

2025 Bishop Call Process Biography Form

Rev. Priscilla Paris-Austin



Education:

New York University- BFA
Roosevelt University – MA
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago – M Div.

Year of Ordination: 2011

Present Call/Employment: Immanuel Lutheran Church, Seattle - Pastor

Previous Calls/Employment:

- Mount of Olives Lutheran Church, Phoenix, AZ – Pastor
- Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Burbank, IL – Director of Children, Youth & Family Ministries
- The Cantilever Network, Chicago, IL - Artistic Director/Founder
- Kennedy King College, Chicago IL - Adjunct Professor/Theatre Curriculum Design
- Community High School, Teaneck, NJ - Arts Department Teacher

Volunteer Work:

Current/Ongoing

- ELCA Advisory Team for the Strategy Towards Authentic Diversity Co-conveener/Chair;
- ELCA Youth Ministry Network Mainstage Team (8 cycles and counting);
- Immanuel Community Services Board Ex-Officio Member (2015-present);
- Northwest Washington Synod Strategic Team for Authentic Diversity (2018-present);
- Northwest Washington Synod Central Cluster Dean;
- 66th Synod Founding Board member;
- Northwest Washington Synod DEI Audit steering team member

Previous

- ❖ Western States Youth Gathering - Chaplain;
- ❖ The Overlake School - Board of Trustees (Chair of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee, Head of School Search Team, Interim Head of School Search Team Chair); Overlake Friends of the Arts; Parent Net Facilitator; Parents of Students of Color Chair;
- ❖ King County Dept of Health Faith Based Organization Task Force (Recruitment Panel for FBO Lead);

- ❖ ELCA - Task Force Addressing Discipline Concerns of Leaders of Color; Youth Gathering (Getting Ready Curriculum Team co-lead 2021, Community Life Team-Bible Study stage coordinator 2015, Justice Team 2009); Rostered Women of Color Project;
- ❖ Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago - Corazon Alumni Advisor
- ❖ UJIMA Invisible Heros Imani Award (2012)
- ❖ Metro Chicago Synod African American Strategy Team “Spirit of Mary” award (2010);
- ❖ Metro Chicago Synod Youth Team and LYO Advisor;

Please respond to the following question:

1. In no more than two sentences, please share what brings you joy in ministry.

My greatest joys in ministry come from seeing the people live into their full authentic selves, especially when they are able to make the connection that it is how they give glory to God. When the spiritual disciplines of conversation & relationship, study & advocacy, preaching & teaching, humility & generosity, or service learning & faith formation inspire folks of any age to follow in the loving footsteps of Jesus, I am filled with delight.

For each of the questions below, please respond in 500 words or less:

2. What do you believe are the most significant opportunities and challenges facing the Northwest Washington Synod in the next six years?

The most urgent challenges and opportunities for our synod come from the present polarization happening in our nation and around the world. There is a growing distrust of institutions, including the church, that threaten our capacity for mission in partnership with God. The synod will need to be well-grounded in a biblical understanding with a Lutheran lens, that centers the Middle Eastern refugee Christ and His message of love and justice.

Towards these realities, I foresee the following priorities:

- *Integration of the lessons and practices of the DEI Audit within synodical systems, in order to engage learnings and create feedback loops for perpetual cycles of listening, discernment & reflection, imagination, action, & reflection, transformation, celebration, and listening, etc.*
- *Addressing the economic impact of a shifting allegiance away from the institutional church, on synodical and congregational mission support, mission development & redevelopment, and specialized ministries in urban, suburban, and rural settings. There’s a deep need to reimagine how we break free from the lies of capitalism and individualism that shackle us to a scarcity mindset, that is contrary to the abundant love of God that promises we have more than what we need.*
- *Engaging individuals and congregations in expansive and collaborative modes of Faith Formation that reject supremacy thinking and embrace the liberating love of Christ for all.*
- *Healing the human divides of geography, race, age, economic class, culture, and political understanding that have always plagued our society, through practices*

like confession and repentance, curiosity and validation, compassion and care following the way of Jesus.

3. What strengths, gifts, and/or experiences would you bring to the office of Bishop that would inform your leadership and assist you in addressing those opportunities and challenges?

Before my life in professional ministry, I accumulated 10+ years of experience in education leadership, nonprofit management, community organizing, and collaborative partnership work. These experiences in retail customer service, theatre, school settings, arts and community organizations continue to inform my leadership in the church, whether as a volunteer, a head of staff, or part of a team. This perspective guides my view of Scripture through a womanist lens as I explore God's presence and power inclusive of the edges of society. It keeps me grounded in my faith in the love of God through Jesus rather than an allegiance to institutional power. I feel this frame will be an essential beacon of hope and a call to action as we navigate this season of crumbling faith in institutions.

My years of theatrical experience have shaped me as an extemporaneous preacher, who can absorb & process information, to structure it into a thoughtful, intentional, theological response in times of crisis. I have frequently been called upon at a protest, or public gathering to speak a word of encouragement to a group with just a few moments' notice. In those times I have found myself blessed with a word of the Spirit that provides what is needed in the moment. Similarly, my background in improvisation has enriched my abilities as an adaptive leader who understands the benefit of teamwork in attaining any goal. I am comfortable, making a plan and changing it on the fly as needed.

I also have a heart for making sure people know they are beloved and always belong in whatever space they inhabit. Ensuring that not only is everyone welcome at the table, but that we can eliminate the table to make space for folks is one of my deepest passions. One place this was illustrated was in my role on the search committee for the King County Health Department Faith-Based Organization Task Force Lead. This Task Force began because a group of eccumenical partners sought to work and learn collectively when COVID started. I was grateful for my eccumenical relationships that put me in the room from the very beginning of those conversations. King County Health Department quickly recognized the mutual benefit and invested some of their COVID funding to provide a staff person as our point of contact. While serving on the search committee, I was able to encourage other committee members to share their voice as we developed the job description and rubric for hiring. The search team ended up including questions from the rest of the Task Force and as a result, staffed the position with a man who remained with the department even after COVID funding ended.

