



First Lutheran Church St. Peter, Minnesota

ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL MEETINGS

#1 - Sunday, December 6, 2020—11am
#2 -Sunday, January 31, 2021—11am

MISSION

Renewed by Christ in Word, water, bread and wine, we go in peace to serve our community and the world.

2020 STAFF

INTERIM PASTOR.....Wiliam Nelsen
PASTOR (resigned Sept 20)Gwen Hermanson
PASTORAL INTERN (thru Aug 20).....Miranda Joebgen
CANTOR Emily Bruflat
MINISTRY ASSOCIATE (began Sep 20).....Calleigh Carlson
BOOKKEEPERKaren Smithers
CUSTODIAN.....David Pehrson
OFFICE COORDINATORCraig Wolfe
VOLUNTEER ARCHIVIST.....David Fienen

2020 CONGREGATIONAL COUNCIL

President..... Bill Kautt
Past President..... Shannon Nowell
Vice President.....John Sylvester
Secretary.....Cindy Nadea
Treasurer.....Harry Hunt

Mary Spear
Garrett Paul
Gordon Long
Ryenne Pettis
Mary Thompson
Carolyn Trnka
Ken Westphal
Raina Rhoemhildt
Michelle Doose



EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

CONGREGATIONAL REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDING
DECEMBER 31, 2020

Living in God's amazing grace

INFORMATION ABOUT MEMBERS

Latest report on file: 2019

Baptized
(Total Membership)

1. Membership, end of 2019		760
2. Members received during 2020		
A. By Baptism, children 15 yrs. And younger	3	
B. By Baptism, adults 16 yrs. and older	1	
C. By affirmation of faith	1	
D. By transfer From ELCA congregations	0	
E. By transfer from other Lutheran congregations	0	
F. From non-Lutheran Congregations	0	
G. From other sources and statistical adjustments.	0	
H. Total Members received this year		6
3. Members removed during 2020		
A. By death	6	
B. By transfer	24	
C. For other reasons and statistical adjustment	0	
D. Total members removed this year	-	30
4. Membership, end of 2020	=	736
5. Number of people confirmed in 2020	11	
A. Total confirmed membership, end 2020	747	

Register/Pastoral Acts Report

Members Received

Aileen Bipes
Conrad Dobie
Callan Klinger
Paige Kurth

Deaths

Helen Baumgartner
Megan Berglund
Herbert Chilstrom
John Hall
Robert Swedberg
Cole Turritin

Baptisms

Conrad Dobie
Callan Klinger
David Marlow
Paige Kurth

Confirmations

Isabel Avant
Vera Berglund
Anna Boomgaarden
Samuel Buffington
Eleanor Kennedy
David Marlow
Daisy Pehrson
David Pehrson
Natalie Peterson
Maya Pettis
Raina Roemhildt

Transfers Out

Judie Berg
Anna Boomgaarden
Ella Boomgaarden
Laura Boomgaarden
Leah Boomgaarden
Mark Boomgaarden
Aksel Christensen
Eric Christensen
Heidi Christensen
Odin Christensen
Jan Denn-Netzke
Kim Devine-Johnson
Arlene Hilding
Helen Ihrig
Chris Johnson
Ruth Johnson
Jay Kendall
Lee Landgrebe
Callie Netzke
Charles Netzke
Colin Netzke
Robert Peterson
Isla Schild
Chad Winterfeldt

The Pastor - Reverend William Nelsen (Interim)

Thanks to Pastor Gwen Hermanson and her ministry through September of this past year and for the report she filed. Thanks also to Dr. Garrett Paul, Rev. John Malm and Rev. Steve Kidder for leading worship and preaching before my arrival.

I began serving First Lutheran as your Interim Pastor on October 12, 2020. I immediately began giving attention to the following priorities as a result of guidance I have received from the Church Council members and others: lots of listening to members concerning their views on the status of the church; getting acquainted with members new to me and reacquainted with many I had known for several years; preparing for and conducting worship services and preaching on-line and on local TV; coordinating work of the staff; attending and participating in a wide variety of church committee meetings; serving our youth through special activities and teaching confirmation class; and reaching out to discover and serve community needs.

From lots of listening via approximately 200 calls and personal visits, I have learned that the multi-talented people of First Lutheran love this church, celebrate its long history, want to see it be strong in serving its members, the St. Peter community and beyond, and are prepared to come together to move forward in hope and vision for the future. Through small group gatherings and written responses over two months, members have had and will have valuable opportunities to help guide and embrace this future.

