

Northwest Washington Synod

State of the Synod Report

May 15, 2021

Overview

I am so glad to be the Northwest Washington Synod with you – as we walk, journey, travel together. We are connected as the body of Christ – as siblings in Christ – together. We are the Northwest Washington Synod in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Together in Jesus Christ we are freed by grace to live faithfully, witness boldly, and serve joyfully. As people forgiven and redeemed, beloved and welcomed, we are called to embody God's grace in speech, action, and relationships. I am reminded daily that it is Jesus Christ who loves, welcomes, and forgives. As baptized children of God, we are called to participate in this love, hospitality, and forgiveness. I am thankful for all of you for your love, your welcome, and your forgiveness.

When a pandemic occurs, no one is quite prepared. The tragedy that over 3 million people have died throughout the world and almost 600,000 people in this country alone because of COVID-19 cannot be overstated. I am grateful that we are community together in this time and that God's love and grace stands firm – even in difficult circumstances.

In March 2020, the synod executive council and I met (online) for an emergency meeting. We were not sure what COVID would mean for the Northwest Washington Synod. Truthfully, I was concerned. I wondered, how will we make it through this? How will we worship from our homes? How will pastoral care happen? How can we be the body of Christ separate and yet together?

And then, we were surprised. People kept coming to worship and gathering together. Yes, in different ways: through Zoom, Facebook Live, YouTube, podcasts, email, and more. Pastoral care happened through phone calls, outside windows, and text messaging. Gatherings happened from cars and lawn chairs and flatbed trucks. It was incredible. You are incredible. Attendance did not go down. As a matter of fact, I don't know if you know this, but in the United States overall, more people went to worship on Easter Sunday in 2020 than any other time in recorded history. In this synod, overall, attendance did not go down in 2020. As you will hear in a moment, mission support did not significantly go down either. I have heard from many pastors about people coming to their church for worship from all over the world. People who were disconnected from church suddenly became connected ... with community, with the good news of Jesus, in this time.

What does this say? The Church is needed. The Church makes a difference. We make a difference – especially in times of great angst and concern. There are true spiritual questions people are asking – and whether we are on Zoom or in-person or whatever – people want to be connected and embraced, they want to ask hard questions and they want to trust that their questions will be heard. They want to know that they are loved and redeemed, that Jesus is with them. Yes, people are longing for the good news of Jesus Christ, perhaps now especially.

Let me tell you about some of what the Holy Spirit is up to in the NWWA synod since I was elected in May 2019. Please know this is not an exhaustive list and if your ministry or focus is not here – I apologize for the oversight. I am thankful for all that this synod is doing (and remember, the synod is “us” – WE are the synod).

Bishop's Five Focus Areas and Working Statement

As I talk about what has been accomplished and what we are envisioning, please know that I am working out of this working statement that we, the synod staff, agreed to embrace:

“Trusting in the Spirit, we are journeying together with God’s people so that all may discover and participate in what God is doing among us through Jesus.”

Further, there are five focus areas interwoven in the work that we are doing as we journey together in Christ:

1. Faithful Innovation
2. Youth and Young Adults
3. Leadership
4. Connection
5. Racial Justice

This working statement and these focus areas intersect together in the work we are doing as synod staff and synod council. I’d like to tell you about some of the things that we in the synod are doing.

Established Congregations

I am thankful for how all of you in stablished congregations have adapted through this pandemic. I am excited to see the partnering, the collaborating, the experimenting, and the dreaming that has happened. Here are two examples of collaborations in the synod:

- The Stillaguamish Missional Experiment is centered in the synod call of a Deacon to be a shared resource for all of the congregations in the Stillaguamish Cluster.
- The pastors and congregations of Northlake Lutheran and Prince of Peace, Shoreline partnered to share worship together on Zoom during the pandemic through the season of Epiphany.

We in the synod are thrilled to help with collaborations and partnerships. We have learned that these kinds of partnerships work better from the congregation (and not from the synod saying, “Let’s do it this way!). We are always happy to work with congregations who want to do more collaboration with one another.

We are also excited when a congregation has an idea for a new ministry that the established congregation would help foster. For instance, Family and Friends Gathering began when Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Everett saw a need for families with wiggly preschoolers. Through a grant received from the national church, and monies from the NWWA Synod, along with Our Savior’s, a new ministry began where once a month families and young children gather together.

We also know that there is a life cycle to all things – and this includes congregations. We encourage congregations to have ongoing conversations about who you are and why God has called you to the neighborhood and to the world. These conversations are much easier when there isn’t urgency – but a time of discernment. For your reflection and conversation, we are preparing a document entitled, “Living Legacy.” While congregations are in different places, it is always good to plan your legacy. The synod staff would love to have these conversations with you. If a congregation is closing, we are here to help. We are a resurrection people. We know that death is not the final answer. Resurrection comes through Christ. We are thankful for congregations who have lived out their faith by their legacy giving. Please visit www.lutheransnw.org to learn more about the funds and grants that have been made available through legacy giving.

