

## Bishop's 2019 Synod Assembly Report

"I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds."

Psalms. 9:1

Beloved, I am truly grateful for this opportunity to serve in Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod as your fifth synodical bishop. I consider this an honor, a privilege and I am coming to find much hard work to the glory of God in the up-building of the Kingdom. I am elated to have some great staff people, an awesome Vice-president, Executive Committee and a working Synod Council to accompany me on this journey.

How do you say, thank you, for a gift so priceless, God bless you Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council for the historic installation you hosted. It was epic, I am still in awe of how the Holy Spirit guided almost 2,000 in a worship that was truly reflective of who we are as a Synod in our lay and rostered leadership, music, ordo, inter-faith partners and fellowship. The Mass Choir was excellent; each participant from our five-county area had to attempt to attend three evening rehearsals in the city of Philadelphia, no small feat. Presiding Bishop Eaton and Rev. Kevin Strickland were gracious in understanding our desire to include members of the Historic Black Church tradition in the laying on of hand in the Apostolic Succession. Yes, historic, it only happened in SEPA Synod. The Holy Smoke pre-celebration was powerful, it served its purpose, drawing people into a deeper relationship with Jesus through the proclamation of the Word, followed by food, fellowship and dancing. To complete our day, all enjoyed the post installation dinner, especially, fifty of our out-of-state guests. In addition, our guests travelling by bus from New York and Maryland who received boxed meals to-go.

A special word of thanks to Vice-President Beasley, Ms. Yvonne Curtis, Installation Planning Team and our Synod staff for going above and beyond the call of duty to create a historic worship experience, as said by many, "it was a once in a life-time affair."

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching." Hebrews 10:24-25

### Synod Events

#### *Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Council*

Our executive team of Synod Council helped me better understand how Vice-President Beasley and Secretary Richard make our Synod Council meetings run so effortlessly. I had an opportunity to convey we are pressing forward evaluating current staff configuration. We are exploring how we will collaboratively work together as the seamless Office of the Bishop through four teams: Administration, Communications, Vitality, and Mission Advancement. Our new configuration may include possible stipend staff and volunteers supported by administrative assistance. It is my hope with these four pillars we will advance our Lutheran tribe in building up the Kingdom of God in Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod in a more impactful manner.

I have met with our Synod Council leaders four times sharing the following information on the work of ministry in and through the Office of the Bishop.

#### *Committee of Deans*

I meet monthly with our Committee of Deans: Pr. Regina Goodrich, Central Philadelphia; Pr. Ron Wesemann, Chester; Pr. Leslie Richard, Delaware; Pr. Norbert Hahn, Lower Bucks; Pr. Julie DeWerth, Lower

Montgomery; Pr. Jane Marston, Ne/W Philadelphia; Pr. Carolann Hopcke, Upper Bucks; Pr. Chris McKinstry, Upper Montgomery; Pr. Chris McMullan, Transitional Ministry (formerly Interim Ministry); and Pr. Marcia Bell, Director of Mobility, who chairs our meetings. Our Deans are vital to mobility and transitions in our congregations/communities of faith and serve as deployed staff to the Office of the Bishop. We discussed how we will continue to work together in raising a standard of excellence in our process of interviewing candidates entering our synod, working with lay leaders during transitions and continuing Kingdom building work in our conferences that will draw people into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

### *Synod Conference Meetings*

- *Delaware Conference Assembly* (Dean Leslie Richard), at St. Matthew, Springfield with approximately 70 in attendance. After the conference order of business was completed it did not leave much time for dialogue; nonetheless, this gathering was my first opportunity to introduce myself and hear from those gathered their hopes, dreams, concerns and fears. When asked my vision for Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, I said, together we set our vision. I believe that God is calling us to be the Kingdom, here on earth. We pray the Lord's Prayer daily, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." If we say it every Sunday, how about we live it daily. All of us can make a difference, Delaware County should be different because our congregations/communities of faith are here. The good things happening in the Church, was their presence and commitment reflected in their willingness to come out on a Monday evening in such large numbers to handle conference business. Unfortunately, due to time limitation our conversation had to end, I shared my email with those who wanted to continue the dialogue.

