

Rev. Aaron Fuller

(He/him)

**Current Position: Pastor,
Bratislava International Church
(ELCA Service & Justice Missionary)**



Date and Year of Ordination: September 15, 2013

Previous Calls and Positions:

- Pastor, Our Father's Lutheran Church, Rockford, MN (2020-2023)
- Director for Resiliency Initiatives, Training, and Education, U.S. Marine Corps Training & Education Command, Quantico, VA (2019-2020, concurrent role)
- Advisor to Chaplain of the Marine Corps, Evidence-Based Spiritual Care, Pentagon, Arlington, VA (2019-2020, concurrent role)
- Command Chaplain, Expeditionary Combat Readiness Center, Norfolk, VA & Sembach, Germany (2016-2019)
- Pastor, St. Andrew Lutheran Church & Holy Communion Lutheran Church, Portsmouth, VA (2013-2016)
- Chaplain, U.S. Navy Reserve, Various positions (2013-Present).

Education and Earned Degrees:

- Doctor of Ministry, Integrated Chaplaincy, Vanderbilt University (2023)
- Frederick Buchner Prize as top graduate Master of Divinity (CYF Concentration), Luther Seminary (2013)
- Children, Youth, and Family Prize for top thesis
- Master of Science, Secondary Education, Old Dominion University (2007)
- Bachelor of Science, Naval Architecture, United States Naval Academy (2001)

Describe your process of discerning this potential call to serve as our next bishop:

There are two primary reasons I feel called to serve as Bishop. First, I believe there is a great opportunity to co-create a more sustainable, ethical, and interdependent culture in our Synod. At a time when many are fearful about shrinking resources, I believe as a Synod we have all the resources we need and more! However, we need to think differently, particularly when it comes to how resources are distributed and shared among us. I believe my experiences and education can provide strong leadership in accomplishing this. Second, I recognize I am a person of color committed to this church. While I believe I have the knowledge, experience, and character to lead as Bishop regardless of my identity, I hope my inclusion in this process leads to greater opportunities for POCs to lead in this Synod and the ELCA.

What is your vision for the Minneapolis Area Synod?

My vision for the Minneapolis Area Synod is to co-create a more sustainable, ethical, and interdependent culture in which we approach ministry more collectively.

Sustainable: Our greatest resource is people! As Bishop, I would seek concrete ways we can collectively support people carrying out ministry, particularly our rostered leaders.

Ethical: I strongly disagree with the understanding that the Bishop sets the vision. The vision must arise out of the voices of the Synod's people, lay and rostered. The Bishop provides ethical leadership that carries out the Synod's vision, with integrity and ensuring no one is excluded.

Interdependent: The Synod's culture is steeped in an ideology of competition and scarcity, forcing congregations to work in isolation and at times against each other. Every congregation and ministry setting needs each other to carry out God's work in the world. I hope as Bishop to create a culture where we think and live more connected and committed to each other.

What do you see as principal challenges and opportunities to this synod in the next six years, and how would you approach them?

I see two principal challenges facing the Synod:

1. Care of Rostered Leaders. Current literature suggests burnout as a reason for clergy shortages. However, this avoids addressing existing inequities in how leaders are cared for and shifts the burden on them to care for themselves. We have an opportunity as a synod to support the holistic well-being of rostered leaders so they can serve freely, regardless of the ministry setting. As a Synod, I hope to seek ways to fund sabbaticals, continuing education, and a quality standard of healthcare. I also see the need to change synod staffing to better care for rostered leaders: a clinical social worker to address mental health and a chaplain to provide spiritual care without fear of reprisal or being exposed.

2. Coming to terms with how the Institutional Church has harmed God's people. My experience and education as a chaplain as taught me that the greatest challenge for the Church is not simply solved by innovation. We need to acknowledge the ways the Church has harmed people. Generational trauma and moral injury must inform how we approach every expression of ministry as a Synod. I feel we've valued our ideological beliefs before people. I hope to support opportunities for congregations and leaders to access research and improve their ability to provide ministry that supports mental, social, physical, and spiritual health and places care of people at the forefront of continuing the ELCA and the Synod's commitment to intersectional justice.