In seeking to provide inspirational and meaningful worship experiences, serving with Music Director/Cantor, Emily and lay volunteers has been a real pleasure. Working with our relatively small but dedicated staff of Karen, Calleigh, Craig, Dave, and Emily has also been very positive.

Volunteer service by our members is demonstrated by significant time spent in guiding congregational plans and activities through our various committees. Here the roles of the pastor and the Church Council are often to both support and coordinate the work of these active, functioning committees. Serving with Calleigh to make a difference in the lives of our youth members and co-teaching our 9th grade confirmation class with Nancy T. and Jessica S. have been very rewarding experiences.

First Lutheran is a church that cares for its people and its community. Numerous calls to our homebound members and those battling illness and experiencing grief have confirmed how deeply these members have appreciated support from the First Lutheran congregation. And our caring extends to the community, as we have been able to serve many needy families in the last two months through the funds given to the Pastor's Discretionary Fund and the direct work of members of several of our committees.

With God's help, I look forward to serving the great people of First Lutheran in the months ahead.

The Council President - *William Kautt, Congregational Council President*

2020 has been quite a year, but, despite the many problems it faced, the Council is moving First Lutheran Church in a positive direction.

Obviously, the Council was forced address how the church was going to operate during the pandemic. With the help and guidance from Harry Hunt, the Council Treasurer, Ken Westphal, the Finance Committee Chair, and Karen Smithers, the First Lutheran Bookkeeper, the church was able to secure a Payroll Protection Plan loan provided by the CARES Act to help keep our employees on the payroll as we determined how we were going to operate during the pandemic (we recently were informed that this loan was forgiven by the federal government, thus becoming a grant).

I would like to thank Cantor Emily Bruflat, Intern Miranda Joebgen, and Pastor Gwen Hermanson for developing the model we have used to provide worship services during these trying times. I have heard many comments from both members and non-members about the quality of our services on Facebook. I would also like to thank the many members who have assisted these services by providing recorded music and readings. The next concern the Council had was financial. On behalf of the Council, I would like to thank all the members who prepaid their pledges and, in some cases, increased their pledges to help insure we did not have any cash flow problems. In fact, the possibility exists that we will finish the year with a sizeable surplus which is fortunate because, right now, the 2021 budget appears to include a large deficit. The congregation must realize this is unsustainable and must be countered with either increased revenue through more or larger pledges or a reduction in expenses.

As the summer approached, the Synod personnel decided they would be able to conduct a previously postponed visit with congregational members and restart the reconciliation process. The visits took place via Zoom and were followed by interviews of the staff and me. The Council received the reconciliation report from the Synod in mid-August, and an electronic copy may be obtained by emailing a request to Craig in the church office.

Shortly after receiving the report, Pastor Gwen resigned stating September 30th would be her last day. Thus, the Council turned its attention to securing an interim pastor. We were very fortunate to secure the services of the Rev. Dr. William C. Nelsen. Pastor Bill began his service on October 12, 2020. With his help, the Council has begun the process of healing and moving forward. We have initiated the process of having small group discussions to help determine the needs of the congregation.

In addition to hiring Pastor Bill, the Council hired Calleigh Carlson to fill the position of Temporary Ministry Associate. Calleigh is assisting with confirmation and working with the youth. Calleigh's energy and enthusiasm are greatly appreciated, and I would like to thank her for the wonderful children's sermons she has provided to supplement the weekly worship services.

All in all, the Council is optimistic as we move into 2021. Obviously, our most important task for the upcoming year is to call a new Minister of Word and Sacrament. We ask all of you for your support as we move forward with this critical task.

The Cantor - Emily Bruflat, Cantor

I am certain that many of us feel that 2020 will go down in history for numerous reasons. For much of this year, we have not seen each other as we have been encouraged to

stay home during this COVID-19 pandemic to keep ourselves and others safe. Little did any of us know that March 8, 2020 would be the last Sunday that we worshiped together as a congregation for the entire year. Even though we have been apart, the life of First Lutheran Church has continued in many ways.

Before diving into COVID time, recall (if you can) last January and February. Our change in worship time began along with the “Simple Worship” at 11:15 in the chapel. “Simple Worship” started out with 20+ attendees and diminished each week thereafter. It did seem to meet a need with a select group of our members, but it was a considerable amount of work and time for such a small turnout.