- *Upper Montgomery Conference* (Dean Chris McKinstry) at Grace, Royersford, with approximately 70 in attendance. Table conversations with fellow conference attendees and dialogue led to the following verbatim highlights:

1. Embrace anti-racism training as a synod. Claim it with fervor!
2. Take it out to the streets – get out with our communities.
3. Merge congregations as so many have become small.
4. Be the Hope.
5. Understand: express our own vulnerabilities in order to uplift others in their vulnerabilities, nobody is alone when we are walking together in Christ.
6. Interfaith groups forming relationships across denominational lines.
7. We are one Congregation with 150 locations.
8. Be more than a building.
9. We need to be a Target – everything you need in one place.
10. Plant a seed.
11. Be a place where people go in times of need.
12. Start with prayer – for what we need (SEPA Cycle of Prayer, prayer for three congregations/organizations each Sunday of the year.)
13. Holy Spirit can make us experts – give us words to say.
14. Preach the damn Gospel.
15. Lead people out of fear, trust God more than fear.
16. Combining resources and assets since we (churches in SEPA synod) are so geographically close.
17. Overcoming the "island" mentality. Getting communities of faith to work together.
18. Developing/training people (not necessarily clergy) skilled in outreach.
19. Focusing on project that write congregations in outreach- zeroing in on the "passion" of communities.
20. Help congregations connect, developing shared "vision," building pathways between our communities that we might really come to know each other.
21. Identifying community needs and taking action on them by asking people on the front line.
22. Re-establish the programs that used to pair an urban and suburban church.
23. Be honest about the fact that we are all facing challenges in our ministries.
24. Help our people get over the fear of failure.

Overall, it was a very spirit-filled gathering with great positive energy, our laity want to creatively move ministry forward. We are tasked with providing programs, events and learning opportunity to strengthen faith and witness of our congregations/communities of faith. I sense that our Rostered Minister are ready and willing for Vitality Workshops (leadership training on the marks and methods of vital communities of Jesus.)

•*Lower Montgomery Conference* Rostered Leader's Gathering (Dean Julie DeWerth) at Grace, Hatfield, with 25 in attendance. "Finances and Stewardship, What's New?" I was one of four presenters: Patty Cline, Director of Advancement for Liberty Lutheran "New Donation Structures Under the New Tax Laws." Guenter Wesch, Owner and Accountant for Wesch Financial, LLC "Taxes for Clergy and Congregation Members." Larry Smoose, Chair of Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Generosity Team tasked with "Cultivating a Culture of Generosity in Your Congregation." Theresa F. Haenn, Regional Representative/Donor Advisor, Lutheran World Relief. I offer their names and occupations because each is a member of a congregation in our Synod, all saying here we are use us to strengthen our congregations/synod.

*Chester Conference* met at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Unionville. I was warmly welcomed by our host pastors: Pastors Rick DeRasmo and Adrienne Meier and members of the congregation that prepared a great spread of foods. I led the election process for conference Dean where Pr. Ron Weseman was overwhelmingly re-elected Dean for another term.

I welcomed the opportunity to answer questions from those gathered, as always, "Bishop, what is your vision for the Synod?" My response, what are your hopes and dreams for our Synod, as we are co-creators? We talked about sustainability, which I moved to resilience as we are always going to be inundated with some person, place or thing that will try to get in the way of vitality. I offered some suggestions on collaborations between large congregations that can anchor smaller congregations with an intern, create a multi-site or simply share leadership. I am happy to say the conversation grew with other possibilities.

#### *Transitional Ministry Development Team*

I met with our TMDT: (Pr. Donna Wright, chair, Pr. Christian McMullan, Director of Transition Ministers, Pr. Regina Goodrich, Pr. Marcia Bell, Director of Mobility, Pr. Sandra Brown, Pr. Fritz Fowler, Ms. Teri Lanan, and Mr. Karl McClellan.) Our team includes lay persons who have recently experienced a pastoral transition, pastors who have recently taken a call following a transition minister, Transition Ministers, and others who are passionate about improving transition ministry.

TMDT's purpose and function is to support SEPA Synod communities of faith going through pastoral transitions, as well as to support the pastors and lay persons trained to lead faith communities through such transitions. One essential aspect of TMDT is ensuring transition practices are flexible, to suit varying needs and situations, while maintaining and increasing integrity and quality. We are blessed to have a cadre' of nimble trained transition ministers (extension of the Office of the Bishop) able to respond to the needs of changing context.

The TMDT has devoted time over the last few months reviewing standards and practices for transition ministry in Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod in an effort to revise our 2015 Pastoral Transition: Lay Person's Guide. TMDT reviews and responds to quarterly reports submitted by the trained transition ministers and conducts exit interviews. It was good to hear their full purpose and practices.

#### *Interim Ministry*

I welcomed the opportunity to meet with our Interim Ministers, who represent the Office of the Bishop during times of congregational transition. We gathered at Faith, Montgomeryville, to understand how interims engage in continual learning, mutual support and accountability, and keep up to date with the synod. I was intrigued by their questions, noting everything is contextual, it is really an intimate dance with three partners.