What has prepared you to be effective in creating belonging among various cultural groups?

First, my identity as a transracial Korean adoptee, and my lifelong learning of it, has played a major role in creating belonging among various cultural groups. I live in a "dance of identities" - my racial/ethnic identity makes me an "outsider" while the culture I was raised in also makes me an "insider." Second, I currently am serving as a pastor to an International Church. The congregation is truly a cultural mix of people from around the world who come to Bratislava, Slovakia to live and work.

What I have learned is that belonging is more than being welcoming or inclusive - it is rooted in human dignity and safety. The true enemy of belonging isn't the loss of a particular culture over another, but rather maintaining a dominant culture where some people cannot realize safety or dignity within it. When dignity and safety are tended to, it allows people to work through cultural dynamics in relationships of trust and mutuality, even when the work gets difficult.

Describe up to five recent or past synod, churchwide activities or community-related activities that have significantly impacted you. How do these experiences inform your vision for serving as our next bishop?

1. I was interviewing for potential calls, I remember a representative of a synod telling me my lack of congregational ministry experience was the primary rationale for why I might not be suited to lead beyond solo calls to small congregations. This person was dismissive of my 24 years (at the time) of leadership education and experience in other settings.

2. In 2022, I attended several MAS Rostered Leader Conferences. While the Synod had prepared a robust and full program schedule and worship, what I noticed is that it did not connect with the fact that rostered leaders were burnt out, felt isolated, and had incurred moral injuries in navigating issues caused by the pandemic and in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

3. From 2016-2020, I've had the privilege of doing ministry as a Navy Chaplain. In that work, I heard countless stories from men and women who live with trauma, guilt, and betrayal because of what they have witnessed and been asked to do yet yearn for a community to heal in and find forgiveness and reconciliation.

4. Since graduating from seminary, it has been a constant challenge to live out choice to "multi-vocational" ministry, largely due to barriers in the ELCA's policies and an attitude of resistance to consider new and faithful ways of serving.

"People are more important than things." This statement of purpose, from a prior organization I served in, sums up how these experiences inform my vision as Bishop. In a time of scarcity and competition, we have lost sight of our greatest resource: people. Too often I have seen personal opinions, resistance to change existing structures, and adherence to legacy understandings of leadership marginalize God's gifted people and extinguish their passion to serve God and the Church. Ministering within and outside the traditional structures of the ELCA has taught me the crucial task of leadership is valuing people and having the courage to lead systemic and sustainable change to that end.

In what ways have you applied new learnings to your current context?

I serve in a Global Mission context, so there are many to choose from! The most important new learning has been linking our missional commitment to accompaniment to the power of raising up human dignity in others. Serving in Slovakia and Hungary, I have learned to pay more attention to the differences rather than seeking similarities to form relationships. Getting curious about the differences calls me to listen and learn, even when I don't understand the spoken language! By paying attention to differences, God enlightens ways to honor and support the dignity of others in relationships. It has allowed ministry to flourish in ways that overcome very real boundaries (language, theology, culture, political pressures) - truly a work of the Holy Spirit!

What specific leadership skills and spiritual gifts have you used in developing lay and clergy leaders that you would bring as bishop of this synod?

Concerning skills and experience, I have been leading and developing leaders for over 20 years, in numerous settings within and outside the church. Yet, I feel my greatest strength is that I have been studying and practicing ethical leadership for 27 years. Ethical leadership has taught me the most important task in developing leaders is to create opportunities to let people lead. Allow them the chance to excel, learn, and use their gifts and skills to make a difference. In pursuing doing what is right, I believe this is the right thing to do. This means the most important skill is listening to and learning about people to identify those opportunities and ensure they are fully supported by me as they fill those roles. It means privileging other voices to speak where previously it has been only the Bishop's privilege to do so. How can leaders develop and emerge if they are not given a chance to lead? I believe a Bishop and a Synod are made stronger when we include other voices!
