

Bishop's 2020 Synod Assembly Report



Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

2020 Vision

Acuity: Seeing Mission Possibilities

***“Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes.”
1 Samuel 12:16***

Beloved, gratitude is generally a word used to express thankfulness and praise, I am grateful! It has been a year of witnessing God's amazing power at work in our synod. I have had the great joy and privilege of witnessing God in the lives of the individual leaders that serve on our various ministry teams, in seminarians, stakeholders, social ministry agencies, and other partners in ministry. I have the honor of meeting faithful laypeople on Sunday mornings as I visit one of our 143 congregations/communities of faith weekly.

Reflections of 2019 Synod Assembly “Building Beloved Community”

Our assembly theme flowed out of conversations with our worship team, synod staff, conference laity and much dwelling in the Word and prayer. Amid the divisiveness, hatred and bigotry spewing throughout our country and around the world, for what do we yearn? We long for peace, unity, harmony and equity, all found in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God that Jesus lifts over and over in scripture.

Our joint view of the *beloved community* is more a euphemism for the Kin-dom of God. In our strategic planning, we attempted to reflect Kin-dom, Beloved Community throughout our assembly in the following ways:

- Keynote speakers, the Rev. Nicole D. Diroff, associate director of Interfaith Philadelphia. The Rev. Wyvetta Bullock, ELCA Assistant to the Presiding Bishop and Executive for Administration

Assembly Highlights

- Inspirational Preaching, “The beloved community is like this: ‘God takes it very personally how we treat one another,’” the Rev. Dr. Wyvetta Bullock said in her sermon. Dr. Bullock also noted, “The compassion we express to others is our expression of our love for God.”
- T-shirts worn by Synod Council leaders and Office of the Bishop staff which includes our Committee of Deans
- Diversity in worship style, preachers, music, and leaders
- Forum topics and presenters
- Holy Huddles (talking with a friendly stranger)
- Synod mass choir representing the diversity of our five county area
- Transition slides/videos highlighting different communities of faith
- Social Media posts, tweets, etc.

We wanted to communicate our theme in every way possible. #WEWALKOURTALK

Acknowledgement of Synod Assembly Action

Secretary, Chris Boerger, in a letter acknowledged the actions of our 2019 Assembly:

1. memorials to be forwarded to the Memorials Committee for the 2019 Churchwide Assembly:
Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod’s Endorsement of “The Earth Charter”¹
2. no changes to the synod constitution
3. no resolutions for Church Council
4. *re-election of synod secretary, the Rev. Karl M. Richard (Praise God, overwhelmingly)*

Appreciation of Synod Officers, Synod Staff and Servant-leaders (Volunteers)

Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. Romans 13:7

A heartfelt, thank you, to Synod Council leaders, our Office of the Bishop staff, our communication and worship teams, our choir participants, all the Mission Center contributors and Forum leaders. A special thank you to Advent, Harleysville who hosted our young adult voting members who also

¹ Earth Charter Initiative: “What is the Earth Charter?” (<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/What-is-the-Earth-Charter%3F.html>)

served as Pages. A well-deserved, thank you to the Women of the ELCA and Lutheran World Relief for providing the Ingathering truck.

Overall, I am grateful at the end of my first synod assembly as your bishop, we experienced spirit-filled worship in new creative ways, along with awesome music rendered by voices from across our synod. We heard powerful keynote presentations that we trust will lead many to transform the way we live as disciples of Christ (the Lutheran Tribe of the Jesus Movement.) We hosted informational, educational and inspirational workshops and forums. We bid farewell to outgoing Synod Council members and welcomed those newly elected.

Finally, I am so grateful for our relationship with all the Franconia Mennonite Church staff, who treat us like family coming for a weekend visit.

Churchwide Events

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.
And be thankful. Colossians 3:15*

Women Clergy Organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT)

I was invited along with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and Bishop Vivian Thomas-Breitfeld to preach and participate in the Women Clergy Quadrennial meeting June 22-26, 2019 in Tanzania. Following this event from June 27-July 2, 2019, I spent time in our companion synod, the North Eastern Diocese of Tanzania. Traveling with me was Ms. Yvonne Curtis, and Pastor Bradley Burke will join us at the end of the Quadrennial for our companion synod visit.