#### *2018 Bishop's Convocation*

BEING BELOVED COMMUNITY, our annual gathering of Rostered Ministers was held at Bear Creek Resort and Conference center, Macungie, PA. We had a record 137 registered with a few lay spouses in attendance. Our theme raising from Acts 2:41-47, for the community of Acts it was breaking bread and holding all things in common. Lutheran Social Services remind us, “Luther’s call that people care for one another in response to God’s grace created...essentially the first social services agency in Europe—the Common Chest.” Dr. King, held “a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth” rejecting all forms of poverty, hunger, racism, and discrimination. I truly believe that we can do more and we are stronger together!

We took this opportunity to introduce our Office of the Bishop: Office staff, Committee of Deans, Advisor for fitness for ministry, Advisor on Holy Closure, Director of Mobility, Director of Interim Ministry, and Director of Candidacy. We also included key ministry partners: Portico Benefit Services regional representative, Barb Debski; Mission Investment Fund regional representative, Gerry Lauro; Dr. Richard Green, Interim President, ULS and Dr. John Williams, Jr., President, Muhlenberg College. We utilized the gifts of many Rostered Ministers in preaching, singing, or participating in other areas. This was our first one night convocation, a test on cost and attendance, met with a mix of opinions, we are still evaluating. A big thank you to Pr. Sue Lang, Ms. Cynta Outterbridge and our convocation planning team for a successful event.

### *Healthy Boundaries Workshop*

We are blessed with gifted leaders in the Office of the Bishop, I am thankful for Rev. Dr. Dolores Littleton who teaches our Rostered Ministers the value of maintaining healthy boundaries within their personal and professional lives. Participating in this training offered me an opportunity through prayer and devotions to lay a theological foundation for boundaries. Also, for my part, I come to better understand why Bishops’ Formation Training starts with Legal 101 and 102 to assist Bishops in maneuvering and maintaining healthy boundaries within our systems. Personally, hearing again about “the attachment theory” I recognize the value of Rostered Ministers bonding with the leadership and the community they have been called to serve within the first year. In addition, I continue to learn how to sure up clear boundaries, taking responsibility for my own choices to avoid, misunderstandings, stress and undue pain for or to others.

### *Holy Closures*

Pr. William Vanderslice spent a considerable amount of time working with, Pr. Don Wright, the Council and members of *Immanuel Lutheran Church, Burholme*. Immanuel, officially closed her doors on November 11, 2018, the pews were filled, and the worship was “wonderful” and bittersweet for many who had returned home. There were tears at the altar rail where some had received their first communion, stood to be married or said farewell to a loved one. Pr. Don Wright was blessed, thanked and embraced by all for his ministry. Mr. Martin Schwab received all official documents on behalf of the Synod. During the fellowship, it was good to hear stories of old and hopes for finding new communities of faith. In addition, Mr. Schwab returned on Wednesday, November 28th to remove items for University Lutheran of the Incarnation, the legacy continues.

*St. John’s Lutheran Church in Quakertown*, our first of possibly five Holy Closures in 2019, it was bittersweet as we closed the congregation and celebrated Deacon Martha Fisher’s retirement from this congregation where she played for hundreds of services in addition to teaching so many to play instruments.

Our thanks to all who accompanied the members of St. John’s on their two-year journey toward leaving a legacy. The church council is to be commended, Pr. David Genszler, Bridge Pastor, and as always to Pr. Bill Vanderslice and Mr. Martin Schwab who dotted every “I” and crossed every “T” to assure that every legal detail was complete.

*St. John's Lutheran Church in Ambler* had her closing service on Sunday, March 31, 2019 at 3:00 p.m. The "Little Church with the Big Heart" will continue her legacy in the hearts, hands and minds of the faithful people who came to faith in baptism, grew in faith through worship, study, music, service and leadership. St. John's will continue as the members continue their ministry with other organizations and worship communities, especially The Welcome Church. The Welcome Church found herself recipients of Tuesday meals as well as Sunday Coffee Hours on the JFK Parkway in Philadelphia. The church has disbanded, her witness continues to the glory of God. The following congregations and pastors will be offering pastoral care and hosting an open house to welcome the Saints of St. John's: St. Peter's, North Wales, Rev. Andreas Wagner; Christ's Evangelical, Oreland, Rev. William A. Vanderslice; Grace Evangelical, Hatfield, Rev. Janet Peterman; Upper Dublin Lutheran Church, Ambler, Rev. Dyan Lawlor and Rev. Keith Anderson.

