

Bishop's Report – Synod Assembly 2026

Over the past year, as I have reflected on the life of our synod, one word continues to rise to the surface: transition.

We are living through a season of profound change—ecclesial, culturally, and institutionally. And yet, through it all, I have witnessed something deeper still: the steady, quiet work of the Spirit bringing renewal to life among us.

This report is not simply a record of activity. It is a testimony to where we are being led.

A Church in Transition

This year we welcomed our new Presiding Bishop, Yehiel Curry at a festival installation in Minneapolis in October. We also saw our newly elected Churchwide Secretary, The Rev. CeCe Mills take office in November. We also welcomed a large class of new bishops this year (14) so with Secretary and Presiding Bishop, that means 25% of the Conference is new this year. I had the pleasure of attending some of the installations for those new bishops this year as I was present for Metro NY Synod, New Jersey Synod, and Metro DC Synod. And change and transition is a reality for many of our congregations as well for much of this year. At any given point, about 20% of our synod's congregations were in some form of leadership transitions. While transition might be a reality for many, it's also indicative of a deeper shift happening among us as *who leads*, but how we structure and sustain ministry transforms. It's not declining as much as it's reconfiguration.

By the Numbers: A Snapshot of Our Synod

- Congregations calling new leaders this year: 7
- Candidates for Ministry: 18
- Candidates Approved / Assigned to our Synod: 4
- Retirements this year: 5
- Leaving the Roster of our synod: 10
- Synod Mission Support: \$1,475,796 (down 4% from 2025)
- All Saint's Appeal (our appeal to individual donors): \$48, 370
- Closed / Merged Congregations: 3
- Voting Members at Churchwide Assembly: 24

From Scarcity to Experimentation: New Models of Ministry.

One of the clearest themes this year has been the reality that our older models of ministry and our old assumptions about what works, no longer holds. We are seeing a decrease in congregations that can support full-time ministry in a model of one pastor, one building, no longer being a viable path forward for many of our ministry sites and congregations. This truth is what caused us to

develop our Ponder Anew Transition paths of transformation, partnership and resurrection. Choosing one of these directions helps us craft the time in a leadership transition so that we can help equip the congregation to exist in the new ministry realities we are all facing. We are seeing a return to times when pastors tend to the needs of multiple congregations. We are also exploring what it means to raise lay leaders to tend to the congregation in the space between when rostered leaders (pastors and deacons) are able to be with congregations by establishing SAMs (Synod Authorized Ministers). We also have a record number of congregations now being served by full communion partners (UCC, United Methodist, PC(USA)). These new models of ministry are but the beginning of what is possible. One thing is clear, the future will not be sustained by independence, but by collaborations and shared ministry. This shift is not optional – it's already underway.

Holy Conversations: A New Framework for Congregational Life

Similar to our Ponder Anew Resources, our Vitality Team has launched a new tool for established congregations called *Holy Conversations*, a guide for congregations to consider the work of vitality and ask some very meaningful and timely questions. *Holy Conversations* also invites congregations to choose one of the three paths towards transformation, partnership or resurrection. The framework of *Holy Conversations* is customizable, mission-driven and asks congregations to answer honestly about their current realities. The emphasis of this work is to help congregations increase openness to shared ministry opportunities, develop the potential of regional parish collaborations, and gain greater clarity around when it's time to close and continue mission beyond being a bricks and mortar ministry. Even in closure we are seeing the story of resurrection, out of the closure of Community of Love Lutheran Church, we now have Share the Love Clothing Boutique as it continues to care for the needs of our neighbors in need in Oxford, PA.

Investing in the Future: Leadership and Formation

While the church continues to be reframed, we are engaging in several training programs that seeks to equip the church in new ways around several key areas. Thankful for many of these processes, its other people investing in our synod.

Love Revolution

Our multi-year process to equip congregational leaders is nearing the completion of its first wave of learners. Affirming the baptismal covenant and exploring the rich complexity of each congregation's unique contexts, this congregational renewal process seeks to center justice work, community engagement, and love of neighbor. Fully funded by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. Vibrant Congregations initiative, we are lucky to have this process helping to transform congregations from congregations who look inside, to those who look outside into their communities. The second wave of congregations is being selected now, and we hope that your congregation will consider being part of the Revolution!!

Faith Alive

Seeking to help congregations more deeply welcome children in worship, Faith Alive is developing resources to help congregations deconstruct and reconstruct their worship from a child centric focus. Working with principles of universal design, congregations will learn ways to open up the experience of worship to a wider range of participants. Resources have been under development this year as we work with our focus group and planning team. Our first worship learning lab was held in January and saw a wonderful engagement of over 60 people coming to learn ways that they can adapt and make worship more engaging for our little disciples. This process is entirely funded by a grant from The Lilly Endowment Inc., Nurturing Children through Worship and Prayer Initiative.

Candidacy Re-Imagined

Our synod was one of 7 synods' selected to help pilot a re-working of our Candidacy Process to form Rostered Leaders (pastors and deacons) in our church. In our current candidacy process, matriculating through a Master of Divinity degree at a seminary is the assumed and usually only way to accomplish the tasks assumed in Candidacy. The Re-Imagined process no longer assumes this as the only pathway towards ordination and instead moves away from this "one-size-fits-all" model of seminary formation. The new pathway acknowledges that there may be many pathways towards ordination and makes provisions for a diversity of candidates to enter the formation process. At its core it shifts from an essay requirement (entrance, endorsement, approval) and into assessment and demonstration of core competencies. Creating a portfolio of assignments, candidates for ministry will work closely with the candidacy committee to document their formation path and complete the candidacy process.