Beginning on March 15, our first few weeks of worship from home were “live” from Facebook. While this was not a polished video, it was a way for us to remain connected. I took these weeks to research different methods of putting together videos for worship, and a software called Filmora was recommended to me by a colleague. It was decided that pre-recording yielded higher quality results, especially with consideration for the Public Access video that would likely be viewed by more people than usual as the pandemic continued. Since Holy Week, this new software has been used to put videos together from staff and members contributing to our worship, and it seems to be going smoothly. I am grateful to the many volunteers who have been willing to try something out of the box and participate in this new way of worship.

We have been able to highlight holidays in our church. Easter featured a festive, virtual brass ensemble. Pentecost was another celebration, involving the Bonse Aba Singers and many members speaking in a variety of languages. I was even able to keep my commitment to an annual hymn festival. On August 9, 2020, over thirty women in ministry came together from Minnesota and around the country to participate in *Beloved: A Celebration of Women in Ministry*. This service to date has been viewed over 2,400 times on Facebook, and it was also aired on SPPA. What was originally meant as a local celebration turned into something incredibly special and far-reaching.

As I addressed in last year’s report, we have two instruments that need major repairs. Worship and Arts has been hard at work through Zoom meetings this year to continue to discuss bids and develop a plan. We are happy to report that the piano repairs have been fully funded thanks to some generous contributions. The refurbished instrument will be dedicated to the memory of Helen Baumgartner, and we are making plans to have the piano moved for repairs to begin in early 2021. The organ repairs are currently divided into three phases of work, and we have enough money to begin Phase One, the least expensive phase. This work will be scheduled for summer 2021. Stay tuned for reports from Worship and Arts about exciting fundraising plans for the next phase of repair work.

Proposed changes to the budget would allow for repairs needs like these to be detected sooner and hopefully avoid such costly work. The Worship and Arts Committee advocated for what will essentially be a savings account to be used for repairs that go above and beyond regular tuning. We were also able to re-home one of our five pianos (to a hobbyist who will refurbish it and donate it to a care center), which will continue to reduce regular maintenance costs.

First Lutheran, I have some questions for you. Going back to “normal” as a society does not appeal to me nor many others, and I suspect this is also true of church. I do long to return to in-person worship when it is safe to do so, but there are elements of this pandemic time that I have come to value, and I wonder how many of you feel the same way. What does a “new normal” look like at First Lutheran? Regarding worship and music? Regarding faith practices? Do worship times matter as long as we are able to be together? We are months away from realizing this, but it is important to start thinking about our expectations to plan for a future that is better than our past.

Funds Management - *Harry Hunt, Chair*

The Funds Management committee had a very interesting year with its investments. We started out the year with some nice gains and then the pandemic hit and the market tanked. Our portfolio was 45% in cash and fixed assets at that time. The middle of March the market hit the bottom. With the unknown direction of the market and what the pandemic could bring, we did not invest back into the market until June. We decided to dollar cost average back into the market. Looking back, the market started to recover right after the market correction in March. We did recover and ended the year with a 7.5% return.

The Endowment allocation for 2020 was \$20,000. These funds were given to the program committees to be used as they wish. Please refer to the annual report for the amounts that were given by the Endowments. This years allotment is \$25,000, 4.7% of year end value, which will be distributed as listed in our annual report. All of the monies in the Endowment Funds are gifts and growth of assets. The earnings from these gifts make it possible for our different committees to offer additional programs for members of FLC.

The purpose of the Endowment Fund is to enhance the ministry of First Lutheran Church. Gift planning is the preparation of a plan that considers your blessings, your needs, the needs of your loved ones and your interest in supporting ministry, both now and in the future. Gift planning empowers you to make decisions that have a larger impact than ever imagined possible. Whether you have much to give or a small amount to share, you can benefit from a gift plan. If you are interested in sitting down with any of the members of our committee please feel free to contact us. Thank you again for all that you do for First Lutheran Church.

Stewardship Ministry - *Bob Stenson, Chair*

The Stewardship Ministry Committee is responsible for promoting biblically based stewardship through temple talks, "Heartbeat" articles, and educational programs for the congregation. The committee is also responsible for conducting an annual financial pledge drive and soliciting responses to time and talent surveys.

The committee encourages the congregation to provide financial support for the congregation's ministry and the ministry of other parts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The fall stewardship season began on Sunday August 30th under the theme: "Growing in faith together toward the future." Stewardship video spots were recorded for each Sunday worship in September. Letters were mailed to the congregation encouraging members to return their "Estimate of Giving" cards for 2021. "Thank you notes" were written by the stewardship committee to members who returned their cards.

As of December 31, 2020 congregation members filled out 118 "estimate of giving" cards totaling \$310,643 for 2021 ministry support.