The Rev. William Vanderslice, consultant to communities of faith in the process of Holy Closure shared an overview of his work. Pr. Vanderslice shared the intricacies and the benefits of meeting with leaders at the first signs of difficulty to assess if closure is the only option or if this is a false negative. If it is a false negative, this is a new conversation; however, if not, we want ministries to close well, leaving a legacy. Pastor Vanderslice is my special advisor on these matters. Please note, our Committee of Deans have put us on notice that there is the possibility of five congregations in early conversations of Holy Closure, we are working with Congregational Vitality on a ministry reviews to assess if closure is the only answer. As the number of Holy Closures are on the rise we have asked Pr. Bill Vanderslice and Pr. Bryan Penman, chair of our Vitality Team to collaborate in giving congregations possibly another option of death and resurrection, a holy innovation.

#### *Synod Staff Development Retreat*

Our first Synod Staff Retreat held at Chubb Conference Center in Lafayette Hill. It was a gift for our staff to be able to step away from our office to intentionally focus on "Who we are, where we are going and how we get there," to achieve a seamless team to serve SEPA Synod.

Dr. Jeffrey Branch, program chair, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM) served as facilitator over two-days working on building relationship, examining how we work together and how we can we work more cohesively considering our size and our work demand. Yes, we are working smarter, not harder to serve in a higher capacity to meet the needs of our stakeholder.

We hope to find funding to invest in our staff professional development on an annual basis to allow us to be adaptive leaders in these changing and challenging times.

#### *First Call Retreat*

This is our second gathering using a synodical model of building leadership and relationship with our gifted first call rostered ministers. We gathered at Crossroads Camp, NJ, for a two-day event (Continuing Education) that intentionally included seasoned pastors to embrace our adaptive learning/change model. I appreciated having the opportunity to preach, preside and dialogue with all gathered. We are fortunate to have an excellent planning team, led by Pr. Bradley Burke.

Also, a debt of gratitude to those who serve as an extension of the Office of the Bishop in the various team noted above.

### **ELCA Events**

#### *ELCA Bishop's Formation*

As a pre-cursor to my official tenure as bishop on August 1st, from July 10th -13th, I attended the New Bishop's Formation Event at our Churchwide office. We each were assigned a mentor bishop, mine is Bishop Sam Zeiser, Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod. This was a joyful and spirit-filled educational gathering with six other newly elected bishops, five who are women and one Latino male. Praise God, our Lutheran denomination is becoming more diverse in many ways.

Our entrance to this event was rooted in Compline and blessings as we shared our "journey to election" stories. My story was filled with reflections of the movement of the Holy Spirit in and amongst the voting members as they listened, discerned and voted for seven, three and finally one. The following morning we had an opportunity to worship with Churchwide staff in chapel laying a foundation for our work sessions as noted below.

Rev. Dr. Walter May and the Synodical Relations staff, our host, arranged intensives with multiple unit leaders:

- **Healthy Boundary:** Ms. Barbara Keller gave an overview of the importance of synodical boundary training for the prevention of sexual misconduct, noting it begins with candidacy. Nonetheless, a considerable amount of time was spent with General Counsel, Thomas Cunniff on how to deal with allegations of clergy sexual misconduct as if not handled properly they end up in lawsuits. Mr. Cunniff noted the importance of legal representation for the ELCA and the synods. I thought of how wise, our Synod is to have Mr. John Gordon as our legal representative. Who, by the way, is known and highly respected at Churchwide.
- **Rev. Dr. Wyvetta Bullock** gave an overview of "Called Forward Together in Christ," which included our five goals of the church we are becoming: 1) A thriving church spreading the gospel and deepening faith for all people; 2) A church equipping people for their baptismal vocations in the world and this church; 3) An inviting and welcoming church that reflects and embraces the diversity in our communities and the gifts and opportunities that diversity bring; 4) A visible church deeply committed to working ecumenically and with other people of faith for justice, peace and reconciliation in our communities and around the world; 5) A well-governed, connected and sustainable church. I believe for us, all five are priorities as we move our communities of faith toward Kingdom building. Dr. Bullock also shared our Churchwide operational plan that included an offer of early retirement to reduce the upcoming budget.
- **The Rev. Ron Gluskamp and Ms. Rebecca Payne** presented Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA. Their sharing included the "ask" (it was artful) for each new bishop to give \$5,000 personally to the campaign.
- **ELCA Secretary, the Rev. Wm Chris Boerger** shared on Constitutional matters (we each received a copy of the constitution with our names on the cover). Secretary Boerger noted that it is helpful to have knowledge of ELCA and Synodical constitutions for good order.
- **Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Executive for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations** shared the characteristics of Full Communion, noting our six communion partners. Ms. Lohre, highlighted our Lutheran-Catholic and Lutheran-Orthodox dialogues. I found interesting our "bilateral conversations/partnerships with African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Mennonite, Union of Reform Judaism and Islamic Society of North America. Also, we have multilateral conversations/partnerships with Historic Black Churches (i.e. Black Methodist Coalition, Conference of National Black Churches) Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) and Church World Service. I have been assigned

