

Rev. Stephanie Espinoza

(She/her)

**Current Position: Pastor,
Cross of Peace Lutheran, Shakopee**



Date and Year of Ordination: August 21, 2005

Previous Calls and Positions:

- Director for Evangelical Mission/Assistant to the Bishop in Rocky Mountain Synod, 2012-2015
- Senior Pastor, Nueva Esperanza/New Hope Lutheran Church in Aurora, IL, 2009-2012
- Missionary Pastor, ELCA Global Mission in Guapiles, Costa Rica, 2005-2009

Education and Earned Degrees:

- Master of Business Administration, Augsburg University, Minneapolis, MN, 2020
 - Language Study (Spanish for Business—online), Cuernavaca, Mexico, 2020
 - Language Study (Spanish), Casa Xelajú, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2006
 - Master of Divinity, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2006
 - Clinical Pastoral Education, Anvil Mountain Correctional Center—Stanford University Satellite Site, Nome, AK, 2003-2004
 - Clinical Pastoral Education, United and Children’s Hospitals, St. Paul, MN, 2002
 - Bachelor of Arts in Youth and Family Ministry, Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN, 2001
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Describe your process of discerning this potential call to serve as our next bishop:

While I was a pastor in Illinois, I also served as the cochair of the Metro Chicago Synod's Latino Strategy. In that work, I saw firsthand the struggles of immigrant congregations trying to survive economically while strongly proclaiming the Gospel. Our group envisioned church in new ways for immigrant communities. Some of our dreams included microenterprises and shared buildings to make ministry economically feasible. From that experience, I began to dream about my own role in being a catalyst for reforming the way we think about and do church. This planted the seed of discerning a call to ministry larger than just one congregational setting.

In our current time, when we see so much fear about declining denominations and closing churches, I see the hope that God is doing something new among us. I feel called to be a part of a resurrection church that is envisioning innovative ways to be God's people and proclaim the Lutheran message of God's love and grace for all.

What is your vision for the Minneapolis Area Synod?

My vision for the Minneapolis Area Synod is to strengthen relationships between the Office of the Bishop (OB) and our congregations, deepening the understanding of our interdependence. I see the OB as being the convener of networking congregations to not only build mutuality but also to share resources (knowledge) and gifts (money and time). This will build up the ministry of all and support those who may need assistance in specific areas of growth.

My vision also includes being a synod that is at the forefront of innovation in this time of needed resurrection. We have the gift of being in the Twin Cities, with incredible local resources that can help us discern holy ministry experiments to be the church in a new way to reach diverse young people and strengthen our current congregations: Finnegans Brewery's Finnovation Lab, the Carlson School of Business's MN Cup (both help seed entrepreneurs), 3M's Innovation Lab, and Augsburg University's MBA program.

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

One of the challenges our synod faces is a feeling of disconnection and isolation after the pandemic, in both our rostered leaders and our congregations. A new bishop and staff can establish new relationships, inviting one-on-one conversations with all rostered leaders and congregational visits. An opportunity exists to expand our conference structure by creating synodical affinity groups, convening those who feel called to a mutual type of ministry. We can gather together, beyond conference lines, those who, for example, minister to large congregations, those in rural settings, those engaged with global mission, or those offering online or podcast ministry. These affinity groups can work together to create a common goal, holy ministry experiments to further the Kingdom of God not just in our congregations but also in our whole synod.

Another challenge we face is racial equity within our synod. Forward steps have been taken, with our bishop asking congregations to create racial justice statements and our synod council leading a racial equity lens study, but work remains. 8 out of 21 rostered leaders of color or serving communities of color are not full time. Often as mission developers, they are tasked with starting a ministry in marginalized communities on their own (even Jesus sent his disciples out two by two) and raising their own funds for ministry. Our synod has the opportunity to prioritize the compensation of leaders of color, while working on a funding mechanism for mission support of these ministries to alleviate the stress of fundraising and managing those funds, while developing a new ministry.

