

# Rev. Pam Fickenscher

## (She/her)

**Current Position: Senior Pastor,  
St. John's Lutheran Church,  
Northfield, MN**



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**Date and Year of Ordination: August 24, 1997**

### **Previous Calls and Positions:**

- Senior Pastor, St. John's Lutheran Church, Northfield, Minnesota, 2014-present.
- Co-Pastor, Edina Community Lutheran Church, Edina. 2002-2013.
- Pastor and Mission Developer, Spirit Garage (Bethlehem Lutheran Church), Minneapolis, 1997-2002.
- Pastoral Intern, Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1995-1996.
- Youth Program Director, St. John's Lutheran Church, Nashville, Tennessee, 1991-1993.
- Camp Counselor, Mount Cross Lutheran Outdoor Ministry, Felton, California, 1990.

### **Education and Earned Degrees:**

- Certificate of Advanced Theological Studies, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1995.
- M.Div., Vanderbilt Divinity School, 1994. Founder's Medalist for highest academic average.
- Faculty prize for achievement in New Testament Studies. B.A., Valparaiso University, 1990. German major, French minor. Honors College concentration in the Humanities.

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

I was asked just last week whether I'd consider nomination on the ecclesiastical ballot. I have utmost respect for the candidates who have done the work of a long discernment process and introduction to the synod over the past several months. The opportunity to be in this important conversation with these gifted leaders about the future of the Church is an honor.

I have been asked on other occasions to consider a call to the bishop's role, and now, as the book of Acts puts it, there is nothing hindering that possibility. I love my current congregation and have enjoyed being part of the healthy collegiality of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod. After ten years in Northfield and entering the "open field" time of parenting, I am open to the Holy Spirit's guiding.

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

The Minneapolis Area Synod is a varied and unique expression of God's church within a vast set of diverse expressions of the church. Within the ELCA, Minnesota synods are only now grappling with many of the same trends that other parts of North America have faced for decades. We have the resources to become better learners and listeners as we face the uncertainties of the future. There are many ministries and decisions that work best at the congregational level; the synod must focus on the leadership support, learning and ecumenical relationships that only the larger network of the synod can accomplish.

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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?

The last decade has taught all of us that we cannot see what the future holds. Sometimes trends continue; sometimes crises force us all to re-evaluate how we have been operating in the world. The ELCA is considering deep structural changes that could re-form all that we assume we know about this synod and the bishop's role within it, so I enter into this conversation acknowledging that uncertainty amidst it all. Through the pandemic I was told many times that my presence and leadership were a reassuring center through fear and decision fatigue, and I believe those same gifts would come to the fore in synodical leadership.

Public institutional leadership is challenging in our hyper-individualized culture, but I believe that strong institutions still have the capacity to strengthen families and neighborhoods. As a leader I believe my role is to first ask good questions that call people in to common mission: What strengths do you have to share with others? Did God give you this abundance for your own benefit, or to share it with others?

It is no secret that the youngest generations are less inclined to enter into public leadership in the church, but they display no less passion for the future of the world that will be theirs. Located in the most youthful part of our state, the MAS can be a link to a multitude of ways that younger generations can connect their passions for justice, for the planet, and for peace with a community that has grounded and grace-filled practice in working together. I am excited about the synod's potential in working with colleges, seminaries, and other faith-based organizations to connect young people with future leadership.

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

I grew up in California and always experienced cultural diversity in a multilateral way. As a woman from the LCMS who felt called into public ministry, I know first-hand what it is to enter into a space where you are seen as the “other.” In the Lutheran Volunteer Corps in Washington DC and during my internship in Jersey City, New Jersey, I leaned into learning about my own white privilege. In seminary pre-2009, I was moved to be an ally to GLBTQIA+ friends and colleagues who could not be their full selves in public ministry. In my current context, the intersection of rural poverty with privileged academic communities is present every day.

I’m still a student in these matters. The first requirement of learning is humility. As a leader navigating cultural differences, my first goal is to model humble listening, and to set tables where mutual learning can take place.

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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 have served on the Board of Directors of Holden Village for 12 years (finishing this June). Holden, like many church-related-but-not-church-owned institutions, has been wrestling with its faith identity throughout that time, even as it weathered serial crises of remediation, fire and Covid-19. I have learned a great deal: about supporting leaders without micromanaging them; about communication through crisis and how we hear one another in anxious times; about finding common language when language itself seems to be shifting around us.

I have been engaged with the Northfield Community Action Center, our local food shelf and assistance agency, as it has more than doubled its reach in Rice County. New leadership and the Covid-19 crisis led them to ask better questions, welcome people with lived experience of poverty into decision-making, and broaden their approach to addressing instability in our community. They’ve shown that it is possible to address multiple concerns -- climate, housing, and community -- at the same time.

Northfield’s Latin/x community is proportionally larger than the same in my previous neighborhood in Southwest Minneapolis. At St. John’s I have had opportunity to go to immigration court with members several times, and have witnessed how detention, court costs and long-term uncertainty impact multiple generations in this community. The complexity does not fit on a bumper sticker, but calls out for better solutions than what we have.

While I have served all my ordained calls in or near the MSP Metro area, my 20’s were spent in congregations in Washington DC, Nashville Tennessee, Berkeley California, and Jersey City, New Jersey. I was introduced to a variety of ways of being church in very different parts of the country where Lutherans are generally a tiny fraction of the population.

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

The last two years I have leaned into reading Scripture with more interfaith sensitivity.

Recent impactful reading for me in the last three years have been new understandings of indigenous history, such as *The Dawn of Everything*; the astonishing resilience of creation such as in Ben Goldfarb's *Eager*; and re-thinking the culture of philanthropy in *Just Giving* and *Decolonizing Wealth*. These learnings have impacted my work with adult education, stewardship and visioning for our place in the community.

And, through sports and engagement in nature stewardship projects, I continue to learn how to truly be in the body I am in; to value what it can do and learn, to listen to what it needs instead of "using" it, and to help the young people in my sphere learn to honor their own and others' bodies too. Even as we proclaim the good news of Jesus, the church can deepen its commitment to the First Article.

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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?**

My strengths are in administration, a calm and listening presence, and loving the Scriptures out loud. Administration: I've been engaged in staff recruitment, hiring and supervising all 27 years of my ministry; I'm constantly seeking to equip both paid staff and volunteers in ways that best use their gifts and calling. Listening presence: I have been told many times that my leadership through Covid-19 was a calm presence in the midst of unprecedented uncertainty; I can live with the ambiguity of an uncertain future without needing to foreclose possibilities just for simplicity's sake. Loving the Scriptures out loud: this is my working definition of preaching; I love gathering with people around the word to inquire how the Spirit is speaking, and am able to speak to the 'occasional' church (funerals, weddings and other occasions) in ways that help those who are less churched to still hear a word of grace even if they do not consider our faith their own.