to the Inter-Religious Relations that works with National Council of Churches USA Inter-Religious Dialogues and Convening Table, Religions for Peace USA, Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign: Standing Together with American Muslims, Upholding American Values and Council for the Parliament of the World Religions. I am happy to know that we have ongoing conversations with the aforementioned groups. I trust I was asked to serve due to Bishop Burkat's involvement through our synod.

There was a word on all of our policy and social statements adopted by Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, i.e. Human Rights, Ecumenism with a special emphasis on the Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice.

- Global Mission gave an update on projects and events, with a reminder of our companion synod relationship, of course we are blessed to be in partnership with the North Eastern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania.

My overall take away from our formation event for my journey as bishop is captured in our ELCA founding documents:

The most succinct vision of how we are to live our life together is expressed in the key principle of interdependence. ELCA provision 8.11 beautifully explains that commitment: "This church shall seek to function as people of God through congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization [i.e., the three primary expressions of this church], all of which shall be interdependent. Each part, while fully the church, recognizes that it is not the whole church and therefore lives in a partnership relationship with the others." That is, each part possesses and reflects "ecclesial density" or churchly substance, but no one part is the whole church. Who knew our mantra, we can do more together than we can alone, is really "ecclesial density."

### *ELCA Installations*

Historic, on Saturday, August 18th, Bishop Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld, was the first African American woman, installed as bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I was privileged, no obligated to attend the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin installation of their new bishop. We began this great celebration with a party on Friday night to facilitate fellowship for all those who traveled from across the country. We enjoyed collegial conversation, food, dancing, and much laughter. On Saturday, there was a festival worship filled with good music, a wonderful poignant message from Presiding Bishop Eaton. The worship music, prayers, drummer, and ordo was true to Bishop Thomas-Breitfeld, all complimented by a grand reception hosted by members of First Lutheran in Janesville, Wisconsin.

Also, I was grateful for the opportunity to travel to Puerto Rico to attend the installation of Bishop Idalia Negron, a former Director for Evangelical Mission that I served with for almost 10 years. A pre-celebration dinner that was cooked and hosted by Bishop Negron, with traditional Puerto Rican food and dance. The worship service opened showing highlights of the Martin Luther film followed by a picture of every congregation in the synod followed by cheers from each ministry. The installation involved additional signs of the office, notably a basin and a Bible, (Word and service) which I appreciated. It was a great opportunity to reconnect with Ms. Junia John-Straker, CEO of Lutheran Services of the Virgin Islands, who served on the LSA Board during my tenure, made some introductions to strengthen our networks.

### *Conference of Bishops (COB)*

A new concept of COB, including Churchwide Unit staff leaders in our meeting, being present to answer questions about current happening and/or future directions. There was quite a bit of dialogue on our ELCA priorities. If Congregational Vitality is our priority then this is what Bishop Eaton is lifting up in her messages.

We have continuing concerns over declining congregations, denominational loyalty and CW financial resources.

As a member of COB's Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Liaison Committee, I had a pre-meeting to discuss our ongoing conversations with multiple religions. I am happy to say we are in deeper discussion with our Roman Catholic siblings, looking forward to a good report. Also, having more intentional conversations with our Historic Black churches.

All ELCA Regions met to hear the assignments of new seminary graduates to synods. In this cycle there were a total of 108 candidates, 55 were unrestricted and available for placement; however, bishops reported that there are 258 first call vacancies in the ELCA. We were blessed to receive Ms. Kelsey Brown.

Presiding Bishop Eaton opened the conversation on the draft document that will replace Vision and Expectations, which is known as Trustworthy Servant of the People of God. The COB agreed on the language of the final draft of the document and voted to recommend it to the Churchwide Council. In addition a Pastoral Letter from the COB was sent speaking to the past use of Vision and Expectations. Follow link to review [Visions and Expectations](#).

