



*“Gather with the Saints at the river that flows by the throne of God!”
– from ‘Shall We Gather at the River’ by Robert Lowry (ELW 423)*

Dear Beloved Saints of Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod,

Gathering is encoded into the DNA of God’s people. The Church has always gathered for worship, for service, for fellowship and prayer. These past 20 months, though, our gatherings have looked different as we adjusted to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The origin story of Robert Lowry’s hymn “Shall We Gather at the River” tells of a pastor who sat in his office during a pandemic in 1863 wondering when people would see each other again. Lowry’s strong faith reassured him that we would meet again in the waters of baptism that connect us to the saints of all times and all places. In 2021, we have asked the same questions, upheld by the same faith.

While it is likely that “the way we’ve always done things” is over, our ministry remains. That baptismal river calls us to live more deeply into promises made around the font. Our congregations have reimaged witness for digital platforms and reconnected to their communities. Our people have stayed connected to God through immeasurable crises – global and personal. Our synod has shifted funds and rededicated resources to help our congregations and people find new ways to gather and BE CHURCH.

The work of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod remains to equip the saints for ministry.

We gather weekly to talk about “Ministry in the New Abnormal.” Clergy and lay congregation leaders connect over Zoom and led by our **Communications Team** to troubleshoot technology, ponder the limitations of building HVAC systems, reimagine liturgy for digital spaces, and keep updated on the latest pandemic health guidelines. Sometimes we bring in experts. Other times we learn from the hard-earned wisdom of those in the room. But we remain connected in prayer and support for each other.

The **Candidacy Committee** gathers to support people who are wondering if God is calling them to be a pastor or a deacon in the ELCA. Right now, there are 36 people between the beginning stages of inquiry and waiting for their first call. Our synod is blessed by their faithful ponderings about how the Holy Spirit is guiding them and our congregations in the future.

In a world that keeps trying to scatter the people of God among divisions of race and sexuality, our **Anti-Racism Team** and our **LGBTQIA+ Ministry Team** gather to remind us that each person is created in the image of God. They invite us to prayer and study, to advocacy and direct action. They have provided digital and hybrid events to draw us together and spur our communities to full inclusion and radical welcome.

The **Committee of Deans** gathers monthly to work through congregational leadership transitions and the other needs of our 143 congregations. During the pandemic, 18 congregations have called new pastors. Another 38 are in various stages of transition, assisted by our team of synodical interim and bridge pastors.

Through it all, our **Vitality Team** has lifted new possibilities for ministry together. We have supported congregations being renewed through the anchor church model. We have helped other congregations explore collaborative ministries. Vitality assessments remind congregations that they have value and witness beyond the number of people in worship or money in the offering plate.

Gather with us in these ministries! Read [MinistryLink.org](https://ministrylink.org) for ways to participate. Pray for our work together. Give generously and *invest* in this witness.

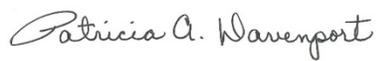
The All Saints Appeal launched as way to strengthen relationships between siblings in Christ across the synod and to make sure that our work together is funded to sustain the mission God has given us. With your help, the stories of God's faithfulness will continue to be told in our synod's gatherings.

We give thanks for you saints of the Lord – for your witness of beloved community, for your financial support, and for your ongoing prayers for this ministry we do *together*. Every dollar you give translates into direct mission in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. It takes *all* of the saints to make this possible.

Visit our website (<https://ministrylink.org/about/give/>) or use the enclosed pledge form to make your gift to the All Saints Appeal *today*.

When the needs of the world demand a reimagination of your ministry for new contexts and when you wonder about ways to gather or regather your community, God promises to keep us connected to each other through the waters of baptism. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod supports and equips our saints for the journey.

We will gather at the river! God bless you!



The Rev. Patricia A. Davenport,
Bishop



The Rev. Karen M. Sease,
Assistant to the Bishop for Vocations
& Leadership / Mission Advancement