The Stewardship Ministry Committee thanks the entire membership of First Lutheran Church for being generous in giving and being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Any member of First Lutheran interested in serving on the stewardship ministry committee is asked to call Pastor Bill Nelsen.

Lifelong Learning - *Calleigh Carlson & Cindy Nadeau*

The Lifelong Learning Committee's focus is on faith formation for all members of the FLC community, both within the church and in support of faith development at home. During 2020, the search for a Director of Lifelong Learning continued. In late August, Calleigh Carlson took the job as a nine month position to assist with faith formation and education programs for the school year.

In early 2020, Sunday School was operating in a one room classroom model with pre-K to 4th grade students. In January, it was decided to split into two groups with older and younger children meeting in two different classrooms. This model continued until mid March when COVID-19 closed our church building and Sunday School was cancelled for the rest of the school year.

This fall, with Sunday church services continuing to be online, it was decided that Sunday School would not be held in person. Weekly children's messages have been posted on Facebook, and Sunday School children have received "Blessing Bags" and "Christmas Bags" filled with at home activities. A virtual Christmas program was held with many families participating.

Wednesday night classes were held for 5-9th grades January through mid March. Once school shut down, so did classes. After a short break, confirmation resumed in the Spring via Zoom calls. Confirmation for 7-9 graders started again in person in September. Each grade level came in at a different time with masks and social distancing. This continued through November until SPHS went to distance learning. Confirmation classes continued online until Christmas break.

Ninth grade students were confirmed in a family outdoor service in August. Seniors received their prayer shawls via doorstep delivery. In June there was a senior blessing service for high school seniors and their parents via Zoom. Both of these services were shared with the on Facebook.

Youth and family activities this year included fellowship time after services in the youth room two Sundays a month with donuts or muffins, volunteering at The Kitchen in February, a youth planned lock-in, an all member pumpkin carving contest, a youth bonfire, a rake the community activity for members who requested raking help, Sunday school children wrote and mailed cards to shut ins during the Christmas season, a virtual tie blanket activity was held in December to make blankets that were donated to Partners for Affordable Housing, pies and flowers were delivered by youth in a "Thank you for your Faithfulness" activity in December, and an Advent Drive- Through was held in December. An advent bundle was put together with an advent calendar and devotional that was delivered to homebound, nursing home and assisted living members.

Adult studies: During the pandemic, some virtual opportunities for fellowship and learning have been offered. There is a Sunday morning coffee hour after our virtual service, as well as a mid-week coffee hour on Wednesday mornings. A Monday morning bible study is offered at 9:30.

We are in the process of planning forum topics for upcoming possibilities and partnering with other committees to plan a Friday Forum.

Building & Grounds - *Bill Kautt, Chair*

As you are aware, the church has been essentially closed since the start of the pandemic in March. However, Building and Grounds has kept busy. We have, with assistance from others, continued to care for the church grounds by weeding and watering the landscape, mowing the empty lots, and trimming some trees. Additionally, we continued work on projects designed to control the rainwater runoff from the roof and keep the mulch out of the parking lot. Our custodian has used this opportunity to do some maintenance work on the boiler and kitchen equipment.

We would like to recognize Tyler Erickson for the construction of the prayer labyrinth on the west side of the church. This was done as one of the requirements Tyler had to complete to become an Eagle Scout. We would like to thank Tyler and congratulate him for the accomplishment of this honor.

The main project for the year was the parking lot. We contracted out a crack-filling project for the main parking lot area. Following the completion of this project, the committee decided to purchase a striping machine to restripe the parking lot. Doing so saved the church approximately \$2,200 dollars.

We also began clearing the courtyard of many old and overgrown items. We plan on finishing this in the spring and then replanting to enhance this area. We would like to thank Mary Ann Scharf for donating the funds to finance this project.

Finally, the committee would like to thank all the members of the congregation who have assisted it throughout the year. We would welcome any members who would like to become involved with the committee for the upcoming year.

Health Advisory - *Keith Stelter, Chair*

The Health advisory Team met every 2-4 weeks starting in March. Members were Mary Hildebrandt, RN; Jessica Stadick, PhD; Keith Stelter, MD; Carrie Stelter, MD; Pastor Gwen and then later Michelle Doose, Pastor Bill, and Calleigh Carlson.

We planned the outdoor confirmation service in August. We made recommendation for youth gatherings and activities and for other church related meetings using the best knowledge and safety practices. We closely monitored COVID cases in the area and make recommendations to the church council.

