

2025 Bishop Call Process Biography Form

Rev. Shelley Bryan Wee

Education: Luther Seminary
Master of Divinity (MDiv)
St. Paul, MN
1993

Pacific Lutheran University
Bachelor of Arts (BA)
Tacoma, WA
1988



Year of Ordination: 1993

Present Call/Employment:

Bishop
Northwest Washington Synod, ELCA
Seattle, WA

2019-Present

Previous Calls/Employment:

Assistant to the Bishop
Northwest Washington Synod, ELCA

2017-2019

Pastor
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Cheney, WA

2016-2017

Intern Supervisor
St. Peter Lutheran Church, Spokane, WA

2013-2017

Pastor
EWU Lutheran Campus Ministry, Cheney, WA

2009-2017

Marketing Specialist
State Farm Insurance, Deer Park, WA

2007-2016

Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Spokane, WA

1997-2007

Pastor
Jocko Valley Lutheran Church, Arlee, MT

1993-1997

Please respond to the following question:

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

It is a joy, an honor, and a deeply fulfilling calling to journey with God's beloved people through the many facets of life. I am grateful for the Spirit's calling of sharing and living into the love of Jesus through worship, prayer, proclamation, forgiveness, accompaniment, advocacy, and the gift of holy community.

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 Pew Research Center reports that sixty percent of Americans do not attend any sort of worship experience regularly. As I work with congregations, I hear this reflected in people's anxieties and concerns: decreasing attendance, young people missing, aging church buildings, inability to pay a pastor, the "graying" of members, the possibility of the congregation closing, and more. These concerns are valid and difficult. I have sat with many councils as we have grieved the loss of what once was and the realities of today's world. However, I would also propose that these concerns and challenges are the root of our deepest opportunities and ways forward.

Authentic Community

Continuing to move forward into holy community will counter our society's norms of isolation, divisiveness, and competition:

- Collaboration – Congregations sharing Rostered Ministers, resources, buildings, and more.
- Innovation – Holding onto our rich traditions while also looking at new ways of worshiping, gathering, and creating spaces where all people feel welcomed, valued, and connected.
- Being Spirit-led – The expansion of imagination towards different models of ministry to allow large and small congregations to deeply listen to where the Spirit is calling and allowing all to embrace their unique gifts, context, and mission.

Lay-Focused Ministry Movement

Through the leadership of Dr. Hahn and the LiVE Board, the synod continues to develop and expand the lay ministry movement.

- The LiVE Project brings together congregations and leaders throughout the synod to be enriched, challenged, and engaged.
- The synod has expanded into lay ministry formation for those who want to go deeper in their spiritual growth through community, reflection, and learning.
- Synod Authorized Lay Ministers (SALMs) are helping with the challenges and opportunities we face in the context we are living in, especially in smaller congregations and rural areas.

Justice, Equity, Diversity, Belonging

The synod continues to focus on the Spirit's calling to dismantle unjust systems of oppression.

- We are partnering with ELCA Organizing for Mission Network as we ensure that the synod is working toward racial equity and diversity.
- We continue to educate and be educated, to work with partners, to listen deeply, and be courageous so that those who have been historically marginalized feel seen, heard, and celebrated.

In today's world, many are lonely, searching for meaning, struggling with a sense of powerlessness, and trying to make sense of this world. They question whether they are loved, if they can be forgiven or if they can forgive. People want to know what is true and authentic.

In the next six years and beyond, the Spirit is calling us to embody alternative ways of being in the world. We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus, to share that each person is beloved of God, to speak out when there is injustice and hatred, to grapple with hard questions, and to be with one another in joy and sorrow in holy community and radical love.

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?

As an ordained pastor, I am called by God to preach, teach, administer the sacraments, and journey with people in their joys and sorrows, so that all may know that God loves each person beyond imagination. In partnership with the synod staff, and as bishop, my passion is to create places and spaces for people to experience God's love and grace in their lives and in the world.