Prior to leaving the country I appointed, with Synod Council approval, Pastor Bradley Burke and Pastor Karen Sease as acting bishops. Pastor Sease will serve as acting bishop when Pastor Burke leaves to join us in Tanzania. Bishop Samuel Zeiser served as their local support should an emergency arise.

Conference of Bishops (COB)

As a member of COB's *Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Liaison Committee*, I participated in a pre-meeting to discuss our ongoing conversations with multiple religious traditions. 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.

Regions met to hear of 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.

Special note to Synods from Secretary Boerger, he shared that he has issued a memorandum about resolutions and memorandums that can be shared publicly. Some Synod Councils are taking action on roster issues and those actions are not being reported to the Office of the Secretary causing significant problems for the records. Synod Councils must vote on roster changes (leave of call, active, retired, or those no longer on the roster) after those changes are endorsed by the Synod bishop. Also, they are currently working on digitalizing all records.

Bishop Eaton opened the conversation on the draft document that will replace Vision and Expectations (*Easter 2010, Visions and Expectations the document was introduced saying "This document outlines the importance of the ordained minister's faithfulness to the church's confession, leadership through faithful service and holy living and faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It expresses the ELCA's expectation that its ordained ministers have a passion for evangelism, pastoral skills that have been refined in seminary and contextual settings and personal character and integrity worthy of the office. It also makes clear that ordained ministry is a privilege granted by God through the call of the church rather than an individual right. Finally, it sets forth the marks of healthy leadership that are essential to being a vital church in mission in a pluralistic context. "Vision and Expectations—Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" is offered to rostered leaders, candidates, seminaries, congregations and candidacy committees to inform their lives of service, their discernment and deliberation. With it we also offer our prayers and our promise to live and serve together in the peace and unity of Christ."* Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson), this document 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.

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.

My election as Vice-Chair of the Conference of Bishop (COB) has expanded the number of Zoom meetings; however, I am so grateful not to travel. I am tasked with other administrative duties within our COB meetings that allow me to connect with other bishops in a more direct manner, giving space for deeper relationship building.

Ecumenical Events

Interfaith Philadelphia Happenings

It was bittersweet to have announced that Rev. Nicole Diroff, Associate Executive Director of Interfaith Philadelphia resigned 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 had her as our keynote speaker at our Synod Assembly. 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 honored Ms. Krista Tippett 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 were in conversation for 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.

A goal without a plan is just a wish, we are intentionally living into our churchwide statement of building relationship with our Historic Black churches.



My first Street Naming Ceremony, what a privilege to be present for a man of God that I had the opportunity of inviting to our LTSP Seminarian lunch talks in the Refectory. It was a privilege to be on the dais with public officials, leaders of the Historic Black Church and people of the community to honor a man who also received an honorary doctorate from our seminary.

Annual AME Church Founders' Celebration

I was honored to preach at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Ardmore. The 2nd Sunday of February is designated as Founders Day Sunday throughout the AME Church. "CALLED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE" Bethel, Ardmore's observation of Founders Day included the official launch of the church's 125th Anniversary Celebration and remembering the founding families of the church from 1895-2020 with the renaming of the fellowship hall to Founders' Hall. Good to see so many of the children, grandchildren, great-grand and great-great grands were present. In addition,

they included in the participants: Baptist, Roman Catholics, Episcopalian, United Methodist and of course Lutherans (Maxine Young, spoke and Joyce Adams was a guest.)

Regional Events

(Collaboration and innovation are at the heart of what we are called to do and be as beloved community.)

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 churchwide 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 you 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!

United Lutheran Seminary and Region 7 & 8 Bishops

Our annual gathering of bishops was filled with information on the movement of United Lutheran Seminary. We had an opportunity to meet with faculty (many by Zoom as they are housed across the country), students and Rev. Dr. Angela Zimmann, Interim President. We discussed the current dynamics of two campuses, distance learning pros and cons; austerity measures, what is integral to our mission, lack of Latino, Latina and Latinx learning opportunities, etc. Noting the seminary had

received \$34 million to support student tuition, they are still in great need of our continued financial support for daily operations. ULS is mindful of the historical and current giving patterns of stakeholders, they are hoping to launch a direct congregational financial request line via a stipend congregational ambassador.