As we now have a vaccine available, we will likely be able to finally return to in person services once the population is sufficiently vaccinated.

Staff Support - *John Sylvester, Chair*

The committee met a dozen times during this difficult year and accomplished the work noted below.

COMMITTEE CHARTER: The committee finalized its charter (a document defining the committee's responsibilities and outlining its annual tasks).

CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES: In conjunction with its charter, the committee developed proposed changes to the Constitution of First Lutheran Church as it relates to the committee's responsibilities. Said changes more accurately reflect what the committee does and is expected to do and were approved by the Church Council and submitted to the congregation for action at its January 31, 2021 Annual Meeting.

JOB INTERVIEWS: Various committee members participated in interviewing candidates for the staff positions of Office Coordinator and Temporary Ministry Associate and recommended that the Church Council offer the positions to the respective, successful applicants.

STAFF JOB DESCRIPTIONS: The committee is in the process of completing its annual review of the existing staff job descriptions and hopes to finish early in 2021. Additionally, the committee developed the job description for the new position of Temporary Ministry Associate.

STAFF HANDBOOK: The committee has just begun its review of the Staff Handbook in order to not only update it but also to sync it with the revised job descriptions and applicable laws.

Fellowship - *Betty Thompson, Chair*

We organized and designated groups to serve coffee and treats after Sunday services into March.

One birthday was celebrated and another planned for March (cancelled due to Covid.)

Our committee served sweet breads and fruit at the January 26, 2020 annual meeting.

Our last meeting was March 10, 2020.

Cemetery—Barb Wilkinson, Chair

Resurrection Cemetery, owned and operated by First Lutheran Church of St. Peter, MN, has been serving members and non-member alike for over 150 years. It is overseen by the Cemetery Committee which is responsible for the operation and maintenance, upkeep, and improvements of the grounds. The Committee also prepares an annual budget to assure that the operation of the cemetery is self-sustaining. Financial resources are derived from: 1. sale of cemetery plots, 2. interest from investments, and 3. gifts by members and friends. In an attempt to cover the increasing cost of operation, the price per grave plot has been raised to \$600, starting January 1, 2021.

As of this year, 2020, seven voting members comprised the committee: Helen Baumgartner, Barbara Haack, Paul Haukoos (secretary), Gordon Long (Council Representative), Pastors Gwen Hermanson and Bill Nelsen,(consecutively), Tom Nelsen, and Barbara Wilkinson (chair). Also serving are Laurie Dietrich (treasurer) and Tom Thorkelson and Jim Stenson (co-managers). The managers are the liaison to funeral homes and people requesting information on grave plots and burials. The grounds manager, Tom Thorkelson, is supervising contracted mowing and maintenance in general. Thank you to Paul and Nita Aasen for their added role in recording sales and burials.

COVID-19 closed in-person meetings in March, but we corresponded and communicated by mail, email, ZOOM and telephone. Long awaited projects at the cemetery were accomplished. Jeff Keeley and Company finished the Drainage Project which should prevent further flooding. In the summer, the road was seal coated and recently the Haack Brothers cleared trees, stumps, and brush at the West end of the cemetery to allow for future landscaping. The last two projects were possible thanks to the generous gifts from Barb and Dale Haack. .

Fourteen volunteers gathered in October to trim and clear trees and bushes in the cemetery. A large pile of wood waits to be burned next spring. Special thanks to Joe Frank for servicing the pump system and for giving extra help with tree trimming and hauling in early spring. Thanks to Dr. Marlow for the use of his trailer and to all who helped with maintaining the cemetery. Thanks and gratitude go especially to Rick and Judy Noyd who volunteer to mow large areas of the cemetery weekly throughout the summer. In the winter, Mr. Noyd also plows the road, a great relief for our budget.

To all who contributed money to the cemetery so that we could carry out the necessary maintenance and projects: THANK YOU! Gifts were received from: Laurie Dietrich, Anne-Marie Gunderson, Barbara and Dale Haack, Mike Haeuser, Christopher Johnson, Gene Lund, Dorothy Lutz, Shelly Mayo, Rebecca Otterness, Barb Regner, Karen Smithers, Thrivent Choice, Barbara Wilkinson.

To make the congregation aware of the beautiful cemetery grounds, articles written by Barb Haack and Barb Wilkinson have appeared in the Fall and Nov./Dec. Church Newsletters. We hope that members and friends will consider gifts toward the operation and beautification of the cemetery.

