

**Northwest Washington Synod  
Bishop's Report  
May 18, 2024**

*I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.  
Psalm 121*

I attend different worship services almost every week. Almost every week I am with a different congregation that is part of the Northwest Washington Synod. In the different congregations – small and large, liturgical and praise-filled, rural and urban, choirs and children – there is so much that I delight in. Truly, there are times when I look at the people I am blessed to gather with and I am overcome with the delight and the honor of being called here – to be with all of you as we gather as the body of Christ.

At our best, in this synod we gather together to sing, pray, worship, share Christ's peace, eat together at the Lord's Table, and share in one another's sorrows and joys. At our best, we raise our voices when there is injustice and we speak out for justice. We engage in hard conversations and we faithfully listen to one another and to other voices. In this new time in the church and world, we are finding new ways of connecting and collaborating in our congregations, in our clusters, with our full-communion partners, with other social service organizations, with civic organizations, and more.

Of course, we are not always at our best. And I want to acknowledge that sometimes we fall short – as synod and as individuals. Sometimes we must ask forgiveness from one another – when we don't speak out, when we don't listen. When we don't welcome and celebrate one another. When we act more for our own sake rather than for the community. When we lead with fear rather than trust and hope. I pray that we continue to have courage and that we live into what God is calling us to do and to be.

And so, as together we are saints and sinners, as Beloveds of Christ, I offer you this report. The information below is the work that is done in the Office of the Bishop in collaboration with the amazing staff that I am blessed to work with along with so many partners in this synod and beyond.

Beloveds of Christ, may we together lift our eyes to God, knowing that God will keep us and hold us. May we live into this promise as together we are *Synod* –journeying together in Christ's name.

**Joys, Concerns, and Workings of the Synod**

Established Congregations and Different Ministries

As we journey together – lifting our eyes and trusting in God's keeping – we are thankful for the diverse worshipping communities around this synod. We have long-standing congregations – 100+ years of ministry alongside ministries that are just beginning. We have ministries of different sizes, languages, worshiping styles, and more. We have ministries that meet in church buildings and ministries that are finding new places and new ways of meeting. We are diverse and we are connected. Thanks be to God!

### Cultivate

Many of our ministries have been experimenting with Cultivate / Sacred Spaces where there is an organic way of being church in and beyond church walls. From dinner church to wild church – from “messy” church to creative church – we have lay and Rostered Ministers exploring how to live into our Lutheran faith traditions as we journey together. If you are intrigued, we invite you to a Cultivate Retreat on June 1 at 7400 Woodlawn Ave NE. A more in-depth video on Cultivate / Sacred Spaces will be available following the Synod Assembly.

### Clusters

Different clusters in the synod are also experimenting with working together in new ways. Through connection and collaboration, different congregations are gathering together for conversation, book studies, worship, potlucks, and more as we learn how we are church together. As one example, the Stillaguamish Cluster have worked with each other and with NWWA Synod Coaching to move forward on collaboration. If you are interested in how to connect in new ways with your cluster, the Stillaguamish Cluster video will be available following the Synod Assembly.

### Ecumenical Relationships

Beyond our partnerships with congregations within the ELCA, we are also experimenting and partnering with our full-communion siblings in Christ. We have partnerships that are being fostered in the Skagit Valley and in Maple Valley as well as longer-standing relationships in Seattle, Monroe, and other places around the synod. Through joint efforts in service, worship, and community engagement, churches within the synod are building bridges across theological divides, enriching our journeys and strengthening our collective impact in society. While our ecumenical partnerships are being built between individual congregations, we are also exploring a growing and evolving vision of what might happen across the geography of the synod. Along with our ecumenical partners, we are working towards pooling resources, expertise, and perspectives – to amplify the reach and impact of our endeavors. These collaborative partnerships nurture a spirit of openness, hospitality and cooperation – helping us all live into what it means to be one body with many members.

### Evangelism and Outreach Team

Of course, all of these efforts to journey beyond the walls of the church take time and vision and – yes – money. And so we also have an Evangelism and Outreach Team (known as the EO Team) that is intentional in supporting individuals, ministries, and congregations as they step out and connect in different ways with the intention of helping grow Christian communities. While the EO Team work is not limited to New Start ministries – this is a primary function of their role. The EO Team provides financial support along with encouragement, technical assistance, appreciation, and accompaniment. They also provide inspiration and new perspectives in the different areas where each member lives in the synod.