Living into this, I strive to lead collaboratively. I know that the synod is what it is because of the hundreds of people in congregations, synod office staff, the deans, the Rostered Ministers, the synod council, lay leadership, and more. I work to encourage participation, and to bring a shared vision, mutual respect, and diverse voices around the table – empowering people as they bring their unique gifts and perspectives. I am excited when people's ideas lead to new and enriching possibilities. For example, when I was elected bishop in 2019, one of my core goals was to have deeper faith formation in the synod. I am thrilled at how this goal has evolved and been sharpened through the leadership of Dr. Hahn, along with the LiVE board, who expanded LiVE to what it is today.

I bring to the Office of Bishop the ability to remain grounded and maintain a strong sense of identity while staying connected to others, even in times of conflict or pressure. In moments of heightened anxiety, fear, or anger, I am able to stay present without being overwhelmed, offering a calm and steady presence. A key part of the bishop's calling is to navigate situations where emotions run high, whether in congregations or with individuals, and to provide guidance with wisdom and compassion.

As a life-long learner, I am committed to embracing curiosity, growth, and adaptability. Whether through books, podcasts, conversations, workshops, trainings, questions, or observation, I seek to remain open to new ideas and perspectives while staying rooted in the sacred practices that sustain me. I aim to approach new ways of thinking with openness, even when my initial reaction is resistance. In moments when I fall short, I welcome accountability from others and value the opportunity to learn from my mistakes.

Fundamentally, I bring a deep love for the church while also understanding that it is a flawed institution that needs reform. This tension is nothing new – Martin Luther and the Reformation were born from a similar love for the church and a conviction that it must continually be reshaped by God’s grace. Like Luther, I believe that transformation requires courage, humility, and a willingness to confront what is broken while holding fast to the Gospel. With this in mind, I am committed to leading with both reverence for our sacred traditions and an openness to the Spirit’s call to more faithfully reflect God’s justice, mercy, and love to all.

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?

I was elected bishop in May 2019, never anticipating a global pandemic. As we all recall, March 2020 brought an urgent and unexpected shift as COVID-19 spread rapidly. We were faced with the unprecedented decision to close church buildings and transition to online gatherings. Looking back, I am amazed at the resilience, creativity, and unwavering commitment of congregations as we all navigated this uncharted territory with deep care, grace and determination for the well-being of our communities while seeking new ways to remain connected in faith.

Following the pandemic, the landscape of the church continues to evolve rapidly. While I am encouraged to see many people returning to worship, including children and younger adults, I also recognize that attendance in some places remains lower than it was before the pandemic. Congregations that once flourished are facing new challenges while those who were already struggling financially are finding it even harder to sustain their ministries.

In addition to these things, we are facing new and complex realities beyond our church doors. Technology continues to dominate – in ways that both divide and unite us. Misinformation spreads rapidly, deepening isolation and fueling ever-growing polarization. Systemic racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination persist. Policies by the current administration are profoundly impacting vulnerable communities and stand in direct contrast to the Gospel’s call to love our neighbor and care for the least among us.

Truly, these are challenging times where the path forward is not always clear, and change can come so rapidly that it feels overwhelming. I think we all agree that the way forward can look murky and we wonder what to do next. That said, as people of faith, we are called to listen to the Spirit, who calls us into deep, intentional community while also calling us beyond comfort and easy answers.

How do we do this? We continue to look for ways to form places of community. We collaborate and partner together. We live in abundance rather than scarcity. We use the physical assets entrusted to us by our forebears in thoughtful ways that expand ways of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. We act with courage rooted in deep, abiding love.

To paraphrase Esther 4:14, I believe that we are made for such a time as this. As Lutheran Christians, we are rooted in God’s boundless grace and love, trusting that we are always being called into something new, into deeper understanding, and into greater love. Knowing this, we are called to love our neighbors boldly, to welcome them unconditionally, and to stand firmly for justice and belonging.

If I am called to another six years as bishop, I will continue to encourage us to move forward as God's people, drawing from the lessons we have learned as we journey together—rooted in both our sacred traditions and new ways of being church.

Will it be difficult? Perhaps. Will there be loss? Likely. But will there be new life? Most definitely.