4. From your perspective, how has the landscape of the church changed since the beginning of the pandemic? If elected Bishop, what strategies and insights would you bring to address the opportunities and challenges of this time in our history?

The pandemic opened our eyes to see how Community can be built beyond the walls of the church. This was not a new concept but it was a new practice for the institutional church. Partnerships were forged, disability awareness was heightened, and the inclusion of marginalized voices became a necessity, thus nurturing and enriching Community. As time has passed, there has been a natural desire to revert to previous ways of being, causing us to lose touch with some of the lessons we have learned in exchange for the lies of convenience and efficiency.

As people of Faith, it is important that we ground ourselves in the appropriate lessons of the monarchies of old. As Bishop I would remind our community that the way forward does not lie in the conquering power of David, rather in his heart of repentance and his love of God; the lessons are not in the power grabs of Saul or Jeroboam but rather the restorative care of Hezekiah, Josiah, and Nehemiah; Not in the power of Deborah's or Judith's swords but in their faithful leadership that led to peace.

I hope to bring to the role of Bishop the lessons I have learned from COVID, such as, God is present in online worship, community can happen anywhere that 2 or more are gathered, whether online, in person, in a church, or a park. I also want to bring what I have learned serving on committees for the churchwide manifestation of ELCA. There I have met leaders from all parts of the country, in various contexts, and found ways to collaborate on solutions that serve all our contexts. The common lesson is that God can work through all kinds of structures and systems as long as we center the humanity of the most vulnerable.

5. Related to question #3, if elected Bishop, what vision and experiences would you bring to cultivate new ways of being the church?

We have entered a season in our nation of high anxiety, polarized living, and forgetfulness of who and whose we are. This is not a new challenge, we have faced these demons of powers and principalities before and scripture has given us clear guidance on how to return to God and restore our community. It happens when we are able to be adaptive and loving and inclusive of all of God's creation without dictating a culture of supremacy. My particular capacity for adaptive leadership will not allow me to give you specific answers to these dilemmas on this form, because the way forward will only be found together, in partnership, by remembering our interdependence with, for and to one another. It is God's intention for us to live and love in partnership and Community. When we can figure that out, as a church, we will truly be able to lead others to a way of New Life.

For me, faithful leadership is less about having the ideas, or answers to the problems that face us, than it is about curating the space and community in which those answers can emerge. The challenge will be what it always has been, our patience to endure the journey. In an age of instant gratification, this reminder that transformation takes time is not popular. But I urge us to remember, that even Jesus took 40 days to prepare himself in the wilderness and while he performed many miracles in an instant, his greatest gift took 3 days. So perhaps, we can take our time for this journey as well.

6. As a leader in the church, what is your approach to addressing conflict?

I endeavor to approach conflict from a Matthew 18 perspective, by first reflecting on myself and my role in the conflict, then addressing my concern directly one-to-one with the person. When necessary, I have approached a mediator to whom both I and the person are willingly accountable, or I have served as that mediator. In such situations I find it important to ensure the space is set so that all voices and perspectives are heard, so long as in the spirit of James Baldwin, they do not diminish anyone's humanity.

7. Please describe an occasion when you took action to lift up those who have been marginalized in our church, and how would this experience inform your leadership as Bishop?

From my days as a Youth minister to present, I have endeavored to be an advocate for those pushed to the edges of community. One example in my chapter of "Call to Allyship":

Xiamora and Guadalupe are the children of a Spanish speaking pastor. They introduce themselves in Sunday School to the teacher, who is a leader with significant congregational power. After mispronouncing the children's names, she decides to give them nicknames to make it easier for herself "and everyone else". Other children in the class attempt to correct her and she laughs them off, saying: "Mory and Loopy are very appropriate names" for the kids. Because of her leadership role in the congregation, other adults begin to call the children "Mory and Loopy" as well, much to the embarrassment of the children. (ed. Angela T K!habeb, p 54)

When confronted with this real situation, I began by speaking with the Sunday School teacher about her behavior. When she refused to see the harm she was causing, I began to work with the council and other leaders to correct the public use of their actual names. The other children aided in the effort by refusing to use the nickname no matter how often the Sunday School teacher encouraged it. Eventually, at the urging of the Faith Formation committee, the teacher was moved to another area of ministry leadership away from the Spanish-speaking children. This change of role became the catalyst to her ceasing the nicknames.

From this situation, I gained confidence in using my positional power to encourage behavioral change to the benefit of those who were being ignored, in this case the children. I hope that as Bishop I would always have a lens towards the most vulnerable and impacted in a situation so that I can advocate for them.

8. If you have other comments about your vision for the Northwest Washington Synod or other information about your background and experience that you would like to share with voting members and others, please do so here.

I am proud to be the pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in the South Lake Union neighborhood of Seattle, a congregation that takes seriously their calling to be a Sanctuary that is Open and Affirming of all persons of every gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, age and status, while aspiring to be AntiRacist, knowing it's a journey not a destination. I

give thanks for the foundation of faith that was nurtured in me by my ancestors, especially my Puerto Rican mother, West Indian cousins, and African American in-laws. This has instilled in me a commitment to family and sharing the faith that can be heard in our family podcast: Sacred Storytime with Pastor Priscilla. I live in eternal thankfulness for the partnership of my spouse of 25+ years and the gift of parenting 3 amazing humans with whom we share a love of God, the arts, basketball, gymnastics, and justice for all.