

Synod Council  
February 18-19, 2022  
Bishop's Report – Rev. Laurie Jungling

Dear Friends in Christ,

*“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Eph 4:*

As I mentioned in my report in September, the functioning mission theme for the synod as the staff engages in our everyday work is “Equipping for the Ministry of the Gospel.” It is this theme that directs us and guides us as we fulfill our callings for the synod and all of Christ’s Church. Most of our time, energy, and effort involves equipping and supporting:

- The Leadership (clergy and lay) of the Synod
- Congregational Life in their ministries, transitions, explorations and innovations
- Collaboration for ministry among congregations, ministries, and followers of Christ
- Stewardship grounded in God’s abundance (rather than scarcity) and a discipleship of generosity
- Administration of the Synod in its practical life (financial, polity and governance)
- Faith Formation through education, resources, guidance
- Love and Justice work
- Spiritual, emotional and mental up-lifting
- Relationship building with ministry partners as well as ecumenical partners and interfaith colleagues and friends

Part of this effort concerns helping the synod ministries respond to the messiness of the present like recovering from the ongoing effects of Covid and assisting congregations in finding pastoral leadership in a time when ordained pastors are fewer. But our work also entails looking to the future and wondering with the rest of the church what God’s future church will look like and how will we get there? This means leading the synod as together we walk on the path Jesus is calling us to follow. Leading in this way doesn’t mean defining and controlling the future of congregations, but rather equipping the ministries of the synod to listen for, discern, experiment, learn, and take faithful risks in following Christ.

The church is in a time of Adaptive Challenge. What we’ve done before no longer works and there are no easy solutions to the challenges we face. So we need to spend time lifting up what is core to who we are, what we’re called to seek and what we’re called to do -- Christ’s gospel and Jesus’ way -- while at the same time letting go of what doesn’t work and removing the stumbling blocks in our path.

**How can we discover the excitement of being Christ’s Church and passionately follow Christ’s mission to proclaim and live the gospel for the world?**

**How do we open our ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit to co-create with Christ the vision of the in-coming realm of God in our midst?**

These are questions I and the synod staff continue to grapple with and invite the synod council and the ministries of the synod to wrestle with as well. My hope had been to dive into some discernment conversations along these lines with some folks around the synod this winter. But after hearing from our pastoral leaders (lay and clergy), my colleague bishops, myself and my staff about the exhaustion of so

many and the on-going whiplash-like trauma from which so many of us are trying to recover, I decided a slowdown was needed. While there are some who are ready to pounce on the opportunities this continuing crisis offers for change, others are just trying to stay afloat and need some space and time to heal before stepping too quickly into the future.

So the “Theory U process” for the synod I mentioned last council meeting has been put on hold. Instead, the staff and I will be taking some time over the next months to get back out there, connecting with congregations and leaders around the synod and listening to where folks are, even as we proclaim the gospel hope of God’s incoming future that we cling to. In fact, this is already happening. During the past several months we have been to the Bear Paw Cluster twice to meet with clergy and lay leaders as they discern next steps for ministry in the area. I am encouraged by the openness to explore alternative ways doing ministry and some conversations are already happening around some innovative ideas on the hi-line. There are some amazing and thoughtful leaders up there, listening in love for the Spirit rather than giving in to fear.

Also, I’ve been to Sidney to preach at Pella and met with the joint team in Broadus as the Lutherans and UCC churches enter into an agreement to share a pastor. I’ve been working with the Lutheran congregation in Cut Bank as they too explore sharing a pastor with the Presbyterians. And I’ve been working with Bethlehem in Billings as we try to support this important congregation through a difficult transition time. And I conducted a Bishop’s consultation with Immanuel in Absarokee who is taking their second vote to disaffiliate with the ELCA this weekend.

These are but a few examples of the work I’ve done alongside the rest of the staff to support and equip our many congregations with and without pastors. Due to various realities, this work will continue well into the future as we have fewer pastors to work with and fewer congregations that can afford them full-time. We are also offering weekly recorded sermons that congregations without pastors can use on a Sunday morning.

I have had some joyfilled opportunities to be out there with the people of the synod, celebrating 127th anniversaries with both St. John’s in Helena and Bethlehem in Kalispell and 101 years with St. James in Columbus. I also conducted an ordination (Annala Rova) and installation (Melissa Johansson) and got to dedicate the new solar panels with a water blessing at Our Savior’s in Bonner.