Response to Trustworthy Servants in Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, we experienced a good number of mixed responses, most pastors are communicating around this matter with thoughtfulness, respect for others and high levels of spiritual maturity. A few that are challenging, yet included suggestions on how to make the document "aspirational." Some comments focused on the overall process used in forming the document. I invite you to read my response in: [A Pastoral Message](#).

#### *Bishop's Academy*

Caring for our Common Home was the theme for our sobering conversation on climate change, its effect on our planet and our people. Dr. Larry Rasmussen laid the foundation giving us irrefutable statistical data, which was theologically supported in his co-presenter, Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's comments. I was struck by the sense of urgency this dialogue has stirred in me for my children's children as they are left to deal with the global crisis we have created by our actions or lack of. Concerning to me is our current President's denial there is global warming.

Nonetheless, Bishop Rodger Prois, of Western Iowa Synod, quoted a friend from his Tanzanian companion synod, Dr. Gabriel Ezekia Nduye, in his PhD dissertation: Climate change, in relation to the world of agriculture, has harmed and continues to harm all forms of life on earth. This study is an attempt to explore ways through which an African Christian ethic of care can be cultivated to promote sustainable agriculture in the context of climate change in Tanzania. Using theories of ecological transformation and of responsibility, also based on qualitative approaches to inquiry, the study argues that, because the agricultural sector is both a contributor to, and a victim of, climate change, a comprehensive African Christian ethic of care can make a significant contribution towards addressing challenges of climate change and environmental degradation today. (A copy of dissertation given upon request).

While Dr. Nduye's paper offers hope, Drs. Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda are sounding the alert, time is of the essence, we need to act now in great ways to slow global warming over the next 3-5 years before we hit the point of no repair.

The Rev. Amy Reumann, Director of Advocacy gave practical ways to contact government official. Ruth M. Ivory-Moore, Program Director, Environment and Corporate Social Responsibility, ELCA noted The Paris Agreement states: Climate change is a common concern of humankind. Parties should, when acting to address

climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the rights gained. (Read more about the Talanoa Dialogue here:

[http://blogs.elca.org/advocacy/the-paris-agreement-and-the-talanoa-dialogue/.](http://blogs.elca.org/advocacy/the-paris-agreement-and-the-talanoa-dialogue/))

Dr. Rasmussen concluded our time by sharing a love letter to his six-year-old grandson, Eduardo, in which he apologized for the state of planet earth. This causes me to examine personally and professionally how I can make a difference for those to come.

### *Consultation with Seminary Presidents*

The ELCA Seminary leaders extended an invitation to our Bishops of Color: Guy Erwin, Abraham Allende, Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld, Pedro Suarez, Idalia Negrón Caamaño and myself to meet with seminary presidents, deans and staff for a dialogue on Sacred Space for Collaborative Listening to Build Contextually Real Leadership for the ELCA. Ms. Peggy Hahn, founder of LEAD, our facilitator guided us through relationship building, clarifying barriers to theological education, giving voice to hope and imagination to what theological education might look like with systemic change. In addition, shared opportunities and barriers related to recruitment and mentoring of people of color. Identify where there is energy for the highest priority ideas. Bishops were asked to identify other leaders to include in the next conversation, also, identify next steps for moving forward with future conversation and relationship.

### *Global Mission*

The Global Mission Unit invited newly-elected bishops to visit the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) January 23 to 30th to raise our awareness and understanding of ELCJHL and the ELCA Churchwide Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine. This is critical for engaging a key ministry of the ELCA's global advocacy. It is also worthy to note, SEPA Synod has eight congregations that have supported missionaries in ELCJHL to the sum of \$15,750.00.

We met the newly elected Bishop Ibrahim Azar of ELCJHL as well as former Bishop Younan who stated, "I am very happy that the unity of the church has been maintained." Opportunity was given for us to visit congregations, schools and related ministries to speak with students, teachers and administrators. The visit highlighted ecumenical and interfaith relations, the daily lives of Palestinian Christians, and the new direction of ELCJHL under Bishop Azar. We, also, met with Israeli officials to discuss the end of Occupation, which was a very short conversation. This is such a complex situation, with two sides and two truths that have led to no resolve.

The highlights for me were not only the historic sites, but spending time with our missionaries and our Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM). These committed, courageous and collaborative leaders were a joy, delight and impetus to be good and faithful servants in a strange land.

### *Urban Collaboration a Holy Experiment*

Mr. Joe Young, Director for Poverty and Justice Ministries, ELCA and several of our urban/first ring suburban pastors met to discuss how we might work to create a plan, write a grant and implement a strategy to assist congregations in resiliency, along with being missional. We have worked to maintain and sustain, we are now looking at retooling rostered ministers and laity in how to stand strong in these challenging times lifting-up the fact that God is active in our communities in great ways.