We are currently working on the informative sign that will direct visitors toward graves of family and friends. Also, the storage shed on the North side is in need of repair. Better siding and new roof shingles will prolong its life. The west side of the cemetery will need stump removal, landscaping, and tree seedlings. There is no shortage of projects.

Social Justice - *Amy Ronnkvist*

Accomplishments:

1. In August 2020, re-invigorated the Social Justice Committee after a delayed start in 2020. Updated the new charter, recruited new membership and developed a plan for upcoming year.
2. Set up a list to provide weekly snacks for medical staff serving St. Peter Free Clinic, which is now available for congregation to sign up.
3. Worked with FLC committees to add a food drive to Advent nativity event.
4. Made connections to Union Street Place through Partners for Housing to explore how FLC can support the work of this group who are helping families with housing insecurity.
5. Did some research to explore how other churches do the work of social justice and found some good examples and ideas that we want to incorporate.
6. Have started planning for a monthly educational online forum that will be available to FLC and the wider community. The first one will tentatively launch on January 22 pending potential speaker who has been identified.
7. Worked with Hikmah to advertise for tutors needed for students.
8. Are exploring ways to advertise and let the congregation know about events in the community related to social justice.
9. Have brainstormed with Pastor Bill on ways to be more proactive to find families who may benefit from pastoral discretionary funds. External outreach was done to Somali store in town as well as Dave Ribar who works closely with students and families at the school district. They have already been able to help several additional families.

List of Endowed and Non-Endowed Gifts held by FLC *(as of 12/31/2020)*

Holmberg Music Endowment—designated for special music events

Johnson Heritage Fund—endowed gift designated for purchase of Bibles for children and special initiatives relating to the spiritual growth of children...as well as for support of RIC initiatives

Logan Mission Endowment—designated for support of Christians through the world, especially through world missions of the ELCA

Ruth L. Matson Endowment—undesignated but with family interests in Christian education needs

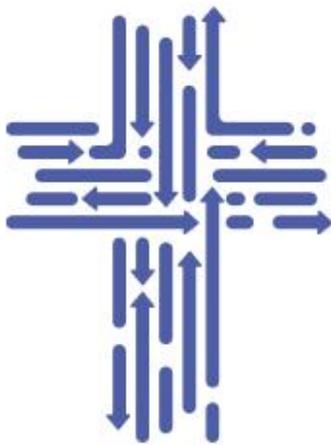
Seminary Scholarship Endowment—designated to provide scholarships for any First Lutheran Church member who is enrolled at a seminary in a program leading to rostered service in the church

Social Ministry Endowment—designated to support the educational and direct action dimensions of the congregation's social ministry

Esther Youngquist Endowment—undesignated, but donor interest in world missions, and venture ministries of First Lutheran Church

Youth Scholarship Fund—endowed gift designated to provide scholarship assistance for youth interested in attending events such as summer camps, youth conferences/assemblies, confirmation retreats, etc. that have a Christian religious component.

Ruth & Ted Larson Endowment—endowed gift designated for a variety of broad causes to be determined by the FLC Council.



“What will serve the Gospel now?”

2020-2021 Annual Report

+Bishop Jon Anderson



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

In the Old Testament, Ezra's third chapter tells the story of God's people beginning to rebuild after the deep losses of a time of exile in Babylon. We have been living through a much less damaging pandemic but it has made this text one of my favorites for this year because it names both the grief and the joy of God's people.

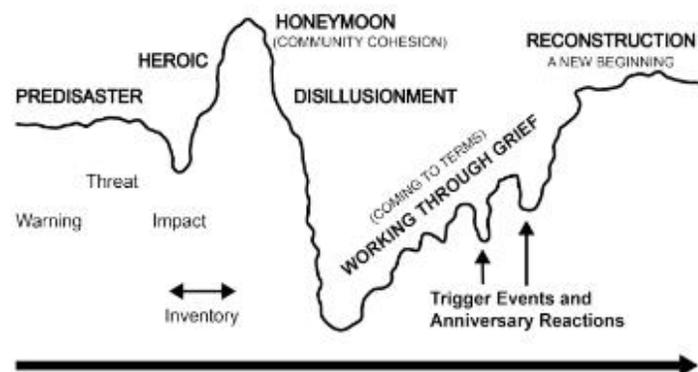
¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people responded with a **great shout when they praised the Lord**, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹² But **many** of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, **wept with a loud voice** when they saw this house, though **many shouted aloud for joy**, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.”