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

I'm going to start with a story I have shared before: For ten years I was the Lutheran Campus pastor at Eastern Washington University. I worked with my own students and more broadly on campus including being one of the mentors for the PRIDE group and the interreligious group. I interacted with students who were Muslims, Jews, atheists, and Christians of all kinds. I loved this call. However, one fall I realized that I had some difficult circumstances to address. First, our budget was cut significantly. Second, many in the group had graduated and we were much smaller. What to do?

I began talking to two other campus ministry colleagues. After much conversation, we ended up forming ELM (Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist) Campus Ministry.

What was lost? It was no longer "mine." I no longer did everything and I had to share "my" students. But what happened was so much greater. Suddenly, because of three ministries becoming one, there was money and time and many more students. Our discussions became livelier. Our worship became student-led. We planned service trips together. We welcomed many more people than we would have individually. We held sacred practices while experimenting into the future. The Holy Spirit connected us and formed community.

This is still my vision. We are better together. We are better together when we collaborate. We are better together when we build community. We are better together when we let go of thinking only about our own vision and instead minister together.

Of course, this does not mean letting go of the particularity of being Lutheran Christians. But it might mean that there is a need to listen and learn from others. It might mean translating God's Word into particular cultures so that all may see and hear and know the gospel story. It might mean finding ways to accompany people as they understand their lives differently after hearing the good news of Jesus. It might mean giving up something so that the Spirit can move and dance in new ways.

Research and observation show us that people don't necessarily want to join an organization. Instead, people want to belong to an authentic community. People yearn to be in relationship with God, with one another, and with the wider creation. People yearn to be seen and to be loved. While each person is distinct and unique, we are also created to live life together, woven together as God intended – like branches on a vine.

What are new ways of being church? Look around the synod at what continues to be created: dinner church, wild church, family and friends ministry, lay ministry formation, ecumenical partnerships, cluster collaborations, ethnic specific ministries, new ways of using land, church

buildings opening up to become community centers, and so much more. And there is room for more. The Spirit is alive and active and continues to activate and whirl around us as we discover new ways to connect and share in God's love through Jesus.

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

We all know that conflict is a natural part of life and community. As both pastor and bishop, I have navigated many conflicts over the years. I have endeavored to approach disagreements with humility and a willingness to learn. I hope that I have grown in wisdom and grace – through both my successes and my mistakes. I pray that I am always leading with compassion, integrity, and a deep commitment towards renewed relationships.

When there is conflict between me and another person, I first try to have conversation with the person involved – to listen and to reflect what they have to say if their conflict is with me – and for me to articulate clearly if I have a conflict with them. I approach them knowing that there might be some power dynamics at play, that there might be other underlying issues, and I strive to be open and non-reactive.

I also have learned that there are times when a public acknowledgement or apology is necessary if harm has been done – even unintentionally. I have done my best to be transparent when I have fallen short. Additionally, there are moments when it is necessary to ask someone else to offer a public apology or seek reconciliation with the one harmed.

I am also a proponent to see if there is a policy, or a need for a policy, to further communication and help with conflict management. A few years ago, it came to my attention that the synod was missing a policy that would be helpful in times of conflict with staff members. Learning this, I worked with the personnel committee and synod council and new policies are now in place.

As bishop, there are times when one is asked to mediate or help with conflict. In this synod, we work with a mediator who helps bring about healing, clarity, and resolution. The goal is not just to address the immediate conflict but to foster understanding, rebuild trust, and create a path for healthier relationships moving forward.

Though not asked here, I want to address misconduct, which differs from conflict but is important to consider when electing a bishop. A key responsibility is investigating and, if needed, disciplining a Rostered Minister for misconduct. While difficult, this is to protect those harmed, prevent future harm, and uphold the church's integrity. In such cases, safety and care take priority over reconciliation.

In my time as a Rostered Minister, I continue to learn and grow. I am not perfect in dealing with conflict. I do my best to seek the wisdom of others when there is need, to not be reactive, to be understanding, and to be transparent. I strive to be a leader of integrity and to live in community with others. May we work to love one another even in conflict, ever moving towards God's reconciliation.

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?