In addition, this group is currently working on a city-wide revival to illumine the light of Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The overall emphasis is to lift up our brand, highlight our ministries and draw people into a deeper relationship with Christ and community.

## **Regional Events**

### *Regions 7 Bishops and Spouses Annual Labor Day Retreat*

I had the pleasure of meeting with some of our Region 7 Bishops and their spouses at the Nassau Inn in Princeton, NJ for a time of relationship and team building. We had an opportunity to complete an architectural tour of Princeton University campus and site visit of the Princeton Seminary. We were able to have conversation during our meals discussing ongoing concerns and opportunities in regional collaborations.

### *Bear Creek Camp*

Mr. Dan Scharnhorst and I met just prior to him leaving the area and taking another position; however, he gave a glowing report on the state of affair at Bear Creek Camp. It was good to hear that camperships are up by 75% since 2012. More importantly the impact that camp experiences are having on our young people, there is notable increase in self-confidence, devotional practices, church attendance and faith conversation at home. They are looking for a new board member, preferably from the city (Person of Color). Dan took pride in lauding his staff as well trained and prepared to continue the work of ministering to all those who enter the grounds. Camperships for children in need especially children of color will remain in place to afford the youth an opportunity grow in faith as they experience God in nature.

### *United Lutheran Seminary*

Cultivating relationships with Dr. Green and the staff of ULS has been gratifying. There appears to be shifting in the culture, in that it is more hospitable and open to sharing of status. I and the Committee of Deans had opportunity to meet over lunch with Dr. Green and Rev. Martin Otto Zimmann to discuss the financial state, the future hope for property sales and new initiatives. Our time concluded with an assurance of a place on campus for SEPA Synod and thankfulness for our partnership. We currently have a month to month lease as we search to secure a new home for our office.

### *Elisha's Call*

SEPA Synod was proud to host the first Elisha's Call on the east coast. Elisha's Call is an event focused on young adults of African Descent developed and sponsored by the Program Director for African Descent Ministry for the ELCA in conjunction with the African Descent Strategy. The purpose of Elisha's Call is to help young adults:

-  Gain a wider vision of the church they are a part of and contribute to as members of the ELCA;
-  Gain a wider sense of resources available at our church-wide offices as they continue to be engaged in mission and ministry;
-  Further discern their own call to ministry and gain insight to help them recognize the gifts for ministry in others.

I was happy to meet with these young leaders of our church to dialogue on their joys and concerns, I offered no illusory hope for those discerning rostered ministries. Yes, you may encounter racism, yes, you may have to wait longer than your White counterparts, yes, your sexuality may be a challenge for some; however, be resilient, for God has called you. Telling each of them to take heart, you have allies, you have 4 bishops of color, 17 women bishops and 1 openly gay bishop, beloved, our church is not changing, it has changed!

**“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. .” Romans 8:28**

## **Interfaith Events**

### *Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia*

Meeting with Ms. Abby Stamelman Hocky, Executive Director and Rev. Nicole Diroff, Associate Director was enlightening as to the importance and value of our partnership and participation in ICFP. Zones of Peace which works to address the root causes of violence to make safer communities for all to live, work and play is coordinated by Pr. John Hougen. Pr. Fritz Fowler is our representative on Council. The work that we have begun building bridges of peace with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters must continue.

### *NewCore*

I was invited to participate in a “Conversation on Race and Faith” as part of Interfaith Philadelphia's Year of Civil Conversations. The event was in partnership with NewCORE, and its Board Chair, Reverend Steven Lawrence, our moderator. This was my first introduction to NewCORE, I am intrigued by their mission and methodology “to harness the power of sincere conversation about race and ethnicity and use it to break down barriers, facilitate mutual understanding and respect, build bridges, and promote truth, justice and reconciliation.” As part of a group of “prominent religious leaders” including Rabbi David Straus, the Senior Rabbi at Main Line Reform Temple; Rev. Bonnie Camarda, the Director of Partnerships for The Salvation Army in Eastern Pennsylvania and Delaware; Sheikh Anwar Muhaimin, currently serves as President and Executive Director of Quba Institute, a religious school in Philadelphia, and is the Senior Imam at Masjid Quba, the oldest mosque in the city. It was a positive experience to be open to the Q & A from Muslims, Jews and Christians on how my faith informed how I dealt with racism. I was very proud in the audience of 200 were many Lutheran witnesses: members of our Synod Council, our anti-racism team, rostered ministers, our lay members of congregations, ULS students and a staff member.

