

Bishop Ann Svennungsen's Report

presented at the 2024 Synod Assembly



This is normally my time for me to report on the last year. I will do a bit of that. But, mostly I'd like to reflect on the past 12 years.

Though I came to this calling in 2012 with experience as a pastor; a college and non-profit leader, there was much to learn in this call to serve as bishop.

The ELCA is a church with three institutional expressions. The institutional qualifier is critical – all of the baptized are expressions of God's church – each one of us – living out our faith in the world. We are little Christ's as Luther said.

And like all the baptized, I know that it's my life in Christ, my life in Christian community that makes this calling possible.



Our relationship with God is the foundation for **all** our vocations.

Lutheran theology also makes it pretty clear that our most important of the three institutional expressions is the congregation – the community where the means of grace are shared – where Christ is proclaimed in Word and Sacrament, community is formed, lives are transformed, and the baptized are sent to love the neighbor and work for justice.

Synods and the churchwide organization have a primary calling, then I believe, to help congregations flourish. That shapes everything we do.

So many things call for a bishop's attention. The north star for me has been: will this strengthen our congregations?

One of my best decisions was to visit every congregation in the first 18 months. What are the assets? What's going on? How can the synod accompany the congregation? Not every bishop in every ELCA synod can do this easily – there's too much geography to cover. It's a gift we can steward.

So, I and the staff have prioritized being in congregations – for parties and problems and everything in between. We meet with pastors and deacons and call committees and councils.





And, our work in congregational organizing for climate and racial justice - as well as our Faith and Neighboring Practices initiative has significantly increased the time we're in churches. And, we're all so impressed with the lay leaders we meet - so many of you in this room today.

When I started in 2012, the Minneapolis Area Synod had 150 congregations. Now we have 137.



During my 12 years, we started 5 new congregations - mission starts. Three continue today - the thriving communities of Tapestry, Amazing Grace, and Cristo Obero. Two mission starts welcomed as full-fledged congregations continue to flourish - Elk River and Minnesota Swahili.

We lost one congregation to LCMC. We welcomed one congregation from the Missouri Synod. Three pairs of congregations merged, and 12 congregations closed - with their members now bringing their faith and gifts to other

congregations.

With funds given to the synod from congregational building sales, we started the Resurrection Fund - focused on raising up living ministries from the legacy of congregations that have closed: one-fourth to new mission starts, one-fourth to innovation grants to bring new life into existing congregations, about one-fourth to multi-racial, multi-cultural congregations and ministries, and a tithe to ministries outside the synod.

To date, over 2 million Resurrection Fund dollars have been given to support ministries in our synod and beyond.



Yes, for me, the greatest joy and sense of fulfillment in this work is the vitality and faithfulness of our congregations. And, let's be clear, vitality is not about numbers; it's about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I've given 12 bishop reports and never once quoted from my husband's primary research work – Luther's Smalcald Articles. I guess this is my last chance. Luther wrote the Smalcald Articles when he thought he was dying. Sort of a last will and testament.

As such, the articles provide a succinct statement of Lutheran theology. Well, as succinct as Luther ever got. Luther starts, of course, with what he calls "the First and Chief Article" that is the good news that "Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All have sinned; they are justified without merit by God's grace in Christ."

In abundant love, God uses many ways – what we call the means of grace – so we might hear and see this good news: baptism, holy communion, preaching, the forgiveness of sins, the care and consolation of the saints.

Congregational vitality starts with getting that right – preaching the Good News.

We work hard to invite, prepare, and sustain gifted leaders and preachers of the Gospel.



Every person considering rostered ministry meets with our synod candidacy committee – a remarkable group of lay and rostered leaders who read countless essays and papers, conduct discernment interviews, and walk with candidates – hoping to raise up leaders who know the distinction between law and gospel -- and are eager to preach the Good News in Jesus Christ.

And, the leadership needs of our ELCA are critical. In 2008, the ELCA had (1200) students enrolled at ELCA seminaries, actively preparing to be pastors. In 2022, just 14 years later, there were half as many (600) in all 7 ELCA seminaries. Pray that God will raise up shepherds, that folks like you will open your heart to this calling – and tap the shoulders of others whom you believe God might be calling. Which begs the question, how many pastors and deacons has your congregation raised up in the past 12 years? Maybe, give that some thought over the next 24 hours.



And let prospective deacons and pastors know there are amazing resources to support them. The synod spends lots of time fostering that. There are synod scholarships, ELCA scholarships, seminary scholarships – all working to make seminary education affordable. Our synod

congregations provide internship sites for seminary students, and our chaplains serve as CPE supervisors.



The synod is stewarding the Inheritance Fund – providing educational debt relief to BIPOC pastors and deacons.

Currently, there are more than 30 BIPOC leaders serving as pastors, deacons, and synodical leaders.

And, our active clergy roster has grown younger.

We are passionate that the leaders of our congregations reflect the make-up of our communities and neighborhoods – in gender, race, ethnicity, orientation, age, the list goes on.

Leadership matters. It's a key way the synod supports the congregation's proclamation of the Gospel. So we invest in leaders; we support them.

Not just in and through seminary – but beyond – championing peer groups for leaders in every congregation, and providing resources to get them started; referring leaders to excellent coaches and mentors and therapists and spiritual directors; and providing time-sensitive and strategic educational events, like last fall's Bishop's Theological Conference with the Rev. Dr. Catherine Meeks.



All these things support the church in proclaiming the Gospel.