Please allow me to begin this response by acknowledging an action that was the opposite of what is being asked. At my first Churchwide Assembly in 2019, on my second day as bishop, I was in a room I believed was only for bishops. In line for breakfast and seeing a young black person with a name tag, I mistakenly assumed they were waitstaff. It was only when I asked them for more strawberries that I realized they were part of another delegation. Though unintentional, my mistake caused harm. They expected a safe place but instead experienced trauma from my thoughtless request. I apologized to them both privately and publicly, but the impact remained.

I don't like sharing this story. It makes me deeply uncomfortable. I would rather tell a story where I am the hero. But I think it is important to admit when we fail, too. What did I learn? I learned to see better, to not assume, to acknowledge hidden bias, and to be transparent when mistakes are made. In the years since, I continue to learn and grow in understanding and wisdom through trainings, books, conversations, classes, and more.

In the last six years, I have used my voice and my presence in a number of ways to lift up those historically marginalized:

- In the past six years, I've visited the U.S.-Mexican border twice to highlight the challenges and complexities there, while also showing the human side of immigration.
- I've participated in several PRIDE events across the synod, focusing especially on rural areas where my presence might have a greater impact.
- I've spoken at events advocating for the dignity of those oppressed, excluded, and harmed. One memory that stands out is when I spoke at a gathering after a church was defaced due to their being open and affirming of the LGBTQ+ community. While speaking about God's extravagant love, I used the example of God loving oak trees but then imagining a world barren of all trees but oak. Afterward, a young person approached me, crying, because, in her words, for the first time she heard a church leader say that she was seen, validated, and loved.
- I've advocated for the different ethnic specific ministries in this synod including funding, translation at synod events, and full inclusion in the life of this community.
- I continue to work with the synod council, staff, Candidacy, STAD, and synod leadership to do a deep audit as we learn and grow into our values of belonging, equity, justice, accessibility, and inclusion.
- I've worked to incorporate rural, suburban, and urban congregations into conversation and belonging.

As a follower of Jesus, I take seriously the call to reach out to those on the margins, to welcome the abandoned, love the unloved, and share in the good news of God's reign. And to go further: I am called to listen to those who have been silenced, speak when needed, accept critique, and see all people in their beautiful diversity as children of God.

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.

Here are some additional thoughts that might be of interest when calling a bishop.

As outlined in the constitution, the bishop is called to be the chief ecumenical and interfaith leader. As the landscape for church changes, we need to lean into our partnerships with other

denominations and faith groups. During these last six years, we have been working more closely with full communion partners and others.

We have opened up new ways of inviting and extending contracts to pastors from our full communion partners to serve in congregations and ministry sites. At the same time, we also are encouraging of our ELCA Rostered Ministers to serve in full communion partner congregations. In this way, we are partnering and sharing together.

We continue to build relationships with leaders from a wide variety of faith backgrounds as we share in justice work. For example, a few months ago the three Washington bishops from NWWA, SWWA, and NWIM synods joined thirteen other judicatory and church leaders across the state to write a joint letter advocating for refugees and immigrants.

Another key duty of a bishop, though not particularly glamorous, is effective time management. Balancing emails, phone calls, meetings, committees, travel, and pastoral care can be demanding. While it may seem mundane, these tasks are essential for staying connected, responding to needs, and ensuring people feel heard and valued. At the same time, it's important to remember that a bishop cannot be on call all the time and must make space for time away.

Being head of staff in the synod office and working with congregations and Rostered Ministers is a deeply relational and multifaceted role. It requires wisdom, patience, and a commitment to fostering healthy communication. Supporting leaders through joys and challenges, managing conflict, and ensuring ministries are well-equipped is of vital importance.

Because of the demands of the job and the possibility of burn-out and exhaustion, a bishop needs to maintain healthy boundaries, engage in spiritual practices, and cultivate strong relationships outside of the office.

In closing, please know that in these six years of serving this synod as bishop, I have said the following words almost every week in congregations and other settings, "It is my joy and honor to serve as your bishop." And I truly mean it. Whatever the outcome of this election, I cannot express the depth of love I have for each of the congregations and ministry sites, for the Rostered Ministers, for this synod, and for each of you. I am profoundly grateful for the privilege of serving, and, if elected, continuing to serve, as your bishop as we journey together in faith and ministry.

As the apostle Paul writes, May we do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. Let each of us look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:3-5

Amen.