The EO team provides grants for different ministries throughout the synod in partnership with Churchwide. Very recently, the Christian Community and Leadership (CCL) branch of Churchwide changed the categories from which congregations and other ministries can request grants. While I am not going to go into all of the categories on this report, please know that there are grants available for both established congregations and other ministry sites. For more information on this, please listen to the Grant Video that will be available following the Synod Assembly.

We would love for you to be a part of the EO Team! This team is about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in a myriad of ways: engaging with people from various cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, naming and recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual as a beloved child of God, working to heal wounds, bridge divides, and build connections across differences, and providing resources so that new and established ministries may thrive throughout this synod. If you would like to empower, equip, and encourage all of our communities in our outreach and evangelism efforts, please contact the synod office and we will connect you.

### Properties

God calls us to be caretakers of the land that we are on. Further, as we acknowledge that all of the congregations throughout this synod began through the support of past generations, we are called to steward the land in a way that is faithful to the gospel. Since I have been Bishop, I have discovered that faithful conversation about property is one way for us to live into our values and theology. I have also discovered that there are many property matters that need expertise – on the synod level and on the congregational level. Therefore, we have contracted with Jay Edgerton as the Director of Properties in the synod. We are also gathering people to be on a property task force to begin more fully entering into a theology of care of property and land within this synod. I am thankful that the synod council has already approved in March 2023 recommendations for when a congregation enters legacy with property matters. [You can read the Synod Recommendations here.](#)

In established congregations, in ministry sites, in newer ministries, in ways in which we care for our land, and in ways we continue to imagine, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Faith Formation

#### The LiVE Project: *Living into Vocational Engagement*

LiVE cultivates:

- *Theological Thoughtfulness*—exploring and expanding understandings for who, where and when God is showing up in our world.
- *Cultural Responsiveness*—encouraging self-awareness and challenging persons to embrace the difference of others.
- *Communal Engagement*—connecting across congregational-ministry divides.

This past year LiVE offered three intersecting Opportunities: Cohorts, Courses, and Retreats. Included last year was the free “Abide” Weekly Synod Bible Study, retreats on Church Vitality, Rest and Renewal, and Chosen, classes on Sovereignty Spirituality and Baldwin and Bonhoeffer, and more. Three new cohorts beginning this fall include Children, Youth & Families (CYF) Cohort, Changing Church Cohort, and Becoming an Anti-racist Church Cohort. Please watch for the entire catalog of LiVE offerings for 2024-25.

We are thrilled that since LiVE began three years ago, there has been a 131% increase in individual participants. Subscribing synod congregations increased 64%. We also had a number of participants and congregations outside of the synod and outside of the ELCA. The class on Baldwin and Bonhoeffer especially drew a large group of people from inside and outside of the synod.

We are thankful to have received a grant from Trinity Education Foundation for 2023-2024 for \$50,000. This money has helped provide scholarships for smaller congregations, the hiring of Mandy Neill as the Communications Assistant, and more. Thank you TEF!

### Lay Ministry Formation

Lay Ministry Formation (LMF) is a two-year, cohort-based educational and training program for lay leaders seeking to deepen their faith practices and discern what God is calling them towards in their vocations. LMF is more than an individual approach to learning. LMF promotes a more integrative, intersectional approach to leadership that is communally engaged in cohorts and congregational teams.

LMF recognizes the variety of calls in our lay leaders lives, and gives room for their own exploration in those interests alongside

We are pleased to announce that last year we began LMF with our first cohort of nine participants.

Through a mixture of online classes and retreats, this group continues to learn and to grow. For more information on LiVE or Lay Ministry Formation, please listen to the video that will be available following the synod assembly or you are welcome to [read the report](#) from Rev. Dr. David Hahn on this last year.

Through faith formation, we trust that ***our help comes from the Maker of heaven and earth !***

### Paths to Vocational Ministry

In the last few years, there has been a severe drop-off of people who are interested in attending seminary. This is not just the ELCA but all denominations – from progressive to more conservative. This goes along with the de-churching of the United States. Fewer people are going to church. Therefore, fewer people are going to seminary. This is causing a clergy shortfall. As we adapt to this new reality, there are different paths for people who are interested in vocational ministry.

### Candidacy

We are thankful for the candidates who are entering into faithful discernment to become Deacons or Pastors. It is not an easy road to become a Rostered Minister in the ELCA. It takes preparation, study, money, time, and more. We currently have twenty candidates who are in the process of becoming ordained through candidacy and seminary. Please pray for them as they continue to be faithfully formed through the Holy Spirit.

