



Greetings Beloved Metro DC Synod!

It has been my great honor to serve as your Synod Vice President over the past year. I remain humbled and grateful for the confidence and trust Bishop Ortiz and the Executive Committee have in me to serve the church in this way.

The theme of this year's Synod Assembly is *Alive: Inspired by the Holy Spirit*. Indeed, St. Irenaeus all those centuries ago said that "the glory of God is [humankind] fully alive." I have found great inspiration in these words. Over time, in my ongoing walk with God, I have grown in my understanding of what this means.

First and foremost, I think to be fully alive means to have a healthy appreciation for how we are all connected and interdependent. Being fully alive does not mean I can go it alone, prove my worth, show off, refuse to take no for an answer, or pull myself up by my you-know-what. There's a lot of bad theology out there, right?

Being fully alive means we take our faith seriously, continuing to learn and grow through worship, prayer, scripture, and holy listening to one another. All of us are forever in formation. None of us has figured it all out.

Being full alive means we live out a mature and responsible understanding of financial stewardship, paying our staff members equitably and fairly – not attaching all kinds of strings to our giving. Paying when we get something we like, not paying when we don't. Giving is a spiritual practice, a reflection of our commitment to being in community with one another. It isn't a transaction.

To be fully alive together mean we take an expansive and affirming view of healthy sexuality, recognizing the strictures and mores of the past may no longer serve us well. It means we respect and care for creation; carefully considering how we efficiently use electricity, water, and gas; and how we reuse, recycle, compost, and dispose of waste.

And to be fully alive together means we embrace Jesus' vision of the kin-dom of God. It means we act to bring about the Beloved Community. It means we dismantle racist systems and structures in our church, in our communities, and in our world.

It has been over a year since George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis. Many of us have learned a lot about racial injustices that have plagued our society for too long. Many of us have known these truths all along and are now happy that more people have woken up and sad and angry that it's taken so much death and pain to do so.

A friend and mentor of mine often says, “Racial justice is not a sidebar to the Gospel. It is central.” That isn’t a partisan political point. It isn’t a secular point. It is one that is faithful to being a follower of Jesus.

Over the past year, the synod council has wrestled with what is ours to do to bring about the Beloved Community. We issued a letter in October 2020 that declared our support of Bishop Ortiz and of all clergy of color in the synod preaching and leading our church towards racial justice. The letter confessed the ways the church has fallen short in our witness of the Gospel, and it committed the synod to taking action to dismantle racist systems and structure and issue a plan to do so. We recently issued that plan, and it calls on the synod to create more learning spaces about racial equity and justice, to hire a contractor to audit key synod systems including candidacy and mobility for racial bias, and to convene a panel that will consider how to make reparations for racial reconciliation and healing.

Conversations about this work are not easy. We don’t all agree about every detail or word choice. Engaging the work can be even harder. There aren’t a lot of good examples or role models. We will inevitably mess it up sometimes. And there are harmful consequences for those missteps. And yet, we must persist. We have to keep trying. We can’t give up. Being fully alive – glorifying God and following Jesus – demands it. The Holy Spirit will lead us, and we have to learn to listen beyond our egos in order to follow.

For us white people that means unlearning a lot of what we think we know about church and how racism operates, what success means, and what good leadership looks like. We need to be more curious than defensive, more deferential than self-assured. We can’t be immobilized by our shame or guilt. We need to listen. We need to learn. We need to keep walking and growing. And we need to understand that whatever difficulty we have encountered in life does not negate our whiteness.

I am a gay man in America. I have faced my fair share of prejudice, violence, and hatred. I’m from a working-class family in blue collar, politically divided Erie, Pennsylvania and have a student loan bill to prove it. . . And however interesting that may be and however much that has shaped me, it does not change the fact that I am a white man too.

And that does mean that my interactions with law enforcement are different than my black and brown peers. It does mean that the unconscious assumptions people make about me are more flattering – and therefore more advantageous to me – than they are about my black and brown peers. And that means that systems – educational, financial, healthcare-related – all have and will continue to treat me differently, better, than people of color.