New Starts

In the last two years, we have started four ministries. Yes, even in COVID. These new ministries are designed to reach people who, for a variety of reasons, have not connected with established congregations, and so, have not heard the redeeming and amazing message of Jesus. Through these ministries, we are reaching young adults, we are connecting with those outside of the church, innovating faithfully, and working towards racial justice – all as we join with the Holy Spirit.

The new ministries we have begun this last year include:

1. Living Stones – a prison ministry started in the Shelton prison in Southwestern Washington Synod and together we are expanding this ministry to the Monroe Correctional Complex.
2. Family and Friends Gathering – a worshipping community for young children and their families hosted by Our Saviors Lutheran in Everett.
3. Stilly Valley Dinner Church – An informal gathering around a dinner table, weekly Bible studies and serving in the local community, are the hallmarks of this ministry.
4. North Cascades Wild Church – A worship service that is inclusive of all people and acknowledges that even the rocks and trees clap their hand in praise of the Creator.

Please visit www.lutheransnw.org to watch the video online (available after synod assembly) where the mission developers talk about these ministries and others.

The LiVE Project

One of the Lutheran teachings that I hold most dearly is the understanding of priesthood of all believers - that all humans have access to God through Christ, the true high priest, and none of us need a priestly mediator. Out of this comes the understanding that all God-called vocations are holy – whether you are a teacher or a plumber, a doctor or an entrepreneur, mother, friend, gardener, volunteer. When you work for the glory of God – and for the world's good – God is calling you into this work and ministry.

I am excited to announce that we are embracing this understanding through the **LiVE Project**. LiVE (Living into Vocational Engagement) is a movement understanding that God is centered in all things. That, as people of God, we are called into responsibility and care for those around us and the world itself. I encourage you to watch the video online at www.lutheransnw.org (available after synod assembly) that shares more about the LiVE Project from the voices of those who are integral to its inception and work.

We have already partnered with Paths to Understanding (formerly Neighbors in Faith) where we brought a one-night workshop entitled **A Listening Circle Towards Inclusion and Diversity**. This was a sacred time where we heard stories from individuals within our synod who come from communities under-represented in our synod. There was opportunity following this workshop to join a six-week study called **Interrogating Privilege in Church & Our Lives** that ends this week. This workshop is facilitated by Pastor Priscilla Austin and Dr. David Hahn. Please watch for other opportunities for engagement.

We are also excited that we are in the middle of planning a synod-wide conversation on the ELCA initiative **Growing Young**. As you are all aware, churches are losing members and vitality as increasing numbers of young people disengage. We are excited to embrace **Growing Young** as we look at strategies that any congregation can use to involve and retain teenagers and young adults. As a result of engaging young people, these congregations have found they are growing spiritually, emotionally, missionally, and numerically. The strategies will work in any congregation, whether you currently have young people or not. If you would like more information on Growing Young. Please watch for more information through the synod weekly newsletter. Here is a link describing **Growing Young**. <https://youtu.be/9u-i08JR2dw>

Coaching

I am excited how our commitment to offering coaching to our Rostered Ministers and lay leaders continues to grow with **Coach Northwest**. Coaching is an intentional relationship in which the trained coach uses powerful questions, strategic listening, and accountability to uncover and utilize your strengths and insights to accomplish your goals. A coach will accompany you, listen intently to what is going on in your life and ministry, and ask questions that will empower you to take the next step. I encourage you to contact Pastor Gary Rothenberger or read more about coaching here:

www.coachnorthwest.com

Partnership with Others

We continue to partner with other NWWA Synod ministries and social action organizations (Below is some of what we are doing but is not exhaustive).

- During COVID we are thankful to our ecumenical and interfaith partners as we discern and have conversation on what is safe for our communities. We are thankful for social justice work we do together and for mutual consolation.
- We are partnering with Southwestern Washington Synod as we reconfigure interim/transition ministry.
- We continue to be in conversation and community with European Lutheran Church in Russia (our companion synod). We are hopeful that in May 2022 we will be able to visit Russia, attend their synod assembly, and individual congregations. If you would like to financially help our companion synod or if you are interested in traveling to Russia next spring (hopefully), please contact the synod office for more information.
- Open Door Ministries – a ministry for all faith communities to welcome and celebrate LGBTQ+ people – has been a ministry of this synod for thirty years. It began as a ministry for people with AIDs and has changed throughout the years. The board at Open Door Ministries has decided to enter a year of discernment for a time period of one year, pausing all ministry activities. Please keep this organization in prayer as they discern their future.

Racial Justice Work

The NWWA Synod is committed that in everything we do, we are including the work needed to be more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. To be truthful, we haven't done enough. And we continue to commit and move forward to live into what we know through Jesus and his teachings.