We continue an ongoing conversation on the ELCA Assignment Process and a proposal to change the way candidates are assigned. We concluded that we will present the proposal to the March COB for approval.

Leadership for Faithful Innovation

Faith Innovations with Dr. Dawn Alitz from Luther Seminary at Crossroads Camp, NJ with SEPA and NJ Synod leaders continue learning. This train the trainers, is equipping us with tools to invigorate leaders to be vulnerable, risk creative change to stoke the vitality within the servant-leader, starting with self. The hope is doing more, by doing less, intentionally focusing on the core values of the congregation/community of faith.

Approximately 120 leaders from New Jersey and SEPA Synod gathered as Guiding Team, Coaches and Rostered Minister to mark year two of this three-year process in Faithful Innovation. A time of sharing what has been learned this far on the journey, challenges and joys. Looking at next-steps, creatively moving forward inviting more opportunities to try new things in and with the communities where we are planted. Dr. Flippin is working as staff liaison with our great group of lay and rostered leaders. He also, handled the venues and hosting this event, well done.

Muhlenberg College Board

Our time together consisted of usual board work of business and bucks, but praise God it was founded on "High Impact Practices to Strengthen Inclusive Excellence." Benefits of this pre-work, helps us, provide, build and prepare students for careers after graduation. I am constitutionally mandated to serve on this board; however, I appreciate the opportunity to support our institutions of higher education, spending time with the students and faculty, at times offering a prayer along with my fellow bishops in attendance. I was privileged to be invited as a keynote speaker at a virtual Muhlenberg Women's Conference to build, support and enhance communal relationships this semester.

Synodical Events

Conference Gatherings

Upper Montgomery rostered leaders met at Diakon Manatawny Manor for devotions, followed by open dialogue, discussing our current status and hopes for our future. A true emphasis on moving from the status quo, to vitality. How do we collaborate to make a difference in the communities we are called to serve?

Lower Montgomery gathering was held at Twining Village, Holland, PA for lay and rostered leaders. Pr. Hahn led with opening prayer, dinner was hosted by Twining Village and two workshops were offered. I would say about 100 people attended, with most congregations/communities of faith represented.

Chester 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 Dean where Pr. Ron Wesemann was overwhelmingly re-elected Dean for another term.

I welcome these conference gathering which present opportunities to dialog with our lay and rostered ministers: "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 connect 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 offer 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 most conversations grow with giving way to other possibilities.

First Call Retreat

This was 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 that was led by Pr. Bradley Burke when serving as assistant to the bishop.

Interim Ministry

This was my first 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 transitional protocols. I was intrigued by their questions, noting everything is contextual, it is really an intimate dance with three partners.

(Equipping leaders for the work of ministry is at the core of our Kin-dom work of building beloved community one person at a time.)

Chrism Service

Chrism Worship held at Christ, Oreland was well attended, approximately 100 rostered and lay leaders gathered for the blessing of the oils. I shared from Luke 4:18-21, pivotal verses “¹⁸ *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,*¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” “The thought for our message, **Let go, on purpose!** Anointed by the power of the Holy Spirit, Called and commissioned by God. Jesus, let go of anything that would hinder his preaching, teaching and proclaiming the good news of God, the core values of his call to ministry. Yes, on his journey to Jerusalem, his ultimate purpose, an old rugged cross, a borrowed tomb to achieve victory for us all! Jesus, let go on purpose. In the message, I encouraged our leaders to reflect on their Call. First our baptismal call, then our Call to rostered or congregational ministry. What are our core values, and what are the items that have appeared on our lists of things to be done. Let go, on purpose to keep the main thing, the main thing as disciples of Christ.

The members of Christ, Oreland served a wonderful lunch that was attended by most of our worship participants. We had three bishops at one table, how often will that happen?

I didn’t realize that this was a two-day event as I was with Pr. Vanderslice and Ms. Curtis for the pouring of the oils into easy carry vials, setting the table and checking video feed. The behind the scenes things you learn to make all this seamless.

Pastors Active in Retirement and Spouses (PAIRS)

St. Peter's in Lafayette Hill was the setting for luncheon with our retired rostered leaders and spouses. It was fun to reconnect with longtime associates and a joy to have frank conversations on the state of our Synod, the hopes for the future and shared wisdom on how we get there.