That is the state of my heart as I think back through the journey of the last year. I want to weep and lament for the ways our lives and communities of faith have been damaged by the virus, by our own choices, and by the choices of people around us. I want to weep for the lives lost, friends who have or will leave us, and fears about the uncertainty of the future. I also want to shout with praise to God for leading us through this season and getting us to this point nearing the end of our wrestling with this virus. Looking forward I have concerns and fears, but I have a deeper confidence that trusts God is with us and guiding us through this wilderness. Like God's people in troubled times in the past, I trust God will work in the lives of people, congregations, and synod to grow us stronger and more faithful through this time of struggle.

We will soon need to imagine the reconstruction process after this slow unending disaster. Like God's people struggled coming out of the wilderness during the Exodus, we will have our challenges in what will be a delayed, messy, and likely confusing process of returning to in-person ministry, worship and congregational life that will unfold unevenly in time and across our synod.

Emotional Life Cycle of Disaster



We have new gifts for this part of our journey that have been developed and discovered. I give thanks for the muscles grown. We have grown more comfortable discerning and deciding as God's people. These skills will bear fruit for decades. I give thanks for the many adjustments and innovations we have made that will serve the Gospel now and after the virus' threat has ended. The learning and capacities will not be lost. I give thanks for the many lay people who have stepped forward and our ministers, too. Most of us could never imagine we could do what we have done. We have not gotten everything right, but God has kept leading us, protecting us, inspiring us to forgive and to execute new strategies for all forms of ministry – worship, faith formation, youth ministry, pastoral care, serving our neighbors – to safely navigate this time of the virus. In the coming days, weeks, months, and years we are called to work together to build a better “normal” for our lives, families, congregations, communities, and world. It will take faith and hope. God will inspire us to love, have courage, and practice forgiveness in the coming year.

God's Spirit inspired our imaginations, called us through a wilderness of challenges and opened our eyes to revelations in this apocalyptic time. An “apocalypse” is literally “an uncovering.” It reveals or uncovers our brokenness – personally, communally and in the systems of our shared life. Yet, there has been an equal or even greater uncovering of our assets, capacity, willingness to reform our life together for the sake of the Gospel and to protect the most vulnerable in our communities and congregations. In the coming year congregations and leaders will continue to be called to...

“Listen to God, each other, ourselves, and the World.

Reconnect with God's story and God's faithfulness.

Define the challenges we are facing.

Reframe our expectations and goals.

Cultivate new ways of being the church through spiritual practices and innovation.”

-Luther Seminary Faithful Innovation Project

I invite you to join me in the balcony and look at our life together as a synod for a bit. It has been something, this past year. The challenges, growing pains, threats have been many and hard. The opportunities, learning and transformation have been stunning. Even as we move forward, make more exciting discoveries, and learn new ways, we also need to be aware of people's various emotional and spiritual journeys. In this season of uncertainty, tension, and conflict, we will need to monitor and pace our plans for the future. We can both plan and move forward, while attending to the folks who are grieving and struggling with the deep change of the past and coming days. As I shared in the past, four great questions are:

What is lost? What is left? What is possible?

What will serve the Gospel now?

Most people have been focused on navigating their personal lives, keeping their businesses going, and living in a reality where we cannot relate to each other in normal ways - both in our families and our communities. Your synod staff has likewise worked hard to sort out how to do our work in Zoom and other electronic forms of communications. We have had to develop capacity and competency using new tools that help us collaborate and sustain the core of your synod's functions. Reconciliation ministry has been a place of major investment of energy. At the same time we have encouraged and sought to grow people to serve in their congregational roles, some as rostered ministers. We have sought to answer our calling to “equip” by supporting congregational life. Transitions have been more challenging and needed more attention. Pr. Dee Pederson and a team of people have encouraged mission through initiatives like our two churchwide grants, which were deployed to love our neighbors in need and encourage hunger ministries. Task groups have gathered around themes like faith formation, racial justice networking, and thinking about “Growing Young” in our congregations in this time. We have also sought to share information about the virus and best practices

from across our synod and church. I will not list off all the great work of your synod staff team, but I could. I am thankful for each member of your synod staff and governance.

People often talk about the synod like the synod is your bishop, but I know the truth. It is a team of committed and caring people who each bring their gifts to our shared-life with a confidence that “together, by God’s grace, we have all that we need.” This team also includes our council, deans, conference chair people and conference ministers. The word “synod” means to be on the road walking together. At the deepest level it includes all the baptized ones who have cared for siblings in Christ in neighboring congregations and in proclaiming the Good News by what they have said and done. As I looked through our calendar for the past year thinking of the journey, deep gratitude washed over me for all the ways God has worked through the faithful to care for God’s Church and God’s world.