Finally, bishops have a key role when leaders lose their way. When we hear about potential misconduct, all other work is set aside. My whole attention is focused on the issue. We want to care for victims; to ensure there aren't any more. I've been surprised at how much

prayer and discernment and energy it takes to lead in these times. I count over 50 instances where I and/or the assistants have invested in significant conflicts and/or issues with rostered leaders (both active and retired).

Most of my sleepless nights as a bishop occurred as I've navigated such situations. Still, you may be surprised to learn the ELCA is one of the most respected denominations for how it handles clergy misconduct.

Our theology is a true gift – honest about the reality of sin; clear about the distinction between law and gospel.

And the synod also convenes – not just leaders but communities. we foster mission partnerships between congregations, accompanying each other for the sake of the Gospel.



Our conferences gather together on a regular basis. The conference assemblies a few months ago gathered conferences by region. Several lay leaders wondered how and when we might do that again. While you're here this weekend, ask your pastor about another congregation in your conference – introduce yourself to them. Ask how they're doing. Maybe

you could begin praying for one another. The Holy Spirit is at work.

Though we prioritize congregations as the place where the Good News is made known in the means of grace and the gathered community – we also recognize that **the synod has a unique and critical role of networking and convening.**

And, I believe these networks are vital to the flourishing of congregations. Put another way, I believe the diminishment of the network can be perilous to congregations. Without the synod, congregations become separate dots on the map; with no structures or prioritization of the collegiality that is critical – collegiality of lay and rostered leaders together; collegiality of congregations together. This is key to nurture, accountability, and a sense of unity in the church.

Further, without that healthy network – a community of communities – the witness to our region is lost – the synod's public voice aimed at the larger social, ecumenical, and legislative organizations.



And the networks expand beyond the geography of the synod. ELCA churchwide links across this whole country – and across the world.



One of my greatest joys has been to see the flourishing of our companion synod relationships – with Leipzig and Nigeria. I am so deeply grateful that Superintendent Sebastian Fedyt and Archbishop Musa Filibus are here for this assembly. It gives me such joy, personally, but also for the ongoing partnership we share as companion synods.



As much as ever, I love the ELCA. I believe its distinctive witness is critical, especially today, when so many in America seek to use the word “Christian” to mean lots of different things – and to advocate for lots of different causes.

Our clarity about the gospel – about God’s initiative, God’s radical forgiveness in Jesus Christ; our witness about the freedom of the Christian to love the neighbor, to think critically and thoughtfully, and to courageously engage the public square for the sake of justice – or, in a paraphrase of Luther: “to act boldly and trust God more boldly still. That is vital.

In a time when such strong winds blow in our country, when some are flying the banner of Christian nationalism, Luther’s confessional witness about the distinction between law and gospel is as crucial as ever.

I believe we – the clergy and lay leaders in this room – are called to be faithful and discerning stewards of this clay jar we call the ELCA. It’s as important as ever. Yes, we are a clay jar. Broken in many ways. Systems of exclusion and privilege continue to have a hold on us. Still, I believe our clarity about the Gospel of God’s radical forgiveness in Jesus Christ sets us free to do the good, hard, hopeful work of building beloved community for the sake of the world.

Before I conclude my remarks, a couple wonderful highlights from the last 12 months. I can’t say enough about the giftedness of our Bishop Election Committee. I’m not sure any of them knew what they’d signed up for – it’s a whole lot of work. But they have engaged this work with faithfulness, wisdom, and collegiality – and we are truly blessed.

As you know we received a million-dollar grant from the Lilly Endowment to start the Faith and Neighboring Practices program in 2022. This year, we were thrilled to receive a \$1.25 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help establish “Family Faith: Deepening Roots, Strengthening Families” devoted to forming learning communities made up of families, parents, and caretakers from the Synod’s eighteen ethnic-specific, culturally specific, and multicultural congregations with a focus on raising children in the Christian faith. Lift up this initiative in your prayers in these early stages.



Finally, I have loved this calling to serve as your bishop – ok, not every minute – but the calling has been an extraordinary blessing. I have sensed God’s call deep in my heart throughout the past 12 years. And, I have felt the incredible power of your prayers and love.

I’ve been blessed beyond measure by the team of the synod staff and elected leaders. We are truly a team – mission focused, hard-working, fun-loving, caring. God has gifted so many, many people who step up with courage and love to serve as pastors, deacons, chaplains, youth directors, teachers, musicians, church council and call committee members, synod staff, synod council, conference deans, and endless committees.

I couldn’t be prouder or more grateful for the incredible privilege of serving in and with this community called the Minneapolis Area Synod.

When I began, current staff members each submitted a letter of resignation. That will happen again on July 31st. The new bishop will have an opportunity to build a team that complements their own strengths and weaknesses. So, I fervently ask that you hold this incredible team of synod staff in your prayers. Because of term limits, I have known for 12 years this will be a time of transition for me. The rest of the staff is living with uncertainty – so please pray for these beloved servants of the church.

Our verses from Acts are clear that following Jesus is meant to be done together. In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes Christian relationships as critical for discipleship, for following Jesus. He writes, “God has willed that we ... seek and find God’s living Word in the witness of another person, in the mouth of human being. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to them. They need a sibling as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation.”

In synods, in congregations, in peer groups, in Bible study groups, in choirs, and Sunday school rooms, on youth trips, in hospital rooms, and on the steps of the capitol, the community of Christ is alive. Thanks be to God.