We are also thankful for the NWWA Candidacy Committee who is walking alongside the candidates. In the last two years they have committed time and effort in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion by hiring a consultant to identify and improve the candidacy process for all candidates. They have also been incredibly adaptive to the change in landscape in our seminaries and the needs of the candidates. Past Chair Pastor Jana Schofield and current Co-Chairs Pastor Erik Samuelson and Deacon Liz Colver have provided wonderful leadership to this synod and to the larger church. We continue to invite our congregations to help identify potential public ministers among you. And we would love to have more congregations identified as potential internship sites.

### SALM-Synod Authorized Lay Minister

As we look at our synod, we realize that there is a developing need for Bible-focused, thoughtful, and culturally relevant leaders to help with the pastoral needs in existing congregations – especially smaller and rural communities. We are now training lay people to do pastoral care in congregations who, for various reasons, are unable to have an ordained Rostered Minister.

I mentioned the Lay Ministry Formation cohort above. While not every LMF participant will become a SALM, some might feel called to this ministry. A SALM is a layperson who is authorized by the Bishop to do pastoral ministry in a specific site. They are required to do the two years of LMF as well as continuing education and some other obligations. If this interests you, or you think your congregation might want to look for a SALM, please contact the synod office for more information.

Through different ways that God is calling us into vocations, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Congregations in Transition

Two years ago, when we had our last synod assembly, twenty of our congregations had pastoral vacancies. We are thankful that through the great work of Assistant to the Bishop Andy Yee – along with transition pastors, care pastors, transition facilitators, transition teams, congregation councils, call committees, and congregations – that we now only have six vacancies in the synod. We are so thankful for those who accompanied the many congregations through this time of great change.

As we continue to discover, each congregation is unique and we cannot have a “cookie cutter” approach for each transition. Therefore, we in the synod office are committed to continue working with congregations in transition as together we pray, discern, discuss, and ask with the congregation, “What is God calling us to do and to be? Where is God calling us? What is our next faithful step?”

While most of our congregations in transition will be calling a new Rostered Minister, we are also exploring new ways of providing pastoral leadership and care due to a congregation’s lifecycle, geography, finances, and other factors. This includes working with our ecumenical full-communion partners, working with other congregations, or lifting up a Synod Authorized Lay Minister (SALM) for the community. A more in-depth video on transition and mobility will be available on the synod assembly webpage following the Synod Assembly.

In congregations in transition, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Congregations in Legacy

We desire that the Holy Spirit continually sustains both our community as a whole and individually each community within the Northwest Washington Synod. 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 what God has called you in the neighborhood and in the world. These conversations are much easier when there isn’t urgency – but a time of discernment. We in the Synod Office are happy to meet with you and work with you as you have these conversations.

For congregations that recognize they are moving towards closing as a church and moving towards legacy, we provide legacy teams to help with this process. We understand that this is a painful process. It is also sometimes overwhelming. There is not only the grief that comes when something you love ends, but there are many legal and financial issues to deal with in a congregation closure. Please know that we are committed to providing quality pastoral care and help with other issues that is faithful to the congregation and to the mission of the church. We also have [Synod Recommendations for Legacy Considerations](#) that the Synod Council adopted on March 18, 2023 for reference in closures.

I am so grateful for the years of faithful ministry of the following congregations. Through their care and love, thousands of people experienced Jesus' love and grace. Beloved people heard God's Word, were baptized, received forgiveness and were encouraged to forgive others. So many were comforted in their grief and celebrated in love. They have received instruction and formation. They have been Holy Community for each other and for the world. While we grieve the closure of these congregations, we know and trust that their impact continues. ***Through the Holy Spirit, the legacy of each of these congregations continues beyond what we can even imagine.***

We give thanks to the following congregations who have now entered legacy and for their discernment in distributing their assets:

*Glendale Lutheran Church-Burien, 80 years*

Upon closure, Glendale is selling their facility to a Vietnamese Baptist Church. Once this sale is complete their assets will be distributed as:

\$1.5M NWWA Synod New Ministries Fund  
\$700K NWWA Synod Unrestricted Fund  
\$50K NWWA Synod Youth and Family Fund  
\$1.0M Glendale School Scholarship Fund

*Shepherd of the Hills-Concrete, 67 years*

Properties and buildings given to the Upper Skagit Tribe per their acceptance and negotiation.

*Clearbrook-Lynden, 121 Years*

Sold to The Hispanic Church

\$10K NWWA Synod for expenses incurred  
\$62K Lutherwood Camp and Retreat Center; and donated  
\$7K NWWA Synod

*Holy Cross-Bellevue, 54 years*

Habitat for Humanity building thirty-five units of affordable housing on the property

*Holy Cross-Lake Stevens, 38 years*

Property given to the NWWA Synod

NWWA Synod leased to Hope Lutheran Church – the newest congregation in the NWWA Synod

*Central-Bellingham, 69 years*

Sold to Lutheran Community Services Northwest

LCSNW will provide services to the greater Bellingham area in mental health, family and community support, refugee and immigrant services, child welfare, aging and independent living,

and crime victim services. Compass Housing, a partner with LCSNW, will work to develop low-income homes. LCSNW will also provide office and worship space for the synod's new ministry start Echoes and other ministries.

