

# Natalia Terfa

## (She/her)



**Current Position: Associate Pastor,  
Prince of Peace, Brooklyn Park**

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**Date and Year of Ordination:** May 31, 2015

**Previous Calls and Positions:**

- 2012-2015 Associate in Ministry - Prince of Peace, Brooklyn Park
- 2005-2012 Director of Youth Ministry - Prince of Peace, Brooklyn Park
- 2002-2005 Director of Youth Ministry - Gethsemane Lutheran, Hopkins

**Education and Earned Degrees:**

- MDiv - Luther Seminary, 2014
  - MA - Luther Seminary, 2008
  - BA - St Olaf College, 2002
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**Describe your process of discerning this potential call to serve as our next bishop:**

The first time a colleague asked if they could put my name in for Bishop, I laughed. When another colleague also asked me, I decided I owed this step some intentional discernment.

So I began with prayer and journaling. I walked and talked with my spouse. Then I called my spiritual director, who gave (and continues to give) me quite a bit of homework. I talked with two current and trusted bishops who spoke candidly and honestly about this call. I had conversations with trusted colleagues and friends, both in and outside of the church.

Each one of these conversations affirmed that, at the very least, my voice in the conversation matters, that this call deserves my consideration, and they all expressed hope I would stay in the process. Over these last weeks, I have noticed all the ways my colleague's request was actually not the beginning, but more of a middle place of discernment, and that God has been doing some pre-work to get me to do more than laugh at this suggestion. So here I am.

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## **What is your vision for the Minneapolis Area Synod?**

The Minneapolis Area Synod is a large and well-resourced synod, but we rarely act out of that abundance. Instead of letting our scarcity mindset guide us, I wonder what it would look like to trust in God's provision and take risks on behalf of the future church that is groaning to be born. Rebirth and renewal follow loss, so there will be challenges and grief ahead, but either we are resurrection people or we are not.

My dream is for the Minneapolis Area Synod to be  
a midwife, not an epidural;  
a door opener, not a gatekeeper;  
a truth teller, not a pretender;  
an open table, not a pyramid.

It is only by trying, failing, learning, and trying again, that we will be able to see where God wants us to move and grow and be reborn. I believe we can do this through the active (not just spoken) practice of innovation and creativity in our congregations, through their leaders, and by raising up the leaders yet to come.

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

We share a fear of a shrinking church. Attendance is down; denominational affiliation is in sharp decline. Looking only at numbers is scary, and unhelpful, as our fear causes us to miss out on seeing what God is really up to. We turn inward instead of outward, and we hoard our gifts instead of giving them away. We are afraid that this decline is failure, and we have bought the lie that failure is not an option. The hard reality is that the church as we know it will not and cannot stay the same. Instead of being so afraid of what is coming, my hope is that we learn how to be honest about who we are, where we are, and embrace what is to come.

The landscape in which the church exists has changed drastically over the last decade, and we have fallen behind. Adults spend an average of 6-8 hours a day online. Our opportunity is not only on tiktok or instagram, but also using podcasts, youtube, and many other ever-expanding digital formats to connect. I deeply believe that we have abdicated our responsibility by not being more present in these spaces. The voices of Christians in the digital space are plenty, but they aren't preaching a Gospel that we believe in. This doesn't mean in-person church is obsolete. It is more important than ever! There will always be people who need and want church as it is. But there are all kinds of people - from skeptics to deeply faithful - that will never step foot in our church buildings. We cannot simply keep hoping the perfect program or worship experience will bring them in. I believe we are called to meet people where they are, inside and outside of our buildings, through both tried and true and new and innovative ways, if we can let go of our fear and trust God to lead us there together.

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

My work as a podcaster taught me how to create belonging. Each week, I gather thousands of listeners from all over the world across gender, race, religious and spiritual spectrums. At the end of every episode we remind them that they are free to "take what they like and leave the rest." Curiosity and openness to each other is how beloved community is created. Together we practice how to take up space, to trust our yes, to know who we are and feel our belonging even when cultural and religious systems would prefer to manage, marginalize, or tokenize some among us instead of welcoming us as whole, full, people of God. I want people to know they can opt out if they don't feel safe or welcome. I don't want to set a table and close it. I want to set a table and notice who isn't there, who we are talking about or over. Belonging means we make more tables, push systems to change, fight for justice and equity, and hold space for multiple things to be true and held in tension with grace.

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**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?**

I am currently in a Embodied Anti-Racism Clergy Cohort through the Center for Leadership & Neighborhood Engagement (initially launched by MAS). Clergy hold space for each other to be vulnerable and support one another in a process that is difficult and often painful. It's hard, holy, good work. I have previously done embodied work and anti-racism work separately, but bringing them together has shaped my leadership in ways I am still processing, though it's already impacting how I lead and live as a white-bodied person.

Last summer, I led a trip to the Holy Land that transformed the way I understand myself, my place in the world, and it reshaped my vision of shared leadership. My co-leaders and I modeled leading from our strengths and gifts while responding to one another's energy. We didn't apologize for asking for what we needed or for the ways we were different. We modeled not being threatened by or in competition with each other while we honored our differences and constantly lifted each other up. And then we watched our participants do it too. I still get emotional thinking about it. Every day they took up more space, and saw themselves and each other more fully. They were open, vulnerable, supportive, and encouraging. It was an absolute honor to witness.

I also currently work with Church Anew, serving congregations and church leaders across the country. Through each event, training, or worship resource I curate, I get to showcase gifted leaders at their best, build belonging across diverse contexts, and model abundant hospitality for weary Christian leaders. It is another outlet for the kind of shared leadership that seems to break open and change systems in every space.

When you set people up to succeed and give them room to be who they were created to be, it feels like holy magic. It makes me want to replicate it, in any way I can, in any call or office I occupy, for the sake of the ways this kind of leadership can transform systems and institutions.

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

Many years ago, my spiritual director encouraged me to hold onto new learnings for a minimum of six weeks for the sake of my own growth. I consider myself a lifelong learner, and it is one of my strengths, but I get so excited to make connections and bring people into what I'm learning that I would jump right into sharing and teaching before letting what I learned sink into my bones. This six week pause has been a practice in slowing down, trusting my sources, and making sure that I am not just prioritizing learning, but wisdom. This especially feels countercultural these days, when information comes at us so fast, and we're expected to virtue signal our work as soon as we have new knowledge. Teaching from this pause has allowed me to spread new learnings across an extended period of time, not just when it's a trending topic. It creates trust in the words I speak, the work I have done, and models learning outside of a news cycle or cultural moment.

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## **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?**

I joined the candidacy committee of the Minneapolis Area Synod in 2019 because I wanted to make the process smoother for good and qualified candidates. It matters to me to be an active part of changing a system that has caused harm, not just for me but for those who follow. In the case of a slow-to-change system like candidacy, I want to be a voice at the table asking "but why?" and fiercely advocating to make the process less painful for future leaders. I intentionally use my time in panels to challenge candidates in ways that don't demean or belittle, to mirror their words back to them in order to encourage and lift up their specific gifts, and to offer tools or advice for their longevity in ministry. I have mentored seminarians, new clergy colleagues, and young lay leaders. In all of these relationships, I learn as much as I teach, and with each conversation my hope in the future church is renewed and my fears relieved by knowing the ones who will bring it into being.

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