This week the staff and I are headed to Missoula to meet with the pastors about some strategic dreaming for the area. And I will be gathering with the Flathead Cluster pastors in March. The Chico Retreat is on again finally and so will be gathering with the pastors who attend (Hallelujah!).

Another way I am/we are using this slowdown time to the synod’s benefit involves focusing our attention on the financial life of the synod. This time of transition between treasurers is the perfect time to ask new questions, explore different options, and ponder how we can use the generous blessings given by God toward the mission of “equipping the ministry of the gospel in the synod.” That is why much of our time this weekend involves looking at various aspects of being faithful stewards as we follow Christ. We will be looking at the synod’s endowments and how to use the proceeds for ministry in the synod. We will try to get a more robust gift policy functioning. We will look at constructing a healthy 2023 budget and update the 2022 budget with more realistic yet faith-filled perspective. We will begin conversations about the synod’s financial future as mission support continues to decline and about how we are going to handle the Synod House and the mortgage in the years to come.

Synod Assembly is coming up quickly and since it is my first in-person assembly (and Candi’s) and since we are still dealing with the realities of Covid, the work of preparation involves a steeper learning curve. This will be an assembly that combines both some theological work with some important business that we need to get done. We are adjusting the schedule a bit and trying find ways to streamline the event with fewer reports and more active conversations among people in workshops and larger group plenaries.

This year we will be live-streaming the assembly for the first time; but delegates still must attend in person.

These past several months, I have been engaged in more ecumenical conversations, mostly surrounding sharing pastors but also regarding how we can find ways to be partners in Christ together across the state. One conversation that is just now beginning concerns the future of the Montana Association of Christians (MAC); the judicatories of each denomination and the MAC council representatives will be meeting this summer to discern where God is calling that ministry to go.

Also, as the Jewish community in MT looks to purchase the synagogue in Helena, I/we are reminded of our interfaith relationship and agreement with our Jewish siblings and I am thankful for the opportunity to build my own relationships with them even as we explore ways to help them in their project of cultural center to educate and challenge growing antisemitism and other forms of hate in Montana.

The two Task Forces, I'm glad to say, are up and running and functioning in the way their mandate calls for. The Racial Justice task force sponsored a group of 10 Lutheran leaders to attend the Wrestling with the Truth of Colonization training on zoom through Missoula Common Good. I was one of those leaders and found the training to be the best racial justice training I've ever done. (Ask me why!) Another cohort of 10 leaders from communities located near reservations are participating right now in the training. Both task forces have proposals for the synod council to consider and so, to give them the time they need to present those proposals, we will have a focused council meeting via zoom in March to address their ideas and reports.

Finally, my Conference of Bishops and Churchwide responsibilities have also demanded a lot of my time and attention during these past several months. I am the chair of the Theological and Ethical Concerns Committee which has taken on a much greater role in the work of the bishops as we explore questions concerning our core Lutheran beliefs that will guide us into the future of the ELCA, how we as a church can better talk with each other in healthier and holier ways, as well as ongoing wrestling with the theology of online worship, Holy Communion, and congregations. I am also serving as part of the Task Force of 9 (bishops) who continue to finesse the First Call process. And I'm active in the newly created rural ministry table of bishops to find ways to nurture, build up and advocate for rural congregations and pastoral leaders willing to serve them. Ministry in the rural church is important to me and I am concerned that all too often rural voices are diminished or forgotten in many conversations across the church.

Regarding our engagement with the Churchwide expression of the ELCA, a reminder that the Churchwide Assembly is happening this summer in Columbus OH. Those are usually live-streamed and can be interesting to watch. We have several delegates attending, including myself and Dick (VP). Unlike a representative form of government where delegates try to represent the will of the people who elected them, the Churchwide assembly asks delegates to listen to others in order to hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit which may or may not represent the will of the people. In other words, they seek God's will to be done, not my will be done. The churchwide offices have also been in a time of transition and so there are new faces and offices that we who interact with CW more often are having to learn. The Youth Gathering Event that was to be held in Minneapolis this summer has been cancelled. We are exploring with our camps what opportunities might be available for our high school youth here in MT or elsewhere this summer.

Respectfully Submitted in Christ,

Rev. Laurie Jungling  
Bishop, Montana Synod, ELCA  
Feb. 15, 2022