I didn't make the world this way. And these truths about our society and my interactions with it don't on their own make me a bad person. But refusing to acknowledge them is a sin of omission. As the whitest Christian denomination in America, for us to glorify God and be fully alive, we must confess – what we as individuals and community have done and what we as individuals and community have left undone, particularly around racial equity and justice. I urge you to review the letter the synod council issued last October, to review the ELCA's social statement on race in society, and the ELCA's apology to people of African descent.

I am convinced, and feel led by the Spirit, that we as individuals and as community cannot be fully alive if we are not working towards racial justice. And so, that is why racial equity has been a focus of my leadership of the synod council this past year. And I know it has been a focus of many congregations in our synod as well. I want to acknowledge and thank the congregations that wrote to the synod council in response to our letter and for all who are engaging in challenging conversations and work related to racial equity and justice. Keep at it.

Further, I ask you to prayerfully consider what is yours to do to bring about the Beloved Community. Come and participate in the forthcoming synod learning spaces. Seek out and use the worship resources that the Racial Equity Team and the synod office has and will continue to make available. Connect your congregation to local community organizing networks that are pursuing racial justice outside the church walls.

In a year of so much death and grief – this long communal dark night of the soul – we have had the opportunity to detach and untangle ourselves from a lot of things. I pray that we can see a bit more clearly now. That our view and field of vision of who we are called to be and what we are called to do has come into better focus. That we can consider what it really means to be church together, and that racial justice and equity is not and has never been a sidebar.

When we last gathered at synod assembly, two years ago, I carried this flower around. It was a gift from my pastor, the Rev. Karen Brau. As I was leaving the assembly someone stopped me in the parking lot and asked me what it was all about, why I had it on me. That year we were gathered to elect a new bishop, and so I told her: It represents new life in the church.

In Chapter 30 of the book of Deuteronomy we are told: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before your life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." May we receive God's grace and love, and move

towards justice and peace. Inspired by the Spirit, that's how we can choose life and be fully alive.

May God's peace and courage be with you all.

...

Here are some highlights of the synod council's activity over the past year. The council:

- Adapted to the realities of the pandemic: met via Zoom, extended some council members' terms by one year because there was no 2020 synod assembly, and the executive committee met monthly to more closely monitor the synod's finances.
- Engaged two books throughout the year: *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* by Gil Rendle and *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* by Lenny Duncan.
- Discerned how the synod is called to respond to ongoing, systemic racial inequities within the church and society (July – September), and issued a letter confessing ways the church has fallen short and committing to develop a plan for systemic change (October);
- Approved the FY21 Budget (since the synod assembly did not take place, this responsibility was carried out by the council) (January);
- Affirmed a vision document developed over several months by a subset of the council that articulates how the synod council can function more effectively and in alignment with the synod mission statement (January);
- Actively engaged the nominations process; several council members worked with the synod assembly planning team to seek out nominees for the many open positions to be filled at the 2021 synod assembly (January – June);
- Endorsed a plan for racial justice in the synod that calls for more learning spaces about racial equity, a contractor to review synod systems, and the formation of a panel to examine and make recommendations related to reparations for racial reconciliation and healing (May);
- Received reports regarding the Leadership Academy, roster matters, mobility and candidacy, the synodical women's organization, and the synod youth organization (all meetings).

Summaries of synod council meetings are posted at <http://metrodcelca.org/synod-council/minutes/>.

...

Jackson Droney was appointed Vice President of the synod by Bishop Leila Ortiz in April 2020. Previously, he had served as an at-large member of the synod council since 2016, and was part of the synod's Transition Task Force in 2019. Originally from Erie, PA, Jackson has lived in Washington, DC since 2009 and has been a member of Luther Place Memorial Church since 2012. He served as president of Luther Place from 2015 until 2018. Jackson works as Director of Operations at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, an ecumenical organization dedicated to teaching contemplative spiritual practices for life and leadership. Prior to working at Shalem, Jackson spent ten years working in federal politics, as a staffer on Capitol Hill and as a lobbyist for not-for-profit electric utilities. He holds a B.A. from Syracuse University and a Masters' degree in Human Resources Management from Georgetown University.