Your synod office is thankful for your ongoing generosity and support. Your support of your congregation and your larger church has been heroic, noticed and appreciated.

I am remembering and giving thanks to God for 17 years of walking together on the road of faith and through this chapter of the synod’s history. It has been something. It has been a great challenge and an amazing privilege to serve in this way.

We are thankful for the servants who have served your synod in many ways. This year we particularly want to express gratitude to our whole synod staff and governance system. We will miss Conference Minister, Pr. Joyce Graue, who retired. I also want to express deep gratitude and appreciation for the sacrificial love so many lay leaders have shown in this crisis. We all give thanks for the next generation of people who have and will step forward to serve in and guide our synod, including someone who will serve as the next bishop.

I am confident the coming election process will not only open space to discern who will serve as the bishop, but also provoke a deep and meaningful conversation about our synod’s mission field and what kind of leaders and vision will best serve God in the coming chapter of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod’s life. We trust we are called into God’s preferred and promised future, **Embracing God’s Mission and Equipping God’s People - Equipping Congregations, Engaging Leaders, and Enhancing Local and Global Mission.**

I invite you all to join me in being available to read scripture daily, pray for God’s guidance in your life and practice our faith in daily callings in life. I currently am reading a chapter a day in the New Testament. Yesterday, this text showed up.

“Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you.” -1 Thessalonians 1

A helpful prayer:

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings, and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 76)

• ANNUAL REPORT FROM GUSTAVUS CHURCH RELATIONS — DECEMBER 2020 •

Greetings to you from your partners in ministry at Gustavus Adolphus College! The definition of community at Gustavus has always included the wider ELCA community. The network of institutions and relationships which holds our Lutheran congregations, synods, camps, colleges, seminaries, and social agencies together plays a vital role in nourishing and advancing our collective and important contribution to the world. We all make a greater impact because of this diverse network to which we belong.

The past year has presented challenges that relentlessly moved across our country (and world) while at the same time significantly stretching our respective communities in unprecedented ways. Yet, like no other time have we shared in such an experience as church and college. Common to each of us has been a season of serious grappling with issues ranging from a global pandemic and community health concerns to rising social unrest and concern for equity and unaddressed racial justice to a very contentious election cycle and concern for unity and the wellbeing of our nation.

Through the Gustavus Association of Congregations the Office of Church Relations at Gustavus is connected to over 500 congregations from across the country. These relationships are an important source of Christian faith inspiration and ministry encouragement for the college. This has especially been true during these tumultuous times. As we have looked to you our ministry partners, you are a source of inspiration for how you have creatively adapted to faithfully continue your ministry in your context. *Thank you.* You are a source of encouragement to us for the humble and genuine ways you have courageously engaged racial justice concerns in your community. *Thank you.* The Christian love you share to all people and the healing presence of love you seek to embody in a divided community is an inspiring witness and source of hope to us. *Thank you.*

As you gather for congregation annual meetings and synod assemblies, we hope you are inspired by the reminder of the many others who walk alongside you in mission. We sincerely hope we can be a source of Christian faith inspiration, encouragement, and hope for you as well. The Office of Church Relations at Gustavus exists because as a college we live from our Christian faith and desire to be in service to the wider community within which we are rooted. We seek to be a place you might consider as a ministry partner and resource for your congregation's educational goals and growth.

MARK YOUR 2021 CALENDARS AND JOIN US FOR THESE SPECIAL EVENTS:

- **Annual Gustavus Association of Congregations Business Meeting Luncheon — APRIL 24, 2021**
The Annual Business Meeting of the Gustavus Adolphus College Association of Congregations will gather virtually and feature updates from the Gustavus President and Chair of the Board of Trustees as well as inspiration from Gustavus students. For more information: gustavus.edu/businessmeeting
- **The Gustavus Academy for Faith, Science, and Ethics — JUNE 19-25, 2021**, an exciting resource for high school youth interested in exploring creative alliances between faith and science. The theme for the 2021 Academy is *"Who am I? Media, Technology, and Me."* For more information and to nominate a high school student: gustavus.edu/chaplain/academy
- **Annual Nobel Conference® — OCTOBER 5-6, 2021** *"Big Data REvolution."*
- **Christmas in Christ Chapel — DECEMBER 2-5, 2021**

For more information about these events and the many resources we offer congregations, please contact the Office of Church Relations or visit us on-line at: www.gustavus.edu/churchrelations. Thank you for your partnership and prayers!

Rev. Grady St. Dennis
College Chaplain/Director of Church Relations