In the midst of grief and loss, we trust that the Holy Spirit is working through this process of legacy. As faithful followers of Jesus, we place our hope in resurrection. We fervently believe that as one congregation dies in this time and place, the God of resurrection lifts up new and future work for the good news to flourish. May the decisions made when a church is closing continue to impact the world in positive and meaningful ways. May we remember God's mission to change, renew, respond, and save lives in this beautiful and broken world of ours. May the legacy of all of our churches remain faithful to the ongoing work of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the unique Lutheran expression that we are founded on.

Even in grief, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Justice, Equity, and Belonging

We continue to grapple with our history, our present, and lean into anti-racism measures. We are dedicated to moving towards greater justice, equity, and belonging in this synod. Below are some ways we are implementing this goal:

- Candidacy:
  - The Candidacy Committee finished a two-year anti-racism assessment. They are implementing different strategies and ways of making the Candidacy process a place where diverse people are welcome and celebrated.
  - Looking at funding strategic internship sites that support the priorities of candidates of color, marginalized communities, and smaller and more diverse congregations who are unable to afford an intern.
- The LiVE Project: All of the LiVE offerings encourage self-awareness and challenge all participants to embrace the difference of others, learning and growing together.
- STAD (The Strategic Team for Authentic Diversity): A coalition of NWWA Synod Rostered Ministers working towards authentic diversity in our synod through resourcing pastors and deacons with education and resources. We are thankful for their offering this past fall on an anti-racism workshop for the synod.
- Intentionality supporting current and prospective Rostered Ministers of color:
  - Congregations who have Rostered Ministers of color forming cohorts to learn, listen, and support.
  - 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. This fund has dispersed over \$50,000 since it was formed three years ago.
  - Cohorts of Rostered Ministers of color to form connection and communication with one another.
- Diverse Synod Rostered Ministers and Rostered Minister Synod Staff:
  - This synod is dedicated to calling and supporting Rostered Ministers of color or whose first language is other than English. At this moment about twenty percent of the entire

NWWA Synod Roster are Rostered Ministers of color or whose first language is other than English.

- This synod is one of two synods who has an Asian-descent staff person.
- Real Rent: Because the Synod office sits on historically Duwamish land, the NWWA Synod participates in the Real Rent initiative by having a budget line item to the Duwamish people.
- Assessing the Synod Structure:  
We have hired Crossroads to work with and assess this Synod in how we are together – especially in regard to people of color. This assessment team consists of members from the Synod Council, the Synod Staff, STAD, and a variety of lay and rostered leaders throughout the synod. The work Crossroads is doing with the Synod will help us deepen our understanding and design ways to evaluate, strategize and activate what will be required of the Synod to become more antiracist in our ways of being. If you are interested in this work, this assessment team still has room on it as we begin this process. We invite you to prayerfully consider submitting your name for consideration.

We know that there is much work to be done. We know that as faithful followers of Jesus, we are called into uncomfortable spaces. In this majority white synod, we are called to listen and learn from all people, especially those who have been historically silenced. And yet, this is good work. This is needed work. This is holy work.

As we continue to move towards God's justice, equity and belonging, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Partnership with Others

We are thankful for the collaboration and partnership we have with so many wonderful organizations and ministries throughout the synod and through the world. Below are a few that we lift up. Please know this list is not exhaustive.

- We are intentionally partnering with Southwestern Washington Synod and our full communion partners as we address the challenges of being church in this time and this place. We are especially addressing how to share buildings, pastors, and ministries together so that congregations may flourish.
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia (ELCR) is our companion synod. We have a long and rich relationship with them. As you may understand, these past months have been difficult for this church. Discrimination against Lutherans continues to happen in Russia. I am happy to report that this fall a team from this synod is going to Belgrade, Serbia to meet with the ELCR Bishop and his team. We will be there along with two other ELCA synods and two other Russian synods. We hope to provide support and mutual consolation in this difficult time. Please keep our siblings in Christ in the ELCR in your prayers. If you wish to join the ELCR team in our synod, please visit our website for further information.

There are so many ministry partners we could name. We are thankful for each one and we continue to look at ways we may collaborate.