A Church Rooted in Justice and Public Witness

Throughout the year, our synod remained deeply engaged in public theology. Our statewide policy office LAMPa (Lutheran Advocacy Ministries of Pennsylvania) is supported by our two Policy Advisors, The Rev. Leah Woehr-Grande and Mr. Bruce McCullagh, Esq. Advocating on a range of topics, they remind our legislature that topics like the environment, hunger, housing, climate change and immigration are also matters of our faith. This year our day of advocacy in Harrisburg saw a record number of attendee's - signs that people are choosing to get more active in our shared democracy. This summer at the Churchwide assembly our denomination adopted a new Social Statement on Faith and Civic Life and I commend it to your study as we continue to live in the midst of rising political tensions. To that end, I have participated with my fellow PA Bishops on working with Common Ground, USA to develop plans and networks to help ramp down the rise in political violence. I have also worked with our interfaith partners here in Philadelphia to advocate around community safety, antisemitisms and the ever-persistent plague of gun violence in our city. We are truly a church in the public square, and I give thanks that you support it becoming central to how we become a church that looks like Jesus.

A Reality We Must Name

The church, as we knew it, is shifting. While there may be a growing number of people who are spiritually curious out there, they aren't shifting into relationship with our churches at a rate that will turn the tide for the institutional church. Our church is changing, and we need to be ready to name the hard truths that come along with that institutional shift. A myriad of factors have led to the decline in religious attendance (increase of those with college degrees, the rise of women in the work force, marriage happening later and decentralizing marriage as an institution, declining participation in face-to-face organizations, intensified personal individualization, mass consumerism, just to name a few) is a reality we must all face. And that reality will lead to closing congregations, and it's with sadness that we grieve that was a reality for Community of Love, Oxford and Trinity, Ft. Washington this year. Beyond the realities in our pews, the wider world is swirling with growing political divisions, tensions over who is in or out of our country, and a growing list of locations overseas that are places of war and conflict. All of this leads to a growing complexity to doing ministry in these times. Many of our leaders (pastors and deacons) express fatigue and burn out in the face of constant stress and worry. Add onto that stress and worry, a growing list of things to do as they tend to multiple congregations and it's a wonder we didn't see more leave the roster this year.

But the reality we must name is that we are also Easter people. That when the world looks like Good Friday, with death and dark clouds, foreign soldiers standing by as it seems like our messiah dies, we know what's coming and the story of God's victory over the grave. Signs of resurrection are happening all across our synod and our church. Sure, they might be small, but tiny seeds buried in the dark soil eventually gain enough to break forth from the ground. We see resurrection when congregations choose to partner with each other. We see congregational leaders coming together to learn new things about generosity, leadership, working with young people, and a host of other ways they are leaning into these times of transition and renewal. We see young people answer the call of ministry (yes!! Even in these turbulent times). It's signs of the slow and steady work of the Holy Spirit to continue to renew this church through the power of resurrection. We are in the process of becoming and the creator who formed us, isn't done with us yet.

Looking Ahead

As I see the work of our synod over the next year, I see several prioritizes being to emerge to focus our work.

1. Sustainable Congregation Models

- A Compensation Task force has been established to study and provide guidance for our rostered leaders in situations that might not always be full-time ministry.
- We are studying and exploring what part-time and multi-point look like so that we might consider options that work for congregations.

- Developing our SAM (Synodically Authorized Ministry) - a task force is looking into the situations in which we might create or develop our SAM ministers.
 - That we find ways to help congregations develop their justice ministries drawing more people into God's work in our ministries.
2. Leadership Pipeline
- Candidacy Re-Imagined will continue to be flexible and draw a diversity of candidates into formation that may not have had those pathways before
 - Young Adult engagement - writing to The Lilly Endowment, we are hopeful that *The Calling Collective* becomes a new ministry effort for us to reach those in the emerging adult demographic (18-36).
3. Congregational Collaboration
- Utilizing our synod's transition process and the Vitality Team's *Holy Conversations* materials, I hope that that we are encouraging more congregations to work together on a variety of ministry efforts.
 - A growing sense that we are Lutheran's together and less of the fact that each of us is replicating ministry in a silo.
4. Cultural Transformation
- From independence to interdependence, as we transition away from the institutional church, we are creating a web and network of faith communities that show the world what it's like to Love God and Love Neighbor.
 - From maintenance and into mission, helping congregations develop beyond just taking care of the building and into the community to meet people and expand the reach of the congregation.
 - From scarcity and into abundance, the institutional church worries about it's survival in the face of shrinking resources, the missional church sent into the world sees the abundance of people wanting to talk about faith as an opportunity to capture the abundance that God is richly pouring into the world.

Conclusion

This year, as we gather under the theme *Imago Dei*—that we are created in the image of God—I find myself reflecting not only on who we are as individuals, but on who we are becoming together as the church. If we take seriously the truth that every person—and every community—bears the image of God, then we are called to approach this moment not with fear, but with holy curiosity.

- What might God be revealing through this season of change?
- What new expressions of church life are emerging?
- What needs to be released so that something new can take root?

When we take *Imago Dei* seriously, we acknowledge that to bear God's image is not to preserve institutions at all costs—it is to participate in God's ongoing work of creation, death, and

resurrection. This may not be the church we once knew, but it may be the church we are being called to become. A church that more fully reflects the image of God. A church rooted in healing, committed to justice and alive with joy. A church that creates space for all people to discover their purpose and belonging in God's story.

So as we gather for this assembly, I invite you to look for the signs of that new life among us.

They are already here.

And by God's grace, they are only just beginning.

+ Bryan

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