemic. But you kept moving, step by step, in faith and in love you held on to the tail of the windy Holy Spirit wherever she was blowing. You showed generosity and gratitude, you practiced kindness and compassion, and you lived God's joy and the love of Christ into the world in small and big ways that inspired and equipped others to be followers of Christ in the world. That's the Holy Spirit folks and when we live according to the Spirit's fruits, God is present.

And for that, I want to say thank you to every one of you who helped make sure people knew that Christ's church was not closed, but simply gathering and functioning in new and different ways, still called, gathered, enlightened and made holy by the Spirit as the body of Christ in the world. Thank you to the rostered clergy and deacons of the MT/NWy Synod for your leadership, for your patience and willingness to adapt and learn new things, for your continued pastoral presence with your congregations and communities in whatever form it takes – and it has taken many forms.

Thank you to congregation councils and ministry board of directors and committee members for your willingness to take faithful risks to continue to make the life of Christ's ministry happen even in the most trying of times. Thank you to our Synod LPAs who stepped up, filled in, and gave so much of yourselves to help congregations function in worship and so many ways beyond. Thank you to the many who have supported your congregations and other ministries with your gifts and resources – your time, energy, money, effort, patience, generosity and encouragement. You followed Jesus rather than giving in to fear. And thanks to you all as congregations and individuals for the financial support as well as prayers and kind and generous words to me and the rest of the synod staff as we move through this transition. Thanks to your gifts, the synod staff and council were able to continue fulfilling our mission to lead and guide you in the midst of the pandemic and many other challenges we faced this year.

The Future

But as I mentioned above, the times are still a'changing. Even as we celebrate the vaccine, the slow departure of masks and social distancing, and being able to join together in worship, fellowship and service (even if it doesn't feel the same as it did before), we know that we can't go back to the old way of doing things.

Why? Because God's future is coming and those old ways just weren't working any more. Einstein is quoted as saying that "the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." The church and it's way of being church of the 50's, the 80's, even the 2010's is disappearing and we can't stop that. And the more we cling to the old way, the faster the human institution we call the church will die and become pointless in the world. Christ's church on earth needs another reformation to fulfill the mission Christ has given it and we need to seek the vision that God has designed for it.

But this doesn't mean we should change willy-nilly, following the culture blindly and changing just to be acceptable to the world. The Church is Christ's church, not mine, not the pastor's, not anybody else's but Jesus' and therefore we must follow him and ONLY him. We as baptized children of God are called to follow Christ in everything we do, seek and are; that is our mission and our purpose.

Followers of Christ in the MT/NWy Synod, I call us to enter into the faithful risk-taking of being equipped and transformed by the Spirit to follow Christ into the path of Jesus love. That's why I'm proposing this mission/vision theme for the synod:

Equipping ALL of the followers of Christ in the MT/NWy Synod for participating in the ministry of Christ's gospel.

What does this mean for how we shall be living into the future? Well, first we need to remember the "we" in what it means to be a synod. The word synod means "walking on the path together." I am not the synod, though I may serve as the bishop of the synod. Neither the synod staff nor the synod council are the synod, though they are employed, elected, and tasked with serving alongside me as leadership and guides for the synod. The synod house is not the synod; it's simply where the offices are. No, the synod is you, and me, and all of us ELCA Lutheran congregations, ministries and participants from across N. Wy and MT walking the way of Jesus together, receiving the gift of God's holy new life and equipping one another in our faith and ministry together.

And in what ways will we as a synod equip each other?

What will this equipping look like? Here are some things that we as synod staff are already or will be focusing on to create spaces and opportunities for the MT/NWy synod to be equipped to do the ministry of the gospel and follow Jesus into the future even as God's future comes to us.

- Discover/rediscover the core of who we are and whose we are
 - The core that makes us followers of Christ – values and principles and character of Christ
 - The core that really makes us Lutheran at heart and spirit – sola Christos;
 - Let go of what is preventing us from knowing and living this core
 - Welcome the new and old that helps us return to the Lord, our God
- Transitions in Pastoral Leadership
 - Address the rostered leader/clergy shortage
 - Candidacy
 - Lift up alternative paths to seminary ed – TEEM, Distributed Learning,
 - LPA program
 - Work with specific contexts to discern new ideas for collaboration with other congs, ministries, and pastoral leaders. Open to the possibilities without clinging to the past "we've always done it that ways"
- Training Thriving Leaders and Growing Leadership among lay and rostered
 - Adaptive – flexible, self-differentiated, focused on loving those called to serve; open to the Spirit's leadings
 - Emotional Resilience and Intelligence
 - Able to create and guide spaces for the collective spirit-led genius of all the followers of Christ to be explored
 - Excellence in Leadership program through RM synod
- Vital and Thriving congregations and ministries
 - Willing to ask questions and be open to God's answers
 - Openness in mind, heart, spirit to God's future
 - A desire to work together to explore, discern, experiment, risk, fail, learn and then do it all again