Stewardship Extravaganza

There were 240 people registered for a two-day stewardship event with plenary presentations, Q and A opportunities, 11 workshops and worship! Praise God, it was an "excellent event," according to many attendees. Rev. J. Clif Christopher, Ms. Aimee Laramore and Rev. Lucille "CeCee" Mills, all experts on stewardship gave practical, scriptural and inspirational insights on how to create "a roadmap to year-round giving."

Our Generosity Team did an exceptional job of handling every component of this event, it was especially encouraging to see the full team assisting with registration. Our team was resourceful in keeping things flowing during the course the event. A special thank you to the saints at Trinity, Lansdale for their presence and wonderful hospitality. Dr. Larry Smoose, Generosity Team Chairperson and Pr. Karen Sease from our Synod staff deserved a bonus for the extra time and care given to the presenters, sponsors and host; however, because we are good stewards, they get a BIG thank you!

Urban Seeds

Urban Seeds hosted a Youth Financial Expo for young people ages 10-17 at Grace Lutheran Church, West Philadelphia. Keynote speaker was Mkemo London, author of "Save Give Live" and president of The Urban Seeds. Approximately 40 young people learned money management, how to start a business and the importance of generosity. We had lunch, workshops (I was blessed to lead an impromptu workshop with the adults) and prizes were given, yes, I won.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Service

I was privileged to be the preacher at our joint Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod and African Descent Lutheran Association Philadelphia Chapter annual Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Service at Grace Evangelical, Drexel Hill, PA. We were blessed with solos, by our own Vice President Tracey Beasley and Pr. Cornelius Eaddy that stirred the Spirit within, they were supported by the Reformation Gospel Choir. It was awesome! The saints of Grace prepared soup and salad that was

delicious, as well as the outstanding hospitality. The children of the congregation made cinnamon candles to bless all those who attended. Ultimately, it is always a joy to lift up the message of civil rights and social justice that continues to be a challenge for America.

Holy Closures

St. John's Lutheran Church in Ambler held 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 glorify 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

It was a joyful worship of Holy Closure with the saints at Grace Lutheran Church, Norristown. Sunday, January 12, 2020 a conclusion to 135 years of ministry in the name of Grace, Norristown. The sanctuary was full of people, wonderful music, many stories, many tears, and much joy because they had fought the good fight of being faithful in a changing community. I joined with current, former and associate members, rostered ministers and members of the congregations and leaders of the ministries housed at Grace to give thanks for their witness as a beacon of hope in the community.

I am grateful that Pr. Janice, Council and the members made a conscious choice, not spend down the endowment, but to leave a legacy. Grace chose to bless the Interfaith Food Pantry, All Saints Bread of Life Café, the Vogt Foundation, Martin Luther Silver Springs, Norristown Ministries, ELCA Disaster Fund, Hancock Fire Company, Power in the Cross, the Lutheran Archives Center and the SEPA Synod Mission Fund to seed innovative ministries.

Faithfully Moving Forward as the Lutheran Tribe of the Jesus Movement

I am pained by our candidates awaiting call in our Synod, especially, women and women of Color; nonetheless, I am encouraged by their patience with us and the Holy Spirit as they await the ministry

God has prepared for them. Notwithstanding the long wait, thank God for provision and protection as they wait. Also, after two years of study, there are several Diakonia graduates that are looking to utilize their gifts to build up the Kin-dom of God. Beloved, nonetheless; I am grateful, God can bring hope through even the toughest of times, strengthening us for your purposes. We are sharing best practices among rostered ministers, congregational leaders, conferences and synods removing barriers, creating new and innovative ways of sharing and servicing Jesus. #WEARECHURCH, #Thank you for your great love and care.

We will live into our authentic ethnic and racial diversity and equitable inclusivity. We are intersectional, we want to be more intentional in many ways. We want to focus more on Theological framing and equipping; healing actions; structural accountability; theological education and leadership development and ecumenical engagement. My prayer, in my life Lord be glorified is not just a song we sing but the life we are called to live.

Heartfelt Thanks

“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

A special word of thanks, I appreciate our Synod Council’s hard work, “not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,” Our stakeholders trust us as the board of directors for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod to serve as our synod’s interim legislative authority between meetings of the synod assembly. I value your commitment to serve those who selected us to sit at this table.