As we partner with others, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Grants



We are so glad that we continue to distribute grants to individual congregations and ministry sites throughout the NWWA Synod. We are thankful for the national church, congregational support, and individuals.

The grants that we have in the synod are:

- Grace Grants (this ended in 2023)
- Grants for Theological Debt
- Evangelical Outreach Grants
- Gloria Dei Fund
- Mission in Washington Endowment Funds

We are thankful for the individuals, current congregations, legacy congregations, and others who have participated in setting up these grants.

As we envision new ways of being church through grants, we trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### Mission Support

Thank you for your generosity. Through your faithful mission support, we have been able to support our many ministries, begin new ministries, 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 you. We are synod and we are journeying together. Thank you!

As we financially support the mission of the church and God's mission in the world, we trust that trust that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

### "Bishopy" Things

Since we last met together as a Synod, I have visited so many of you in your congregations. We have gathered for installations, for anniversaries, for conversation, amongst other things. There has been laughter and joy. There has been sorrow and anger. We have sung and prayed and worshiped together. I have worked with congregations who are excited and I have worked with congregations who are conflicted. I have worked with congregations in grief. I am grateful for the trust that you place in me and in the synod staff as we work collaboratively with you. I am truly thankful for you.

I quite regularly meet with Rostered Ministers individually. Many of these conversations deal with burn-out, conflict, exhaustion, and/or concern about the state of the church. Barna Research found in 2022 that the percentage of pastors who have considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year sits at 42 percent. I encourage all of you to make sure that there is adequate support for your Rostered Ministers – please provide support and encouragement as, hopefully, they are providing you, as well.

Some other work that I do as Bishop:

- I am blessed to work with many ecumenical judicatories and interfaith leaders. We continue to work together in a variety of ways.
- I serve on several committees within the synod and am so thankful for all of you.
- I have traveled to the Holy Land. There I connected and formed relationships with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). The people I met are amazingly resilient. I had hoped to take a group in January 2023 in order for people in this synod to experience the people of the Holy Land but the war stopped our travel for now. My heart continues to break for the people in the Holy Land.
- I recently traveled to the U.S. Mexican border where I learned and participated in the work that the church is doing for asylum seekers.
- I am blessed to be on the PLU Board of Regents and the Luther Seminary Board as well as some other boards and committees.
- I am so thankful to have my colleagues in Region One and the Conference of Bishops. We learn from one another, have mutual consolation with one another, we have long, deep conversations, and we work towards being faithful in our calling. I am glad of the collegiality and the care that we have for one another.

### Thank you

I am so thankful for the Northwest Washington Synod Staff that I have the pleasure and joy of working with daily. I am so grateful for their dedication, hard work, joy, faithfulness, and care.

I first want to thank those who served faithfully on the synod staff and have been called out to retirement or to new ministries:

Deacon Dianne Johnson, Director of Evangelical Mission  
 Rev. Herb Shao, Director of Evangelical Mission  
 Ms. Traci Hall, Synod Administrator  
 Ms. Laura Sasaki Norton, Synod Administrator

Second, I want to introduce and thank those who are new to the synod staff since our last Synod Assembly:

Rev. Judy Brennan, Director of Evangelical Mission  
 (moving from .75 time to full-time as of May 1, 2024)  
 Ms. Tabetha Myatt, Synod Administrator

We also have a couple of people who are contracted with the synod. I'm thankful for them.

Mr. Jay Edgerton, Director of Properties  
 Ms. Mandy Neill, LiVE Communications Assistant

And I want to thank all who have been around for a while and continue to serve on the synod staff:

Rev. Andy Yee, Assistant to the Bishop  
 Rev. Dr. David Hahn, Director of Formation and Learning  
 Ms. Susan Berg, Director of Communications and Events

Thank you to Vice President Kay Edgerton and the Synod Council for your thoughtful reflection and discernment.

Thank you to the Deans of all of the clusters – for your willingness to gather, to provide care and collegiality, for your wisdom and for your theological deliberation.

Thank you to all who serve on Synod committees, task forces, and in other places where there is need.

As I finish this (rather long) report, I close with this:

Psalm 121 reminds us that God is a God of love and care who never slumbers and who never sleeps. God is with us in all of our journeys – and in our journey together. God promises that our going out and our coming in is held in God’s hands of love and grace and steadfastness - from this time on and forevermore.

Thank you to all of you - Dear Beloveds of Christ in the Northwest Washington Synod. I appreciate you. You are the best thing about being Bishop in this synod. I am grateful to be called into this Office and to be on this journey with you.

May we in our journey together, be always assured that ***our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth!***

+Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee