

2022 Bishop's Synod Assembly Report

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12

“Concerning the synod’s life and work”

God’s words are powerful, they give clarity and direction to our lives as disciples of Christ. Our words are important especially in these ever-changing times, our new Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod Dictionary/Playbook has words:

Pivot, Agility, Innovation, Vitality, Collaboration, Disruptions, Distractions.

Our new language is put into action through scripture, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” (Romans 12:12) These words of scripture reflect how our 70,000 lay members and 301 Rostered Ministers have moved over this past year, maneuvering the lingering pandemic with hope, patience, and prayer. Yes, beloved, in every move God has been providing strength for today and hope for tomorrow. Distractions and disruptions have come in many forms: the great resignation, the U.S. inflation rate increased 7.9% over the last year (the largest spike since 1982), the war in Ukraine, etc. We have kept our focus, sealed with the Holy Spirit, marked with the cross of Christ. We have continued our quest in loving God as we love others. Reflecting Jesus in making disciples, making a difference in church and the public square, all by doing God’s work with our hands and by serving our neighbors here and abroad.

Our congregations and communities of faith have continued to keep the main thing, *the main thing*. Our local social ministries have worked hard to meet the needs of the people in their neighborhoods. Pr. Tricia Neale notes that Feast of Justice, currently housed at St. John’s in Mayfair, opened a second site in Northeast Philadelphia to meet the demands of those who are food insecure due to the ongoing pandemic, inflation, and poverty. St. Michael’s in Kensington is not only fighting the opioid crisis that is prominent in the community, but they also continue providing access to their food pantry. The list of our Lutheran food ministries is great throughout our five-county area; we are so grateful for those who give and volunteer to serve, providing for those in need through community garden, weekly meals, and gift cards. We have urban centers that are taking a stand against violence, especially gun violence. We are working closely with Heeding God’s Call and Zones of Peace to bring an end to this uptick in crime.

Our elected *Synod Council* members meet quarterly to assure that our synod adheres to our mission, vision and values statement and operational goals as per our constitution. *Vice President Tracey Beasley, Secretary Pastor Karl Richard, Treasurer Janet Neff*, and every member of the Synod Council have our best interest at heart when they faithfully show up, conducting business and caring for our church in the five-county area.

We have continued to show up in many ways, forging ahead in making Christ known in concrete manners that have been sustaining, renewing and lifegiving through the witness of our Office of the Bishop. My duties are to oversee and administer the work of this synod; in doing so, I serve as the president of the synod corporation and the chief executive and administrative officer of this synod to assure that our missional responsibilities are carried out. I am grateful that I am not

tasked to do this vital work alone; we are blessed to have an awesome Synod staff that accompanies me on this journey in the following ways:

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” Romans 12:4-5

We refer to **Mr. Martin Schwab**, *Senior Accountant*, as the head, the man behind the curtain who makes everything "in the land of OZ" we call SEPA Synod happen. Mr. Schwab is responsible for recording all deposits, processing accounts payable checks, preparing monthly financial reports and processing payroll. In January he sends out W2s, 1099s and year end donor statements. Every March he works with an audit firm to complete the annual audited financial statements. He also manages properties for sale and cemeteries of closed congregations. He works closely with the Director of Operations, Treasurer of the Synod and chairs of the Finance Committee, Investment Committee and Audit Committee. Martin would like to thank everyone for their Mission Support contributions in these challenging times.

If our Senior Accountant is the head, then **Ms. Yvonne Curtis**, *Director of Operations* is the neck, giving directions on how we get it done! Ms. Curtis manages daily office operations and human resource administration of synod staff with grace. She is your link to the Bishop, Synod Council and the Executive Committee of Synod Council. If you have ever been part of a call process - either as a congregation or rostered leader - Ms. Curtis has been an invaluable member of your team.

Ms. Curtis reports: "I am honored to be called to this ministry of administration. I have the responsibility for the constitutional administrative requirements of the Office of the Bishop. Working with congregations and rostered leaders include helping congregations schedule congregational meetings to call rostered ministers led by synodical deputies. I coordinate with other synods throughout the ELCA, transferring rostered leaders to and from SEPA Synod to reflect changes in call. If a rostered leader is retiring, I process retirement paperwork with Portico. I work closely with the Vice President and Secretary of SEPA Synod, Committee of Deans, and the Bishop's Advisor for Fitness for Ministry. Working with the ELCA Office of the Secretary, I process roster actions for the Report of the Secretary to SEPA Synod Assembly."

You may recognize **Ms. Cynta Outterbridge**, *Database Manager and Communications Assistant* as the registrar for SEPA Synod Assembly, Stewardship and Rostered Ministers Equipping Events. Behind the scenes, Ms. Outterbridge keeps us organized with her strong gifts in data and records management, which includes tracking Healthy Boundaries Training participation of our Rostered Ministers. She reports, "I maintain our synod database in a multitude of ways. I align our information with the ELCA Churchwide system and collaborate with the ELCA Office of the Secretary. I also maintain the parochial report data of our synod. With our Director of Operations, I assist on roster matters, tracking anniversaries of rostered leaders and congregations, as well as maintaining the congregation council officers contact information. I am our in-house Blackbaud System Consultant, the non-profit software that helps us track synodical information, analytics, financial gifts, and grants. I work closely with our Senior Accountant on reports. I also support our Assistant to the Bishop for Communications – Mission Interpretation, updating our Synod Website and compiling the bi-weekly SEPANews email."

Rev. Robert Fisher, *Assistant to the Bishop for Communications and Mission Interpretation*. Pastor Bob Fisher reports, "This past year has been a time of innovation and growth for SEPA Communications ministry, learning new ways to connect with our synod. We facilitated a hybrid Rostered Ministers' Equipping Event, originating from four different in-person sites as well as online. Our 2021 Synod Assembly was held online with the help of a third-party meeting service; our 2022 Synod Assembly will again be held online, and thanks to many SEPA Synod volunteers lending their talents, we did not need to hire an outside vendor.

Our weekly "Ministry in the New Abnormal" Zoom meeting replaced "Communications Office Hours". With the additional help of Pastors Sue Lang and Jonathan Suloff, we provided information and support to leaders navigating our new ministry context. We hosted a series of educational programs such as: livestreaming, social media tools, congregational vitality, adaptive worship, and COVID-19 Q&A sessions with Dr. Tim Babinchak. You can find past recordings and upcoming programs here: <https://ministrylink.org/mission-interpretation/>. Feel free to email the team with ideas or for help at comms@sepa.org."

Equipping leaders for the work of ministry is not just our mantra, it is what we do! **Rev. Karen Sease** says, "My call as *Assistant to the Bishop for Vocations and Leadership / Mission Advancement* means that I get to accompany people who are asking questions like "Where/how is God calling me to serve?" For the 36 candidates and inquirers who are currently exploring rostered ministry, the candidacy committee and I are discernment partners as they figure out their call to be a pastor, a deacon, or layperson – knowing that they will be engaged in kingdom-building ministry however they serve because of God's call on their life at baptism. In mobility, this same question becomes more specific – what are the gifts and skills of rostered ministers who are searching for a call in Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod, which of our congregations in transition are looking for that skill set, and how do we encourage the work of the Holy Spirit in this process? Working with Pastor Marcia Bell and the Committee of Deans, 11 call votes for SEPA congregations have been held since the 2021 Assembly (as of 3/14/22) with more already being scheduled in the coming months. The Mission Advancement piece of my job is about making sure that we have the resources to do what we have been called to do. This happens by encouraging congregational giving to mission support, fundraising through our annual All Saints Appeal and other special appeals, and by visiting with congregations and individuals who want to explore their investment in the mission we share. If you want to dream and wonder together about how God may be calling you to build up the kingdom with your financial gifts or with a call to rostered ministry, please email me at ksease@sepa.org. God is moving in SEPA Synod – join the action!"

Our young people have always been a priority in our synod, we believe in faith formation from the cradle to the grave. We are very excited to have **Rev. Stacey-Kyle Rea** join our Synod staff as *Assistant to the Bishop for Youth and Young Adult Discipleship*. Pr. Rea shares, "We are excited to begin a new chapter in youth and young adult ministry in SEPA Synod, helping our young people grow into discipleship. The pandemic has certainly blown the church in new directions. Though we are sad that the 2022 ELCA Youth Gathering was cancelled, we are already planning for the 2024 Gathering and other SEPA Synod youth gatherings and events. In 2022, we are rebuilding our SEPA Youth Leadership Team (grades 9-12). We also need young adult leadership to plan young adult retreats and faith conversations for ages 18-30. And as always, we need adults willing to journey with our youth and young adults as leaders and

mentors. If you would like to talk about formation opportunities for your congregation's youth and/or young adults, please contact me, Pastor Skyle Rea, at srea@sepa.org or 267-323-3762.

The Director of Evangelical Mission (DEM) position is being split into two part-time positions, allowing both pastors to continue to serve in their congregations and bless their synod with their evangelical mission gifts.

Leadership innovation at its best can be found in our new Directors of Evangelical Mission: Rev. Dr. Moses Suah Dennis and Rev. Bryan Penman. As noted by **Rev. Bryan Penman**, *Co-Director of Evangelical Mission*, "I share the responsibilities with Rev. Dr. Suah-Dennis. As a team we work together to help congregations deepen their sense of vitality and cultivate new communities of faith. My role in this position will be to work with existing congregations on various vitality strategies to help grow and strengthen our communities of faith. It is my hope that in this position, I will be able to help equip congregations with the tools and resources they need to navigate the shifting landscape of ministry. I also hope to work closely with bolstering the lay leadership of our faith communities so that they feel empowered to live out their faith in active service to God, their communities, and the world. And I am just so overjoyed to be serving our synod in this way."

Rev. Dr. Moses Suah Dennis says: "Bishop Davenport's bold choice of appointing both Rev. Bryan Penman and me as Co-Directors of Evangelical Mission is both Biblically and Synodically rooted. This move affirms the awareness that the 21st century church does share many characteristics that marked Christianity in the 1st century. Our SEPA Synod shared-DEM experiment is true to its missional commitment to building a beloved community made of disciples of Jesus Christ. It is my hope and prayer that our work shapes current and new missional endeavors, intentionally embracing Jesus's evangelical partnership model of shared ministry practice. We see this model in the Bible, demonstrated by the sending out of the disciples two by two, never alone. I am also hopeful that our appointment re-enforces the rich diversity of our synod and will further encourage the practicing of evangelical partnerships between different ministry contexts: vital-vulnerable, old-new, urban-suburban, poor-rich, congregations with building-those without buildings, those with pastors-those without pastors and the list goes on and on! Indeed, we can do more together than any one of us can do alone or in isolation!"

Committee of Deans; **Rev. Regina Goodrich**, Central Philadelphia; **Rev. Chris Franz**, Chester; **Rev. Jenn Casey**, Delaware; **Rev. Dr. Norbert Hahn**, Lower Bucks; **Rev. Sarah Aasheim**, Lower Montgomery (elected April 3, 2022, former dean Rev. Bryan Penman); **Rev. Jane Marston**, Northeast/Northwest Philadelphia; **Rev. Erika Wesch**, Upper Bucks; **Rev. Chris McKinstry**, Upper Montgomery; **Rev. Wayne Shelor**, Interim Ministry Director (recently elected former director Rev. Dr. Christian McMullan); and **Rev. Marcia Bell**, serves as the *Director of Mobility and the chair of the Committee of Deans*. Pastor Bell notes, "In these roles, I work closely with the Bishop, members of her staff, the Director of Interim Ministry, and the Conference Deans. As a team, we facilitate the process of finding rostered leader candidates for congregations and congregations for candidates interested in a call in SEPA. This involves reviewing Rostered Ministers Profiles and congregational Ministry Site Profiles, making recommendations to the Committee of Deans and following up with candidates and congregations. It is a joy to see the Holy Spirit at work in our mobility process, even through the

difficulties of the pandemic. I am grateful for all who share their gifts to enhance the mobility of rostered leaders in our Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod.”

We are privileged to have on our team, **Rev. Dr. Dolores Littleton** as the *Bishop’s Advisor for Fitness for Ministry*. Dr. Littleton sits with me in consultations with Rostered Ministers and/or congregations dealing with concerns or issues that disrupt ministry. In addition, Dr. Littleton leads our annual Healthy Boundaries Training.

Also serving on our team is **Rev. Percy Butiku**, *Interim Assistant for Global Vision*. Pastor Butiku writes: “With Bishop Davenport’s permission, I started a dialogue with the newly elected Bishop of ELCT - North Eastern Diocese of Tanzania, Rev. Dr. Msafiri Joseph Mbilu. The North Eastern Diocese of Tanzania is SEPA Synod’s Companion Synod. In January, I was in Tanzania where I met with Bishop Mbilu and his family and he explained to me what was going on in his diocese. He educated me about the programs the diocese has and that some are failing for lack of finance. Bishop Mbilu is looking forward to strengthening this companion relationship with SEPA Synod. I reported back to Bishop Davenport.

My duties include interpreting and advising Bishop Davenport on what I think is needed to understand more about the cultural issues that come with the companion relationship. I am originally from Tanzania. I am ready and able to help the Synod strengthen this companion relationship so that brothers and sisters of both synods can continue to hold each other in prayers and more.

Rev. Paul Jann serves as the *Bishop’s Deputy for Holy Closure*, Holy Closure is the process of walking with a congregation when they begin to think about selling their church and/or dissolving their ministry as a congregation. It is a process of looking back at the history of their mission at that site and looking to future that is in God’s hands. This is an emotional process. Much like grieving the loss of a loved one. Ultimately, the process allows the people and congregation to say “good-bye” to their beloved church. This process is a delicate balance of patience, understanding, and love of God’s people. There is no timeline in this process, because each church is unique.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” 1 Corinthians 12:26

As your **Bishop, Pastor and Chief Operating Officer**, my job of working with all the aforementioned staff people is a privilege. Overseeing the 301 Rostered Ministers is an honor and engaging our 70,000 members in our 143 congregations is pure joy whether in person, on Facebook or livestream. It is exciting to be present in sacred cyberspace, experiencing a move of the Holy Spirit in worship or Bible Study. *Please see the links below for a year of reports in review illustrating how we have shown up representing Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod. God bless you!*

[Bishop’s June 2021 Report to Synod Council](#)

[Bishop’s September 2021 Report to Synod Council](#)

[Bishop’s December 2021 Report to Synod Council](#)

Bishop's February 2022 Report to Synod Council

Bishop's April 2022 Report to Synod Council