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

My entire ministry has been among varying cultural groups. As a seminary intern, I served an Alaska Native congregation in Nome, AK. My first call was as a pastor with Global Mission in Costa Rica, serving 5 congregations of immigrants in rural fruit plantations. I then served a bilingual congregation of mainly Mexican immigrants in Aurora, IL. I also cochaired the Metro Chicago Synod Latino Strategy. Most recently, I served as Director for Evangelical Mission/Assistant to the Bishop in the Rocky Mountain Synod, accompanying Latino and Indonesian congregations. In my current call, my ministry includes serving families who have a neurodivergent child(ren). I also accompany the ministry of Cristo Obrero and the Latino families this mission congregation serves.

I am married to a Nicaraguan and have Latino children. I am fluent in Spanish. My passion and commitment for ministry is to be a Pentecost (Acts 2) church, in which people of all languages are able to speak and hear God's word.

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 did my yearlong pastoral internship in Nome, AK. I have never experienced such beauty, from wildlife on the frozen tundra to the waters of Bering Sea, to the warmth of the Alaska Native people, to their love of old-time Gospel hymns, from their ivory carvings and beaded mukluks to their hand-sewn parkas, and of course, native food! I also have never experienced such pain—from alcohol addiction, to people gone missing, to the near-constant darkness of winter that leads people into depression—from a land that is rugged and a sea that can swallow you whole.

On the other hand, twice a year, Alaska Native Lutherans from the Seward Peninsula gather in a village or Nome for a weekend of faith testimonies, singing of old hymns, preaching, and sharing in potlucks. Some days last until 2 or 3 a.m. Though many of the prayers and songs are in Inupiaq, a language I barely understand, I have never felt so strongly the presence of God in both the beauty and the pain.

Additionally, my husband and I have served as resource pastors at Outlaw Ranch in Custer, SD, for a week of bilingual family camp. The joy of my experience has multiplied as we have brought families from Cristo Obrero with us: children smiling at their first horseback ride and running from their cabins when the dinner bell rings; teenagers who have long forgotten their cell phones getting excited to bring their sleeping bag for a campout and volunteer to read for worship in both English and Spanish; parents getting a break and enjoy eating a home-cooked meal someone has prepared for them; our Spanish-speaking congregants making friends with English-speakers from across the ELCA, embracing each other with tears at the end of camp. It is a holy experience for all.

These experiences have shaped my vision for serving as bishop. I wish to be a convener for our diverse congregations across the synod to build authentic relationships. We need each other and are a better church together.

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

I recently completed an MBA program with coursework in innovation. One of my learnings was on Lean Innovation: trying a new idea and soliciting early feedback from customers (or church members) to minimize waste and time. The process prioritizes experiment over elaborate planning, celebrating incremental improvements.

Several years ago, around 10% of our worshipping congregants were on the autism spectrum. After a sermon series on the Netflix show *Atypical* (about a teen on the autism spectrum), our congregation realized the importance of a sensory-friendly ministry. We prioritized quickly launching this ministry to match the energy in the congregation rather than spending time in elaborate planning.

Under this priority, we rapidly started a new sensory service by getting initial ideas from parents and educators. Then we solicited weekly, and later quarterly, feedback to make needed changes. We now have a service that welcomes more families with a child on the autism spectrum.

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?

As Director for Evangelical Mission/Assistant to the Bishop in the Rocky Mountain Synod, I had the opportunity to facilitate ministry reviews. At the request of the congregation, a synodical team of lay and rostered leaders whom I trained joined congregation leaders for a weekend of listening.

The result provided congregations with a list of Affirmations and Recommendations (areas of growth). A quarter of the synod's congregations participated in this process during my tenure. Congregations found this process beneficial. It helped many of them measure their vitality and put into practice ministry plans for future growth.

The process taught me that my greatest gift from God is the ability to bring diverse people together for the sake of the Gospel. I lift up congregations to help them see how God is working through them, support them by being a convener, and networking them with congregations and resources to help with areas of struggle.