- Vital Congregations Team
- Grow dream or Innovations Teams across the synod – where we dream dreams and explore visions of God’s future; Pentecost across the seasons
- Stewardship
 - See through a lens of God’s abundance and enough, rather than through a lens of scarcity. What can we do with what we have rather than we need more to do anything. (Bolivia)
 - Serve the ministry of the gospel and equip the followers of Christ as the goal and purpose of our giving of our time, talents, treasures, priorities and energy
 - Stewardship Team
- Technology
 - Has take us far; how can we use it in the best ways possible rather than it using us in the worst ways possible?
 - Ex. The question of hybrid church – both in person and online? How will that work? Means rethinking what it means to be church.
- Theological Questions Emerge
 - What does it mean to be Church in this century? Perhaps leaner and certainly less mean, judgmental, and angry
 - Holy Communion as digital?
 - What does it really mean to follow Christ – be a disciple?
- Faith formation and education
 - Be responsive to the current needs of the synod and wider region
 - Faith formation for all leaders – rostered, lay, congregation councils, LPAs
 - NRIT
- Collaboration between Synods and Ecumenical Partners
 - Pandemic brought us together; many ideas are being explored for working together for sharing leadership, educational and training opportunities
 - Ex. MT/NWy and RM synod; Region 1 meet every week (already share financial services)
- Seek to Love and do Justice, walking humbly with our God
 - Do Justice and then go beyond into Genuine Jesus love
 - First Be transformed by the depth of love God has for us to live the fullness of love into the world
 - ReDiscern and discover what genuine Jesus love lived into the world looks like for this time and place
 - Engaging in justice work in and for the world is central to our call; not of the world but in the world that God loves and we are called to love it too
 - Love defines this justice work and shows us how to do justice;
 - Care for Creation TF and Racial Justice and Cultural Competency TF
- Find new and old ways to support our leaders spiritually, mentally, emotionally
 - First Call theo Ed
 - Thriving leaders groups being developed
 - Coaching program
- Collaboration with our Companion Synods

- Walking together to respond to common issues we face (leader shortage) and support one another in common mission of ministry of the gospel and building up the church
- Bolivia
- Cape Orange
- New ways of organizing and communicating as this synod as well as across the ELCA
 - Pastor Duran

The synod staff serves the synod by helping to equip the synod in all these aspects of the ministry of Christ's gospel and much more. We work to seek resources, to encourage and uplift, empower and support, and create the spaces for the whole synod to come together in various ways to discern, explore God's future.

And like you, right now, we're still figuring out the specifics: discerning, learning, trying, failing and adapting to know the specific destination God has in mind for us. And we need your help with that – all of you. We need you to participate in seeking God's future with us and letting it come to us as we open ourselves to the possibilities.

But whatever the Church of God's future looks like, I am sure of two things: that though we can't see it yet, it is coming; and that whatever comes will proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Christ's Church will never die; it will continue on in some form or another. We are simply called to jump on board.

When the pandemic first started, my brother said to me, "you picked a bad time to be bishop." I reminded him that this wasn't my choice and that God is getting me through it all. But I also said, at least to myself, that this time isn't so much "bad" as it is "difficult" and "exciting." In the midst of the ongoing change, I continue to trust in the new life that comes to us in the resurrection of Christ. It does not just come to us in some heaven in future time. It comes to us now, even today in the acts of love, kindness, compassion and justice around us, in the unpredictable and uncontrollable Spirit transforming us and the Church, in the Word of God the comes down and never returns empty.

Finally, it is only in trusting in the new life that comes to us daily in Christ that can we as a Church and a synod can move into the change, through the transition and into the transformation that God wants for us. Only in faith, hope and love can we take the faithful risks necessary to be the Montana/NWY synod together as followers of Christ remembering finally the gospel proclamation from Julian of Norwhich that in the God of love "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

Thank you all for your willingness to be equipped to do ministry in this time of change! And remember all shall be well and all shall be well and all shall be.