



2021 Annual Report of the Synod

by Bishop Patricia Lull | January 2022

***"Let us hold fast to the confession of our faith without wavering,
for he who has promised is faithful."*** - Hebrews 10:23



This past year has been a wild ride. COVID-19 vaccinations opened a roadway to imagine more in-person gatherings just as political rancor made it less attractive to be together with those with views other than our own. Summer brought better weather for worshipping outdoors, fall programming was planned, and then a rise in infections from the Delta variant caused new caution and restraint in our church gatherings.

Across the synod, book groups were launched, tackling tough questions of racial justice and long overlooked inequities in communities of color. Leaders embraced important soul work to understand their own bias and resistance to change. Congregation councils wrestled in new ways to understand what it means to be the church today. Live streaming became common place in sanctuaries large and small.

Looking back, 2021 was both a tough year and a transformative time. Last January, did any of us really think we would still be wearing masks and keeping social distance the following Christmas? Yet, when challenged in so many ways, in congregation after congregation, we learned to **hold fast** to God's promised faithfulness; a wild ride indeed.

Undeterred by not being able to gather in person, at the digital Synod Assembly in mid-May, we launched the synod-wide Planting Hope Campaign. Over the next two years we will work together to raise \$2.75 million dollars to deepen the Spirit's work within and beyond the 109 congregations and mission starts of the synod. Your participation will help us:

- Invite neighbors into life in Christ;
- Renew the congregations of the synod;
- Raise up the next generations of leaders;
- Invest in a transformative project on the East Side of St. Paul
- with Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota.

The congregational phase begins now in early 2022 with congregations setting aside six weeks this year to introduce the campaign and to invite financial participation. More information on the Planting Hope Campaign can be found at <https://spas-elca.org/planting-hope/>.

This synod places high emphasis on raising up the leaders needed for the work of this synod and across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Currently, 38 persons are in the candidacy process, preparing to serve as deacons or pastors. Five candidates were ordained this past year for service in the Saint Paul Area Synod. They include Pastor Tammy Wilkerson, Pastor Teleen Saunders, Pastor Amy Mihelich-Smith, Pastor Linqing Chu and Pastor Bristol Huffman Reading.

In addition, during 2021, 20 persons were installed in new calls in congregations or in specialized ministries. That's a lot of call committee meetings, prayerful deliberations, and congregational meetings. How grateful we can all be that this work did not stop during the disruptions of the pandemic.

Amid the many changes in our communities, strong ministry requires lifelong learning. We are grateful to be in the third year of a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment to support the ongoing learning of pastors and deacons. In 2021, the nine members of the first round of the Second Act Cohort, for pastors and deacons in years four through 10 of public ministry wrapped up their two years together. Ten other pastors and deacons will form a second cohort in early 2022. They will be accompanied by mentors, more experienced clergy with a commitment to walk with rising leaders. Also, the Kubernesis Seminar, for those discerning a call to senior leadership positions, continues to meet quarterly and is eagerly anticipating their capstone sailing trip adventure in August of 2022. A third cohort for Leaders of Color continues to explore how best to invest the resources from the Lilly Endowment to deepen community, learning and support.

It is not enough to have strong, agile pastors and deacons; resilient lay leadership is also necessary for congregations to thrive. This past year, five congregations participated in a Liberating Structures cohort, learning together how to embrace new opportunities for deepening faith and expanded commitment to others beyond the congregation's walls. Three additional congregations are pursuing a tailor-made renewal process. Six congregations have participated in community listening and engagement training. Do you recognize your congregation's involvement here? If not, the synod staff is here to assist you.

While mission support for synod and ELCA churchwide work has been shared at 96% of that budgeted for the year, many congregations do worry about money matters and seek to strengthen their stewardship skills. This past year, nine congregations – perhaps including yours – participated in a year-long training called Stewardship for All Seasons. It is good to remember that none of us need to navigate these days without encouragement from others.

Pandemic restrictions on global travel challenged the synod's long-standing partnerships in the Iringa Diocese of Tanzania and in Guatemala but Zoom and video connections opened new ways to be a church that is both local and global. We are especially grateful that in March, Astine and Ryan Bose were able to begin their two years of volunteer service with Bega Kwa Bega in Iringa. God has shown us and our global partners new ways to be connected, habits which will endure long after the pandemic winds down.

Let me end with a special word of thanks to the synod staff. Along with Ryan and Astine Bose, Rolf Lowenberg-DeBoer joined the staff as an assistant to the bishop in March. Other staff include Michael Gold, office assistant; Pastor Justin Grimm, director for evangelical mission and assistant to the bishop; Peter Harrits, director of Bega Kwa Bega and assistant to the bishop; Deacon Krista Lind, assistant to the bishop; Anna Marsh, executive assistant to the bishop; Alicia Rodriguez, office manager; David Roinas, synod finance administrator; and Mary Smith, director of communications.

It has been a wild ride of a year and yet at every rollicking turn along the way, God's faithfulness has sustained us and those we are called to serve. **Hold fast**, we can say to one another. Please know what a joy it is for all of us to serve with you in the Saint Paul Area Synod.

Yours in God's service –



Bishop Patricia Lull