It is bittersweet to announce that Rev. Nicole Diroff, Associate Executive Director of Interfaith Philadelphia is resigning her position due to her husband’s new job. Since 2007, Nicole has served the Council with exceptional professionalism, building a table of mutual respect among 32 senior religious leaders, one of the strongest and most active Councils of its kind in the country. Nicole has enabled Interfaith Philadelphia to help fulfill our mission "to build relationships of mutual support, offer a moral and spiritual voice in the region, and identify issues of concern for dialogue and action."

Nicole is much appreciated and will be sorely missed. I am grateful to have her as our keynote speaker at our Synod Assembly this year. We continue our work, Interfaith Philadelphia launched “A Year of Civil Conversations in response to increasing levels of violence, hatred, and bigotry nationwide. In an attempt to challenge the divisive dualism of today’s public discourse, we have developed a year of programming that crafts a new narrative for this region, focused on deep listening and authentic sharing.” On April 28th Interfaith

Philadelphia will honor Ms. Krista Tippet with the Dare to Understand Award, we will also be raising funds to do the work of building a thriving religious diverse democracy right here in Philadelphia.

### *Jewish Federation*

Rabbi Batya, Glazer, Director, Jewish Community Relations Council Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, has been facilitating our conversation on how we better understand our common roots. We are currently in conversation on a February 2020 trip from Ghana to Israel looking at the African slaves from the “Point of No Return” (For those of you who are unfamiliar, this is a major slave port where countless captured African people were trafficked through. It is called the Point of No Return, because once they reached the shoreline, they would never come back) continuing with the Jewish slaves of Israel. This has been a major focus as planning must be in place to secure necessary travel documents. Nonetheless, we continue with ongoing work of building relationship through dialogue, advocacy and service.

### *Historic Black Churches*

I am a member of Black Clergy of Philadelphia and Vicinity, as such, I was invited to attend, my first Street Naming Ceremony, Bishop Ernest Carl Morris, Mount Airy Church of God in Christ. What a privilege to be present for a man of God that I had the opportunity of inviting to LTSP Seminarian’s Lunch Table Talks in the Refectory. It was good to be on the dais with public officials, leaders and members of the Historic Black Church and people of the community to honor a man who also received an honorary doctorate from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

### **Other Important Meetings**

I met with the *Rev. Dr. Dolores E. Littleton, Advisor to the Bishop for Fitness for Ministry* to better understand her position and duties. In addition, Pr. Littleton teaches our Healthy Boundaries Training to assure that our rostered ministers are informed and equipped as we live into our calls.

*Ms. Barbara Debski of Portico Benefit Services*, updated me on the continued benefits offered to rostered ministers and their families. Also, Ms. Debski, made me aware of procedural matters Portico requirements for rostered ministers not under call. I invited Ms. Debski to share at our Bishop’s Convocation on the importance of rostered ministers understanding the necessity of following-up on health and pension initiatives offered and the opportunities for our pastors nearing retirement, etc.

*Synod Legal Counsel, Mr. John Gordon*, has worked on our behalf with various strenuous legal matters of which Mr. Tom Cunniff, ELCA General Counsel, is aware, and that has assisted us greatly in maneuvering the legal system and the idiosyncrasies that keep us out of court.

*Mission Investment Fund – Mr. Gerry Lauro*, shared opportunity for communities of faith, rostered ministers and our Synod to take advantage of the many benefits offered through Mission Investments.

*The Rev. Fritz Fowler, my representative on the Interfaith Council*, to discuss his engagement with the council and to extend an invitation for continued service on my behalf.

*The Rev. Mark Wimmer is Vice President for Church Relations with Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries*. As such, he is responsible for integration of Diakon’s service with its role as an entity of the church. I was happy to have my annual meeting with Pr. Mark Wimmer, who expressed his joy that the ministry and mission of Diakon is strong. Diakon is looking for ways to increase its partnership with our congregations, to strengthen our social

ministry impact in our neighbors where our congregations are planted. Pr. Wimmer met with our Committee of Deans to share more on how this might be accomplished.

*Dr. Richard Green, Acting Interim President, United Lutheran Seminary.* Albeit, I don't serve on the ULS Board, I have appreciated the leadership of Dr. Green and the new staff that have introduced themselves by way of emails, invitation to a meal or coming to our office. Dr. Green has reached out in partnership, on joys, concerns or simply alerts. We have been in conversation about our presence on campus, and our need to make decisions based on what is best for Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod on a whole.