- As a staff and in the synod council, we have taken the IDI Inventory (Intercultural Development Inventory) and continue to learn from this assessment. We encourage individuals and congregations to take the IDI, as well – not as an end but as a beginning formation. To learn more about the IDI, please visit <https://idiinventory.com>.
- I am gratified for the many congregations who have confronted their own privilege and dived deep into racial justice work. I applaud the Lutheran Church in the San Juans and many other congregations who, through book studies, online gatherings, difficult discussions, sacred listening, telling stories, and other ways of growing and learning, have begun to explore how to be more engaged and live into diversity.
- I continue to be thankful for STAD (The Strategic Team for Authentic Diversity). This is a coalition of NWWA Synod Rostered Leaders working towards authentic diversity in our synod through resourcing pastors and deacons with education and resources. The name comes from the Strategy for Authentic Diversity, which was approved at Churchwide Assembly 2019, and our goals and work are intertwined with the goals of the strategy. If you would like to learn more about the NWWA STAD group, please visit our website. If you would like to read about ELCA's Strategy for Authentic Diversity, please visit www.elca.org. If you would like to know more about STAD, please go to www.lutheransnw.org.
- Reparations – The Racial Equity and Reparations Fund for Rostered Ministers is one step towards fostering solidarity between Synod colleagues, redressing financial disparities and making reparation for decades of systemic racism within the ELCA. You can learn more about this fund at www.lutheransnw.org.
- Knowing that the synod office is on the historic land of the Duwamish people, we are committed to paying "Real Rent" – a program established by the Duwamish people. You can visit <https://www.realrentduwamish.org> to find out more about this program.

Grants and Mission Support

We are so glad that so many grants were distributed this last year to individual congregations through the Northwest Washington Synod. These grants were provided by ELCA Lutheran Disaster Response, ELCA World Hunger Grants, the ELCA COVID Relief Fund, NWWA COVID-19 Relief Fund, Grace Grants and more. We are so thankful for the national church, congregational support, and individuals.

NWWA COVID-19 Relief Fund

Our Synod's COVID-19 Relief Fund was established in early 2020 to provide financial relief for congregations and ministries. This fund has continued to grow through individual and congregation donations as well as grants provided by the ELCA for COVID-19 Relief. We have given out \$117,683.46 in grants. We have a balance of \$23,351.21. Below is how this grant was funded:

- ELCA COVID-19 Fund: \$57,750
- NWWA Synod Start-up Funds: \$40,000
- Lord of Life Lutheran: \$28,250
- Other Individual and Congregational Gifts: \$15,034.67

**We are still accepting monies for this fund if you or your congregation would like to help. We are especially grateful for Lord of Life who "paid forward" their PPP loan. Please consider this if you excess monies in your forgiven PPP loan. This fund is also part of the designated offering for this assembly.

Grace Grants

We are in our second of three years distribution of Grace Grants. When Grace Lutheran Church, Bellevue, closed, they voted to give to the NWWA Synod over \$300,000 to use any way the synod council desired. The synod council voted to give this money back to congregations – to foster faithful innovation, youth and young adults, community, and racial justice. Last year we gave \$150,000 to several congregations. At the end of the 2021 Synod Assembly we will announce the recipients for the 2021 Grace Grants.

**We would love for this granting process to go forward beyond three years. If you and/or your congregation would like to contribute to Grace Grants, you are welcome to do so as we continue to look to the future.

Other Grants and Funds

- *Because of You*: Fund for Theological Debt
- *Because of You*: New Starts
- *Because of You*: Renewing Congregations
- Gloria Dei Fund
- Mission in Washington Fund

Please visit www.lutheransnw.org to find out if your congregation qualifies for these grants and/or how to support them financially.

Mission Support

I have been continuously amazed at your generosity this last year. In a year unlike any year I have been alive, and in a year when I wasn't sure what or how church was going to happen, you have shown grace, gratitude, faithfulness, and care for one another. One of the ways that you have shown this is through your mission support to the Northwest Washington Synod. As you will hear in a few minutes from our treasurer, the mission support from congregations has exceeded our expectations. We have been able to support our many ministries, begin new starts, help congregations in transition, work with candidates, be with congregations in difficult circumstances, continue to be church in the wider world and be church together in this synod because of your generosity. Thank you!

In Conclusion – Thank you!

I cannot tell you how thankful I am for you. I am thankful for the many ways we were able to connect this past year as we shared sermons, provided synod worship services with music and readings from gifted people from all over the synod, convened meetings with lay leaders, provided resources for congregations in transition, ordained new deacons and pastors, installed new deacons and pastors, worked with Rostered Minister candidates, wrestled with what it means to be Church in the middle of a pandemic, and when church buildings should close and when they should open. Weirdly, in this pandemic time, we connected with you all in ways that we never would have thought possible before COVID-19. Some of the ideas and ministries we are doing would maybe not have happened (work on privilege, diversity, inclusion) without the technology we have learned and the space to reflect.

I am so thankful for my staff. Thank you for your dedication, hard work, joy, faithfulness, and care.

Rev. Andy Yee, Assistant to the Bishop

Deacon Dianne Johnson, Director of Evangelical Mission

Rev. Dr. David Hahn, Director of Formation and Learning

Ms. Susan Berg, Communications and Events

Ms. Traci Hall, Synod Administrator

Rev. Herb Shao, Synod Fellow

Dear Beloveds of Northwest Washington Synod, thank you to all of you. We have reached places beyond what I thought possible. We have exceeded priorities and we are moving forward towards God's preferred future. I am grateful to be on this journey with you.

In Christ's Peace and Joy,

+Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee