



Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

4005 Wisconsin Ave NW, P.O. Box 39105, Washington, D.C. 20016

metrodelca.org

Rooted in Jesus to be Disciples of Jesus Christ
2022 Synod Assembly Report
Rev. Dr. Erin Swenson-Reinhold
Assistant to the Bishop for Candidacy & Mobility and Chief of Staff

Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Between my sophomore and junior years in college, I worked as the campus gardener. Every day, I arrived on campus with the awareness that I would go home covered in dirt as I spent the days tending the soil, watering the plants, weeding the beds, and caring for the health and well-being of those entrusted to my care. As I reflect on that experience, I see how that summer helped prepare me for the intentional and purposeful life as a disciple and discipler of Jesus Christ.

In order to bear good fruit, trees need to be rooted in strong, healthy soil. Through the process of holy listening to you, each other, and most importantly, the Holy Spirit, the synod staff discerned Jesus, justice, and discipleship are the foundational elements necessary for healthy soil that allow us to fulfill our call to encourage, equip, and empower the rostered leaders and congregations of our synod to bear the fruit of sabbath, transformational leadership, and cultural competency. As I've leaned intentionally into this model and reflected on the theme for synod assembly, I see how these elements helped shape my ministry and guide my own discernment.

Over the last three years, you heard me talk a lot about discernment - the invitation to slow down...pause and pray...seeking God and preparing our hearts to boldly respond to whatever the Holy Spirit asks instead of guarding our hearts and reacting out of fear or anxiety. As I invited you to embrace the discomfort of holy listening, I recognize how counterintuitive this request was in that we've been living in a world undergoing an unprecedented amount of change and transition.

While some equate "The Great Resignation" to be a symptom of exhaustion or burn-out, I wonder if this time of great transition is an opportunity for the Church to lean in and discover new ways to be God's Church together. I believe it's a chance for us to empower and encourage the process of holy discernment - this holy place where we intentionally meet God and discover clarity about the ways we are being invited, called, and sent forth as God's holy beloved. I wonder, could the discomfort of this time simply be an unexpected gift.



As synod staff, we've practiced this uncomfortable process of holy listening, and we've been challenged to consider who we are and what it means to be Church. We've stepped boldly with the synod council into a process of examining our own implicit biases and ways we fail to address racial injustice. We've spoken hard truths, offered unconditional love, and accompanied those in times of great joy and deep pain, and we've begun to see the fruit of tending the soil in this way.

In the face of such uncertainty, we've seen tangible fruit in the way God continues to call us to be Church together. Over the last year, eight congregations extended calls and two congregations entered into two-year term calls. We currently have four congregations interviewing potential candidates, nine congregations in a self-study process of prayer and discernment, and several congregations in intentional prayer and discernment about their next steps, whether this is towards holy closure, merger, shared ministry or redevelopment. This means we have around a quarter of our faith communities in an intentional discernment process that will result in some form of change or transition.

Through my ministry in the synod office, I've been convicted by the Holy Spirit that our decisions have to be based in a spirit of discernment. As we lean into God listening intently to what God calls us to do and be, we see more clearly how our tendency is to make ministry decisions based out of our desire for comfort or control, security or affection. One of the powerful gifts of discernment is that as we listen deeply to God, each other, and our communities, we begin to align the ministries to meet the needs of those we've been entrusted to accompany instead of feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, and burdened by ministries that are being called to rest.

As I've accompanied those experiencing a holy nudge related to their vocational life, we discovered the discernment groups are an invaluable resource. Since launching our first cohort in January 2020, nine cohorts have journeyed through the process for a total of 55 participants, 49 discernment partners, and 3 co-leaders. Through this ministry, we also found ourselves intentionally leaning into our ministry partners in the Virginia synod and Lutheran Volunteer Corps remembering we are stronger when we work together instead of feeling compelled to engage in silo ministries.

Like many of your own ministries, the Metro DC Candidacy Committee experienced several transitions of our own as Pastor Ben Hogue, Pastor Wendy Moen, Sister Ramona Daily, and Pastor Karis Graham all discerned their time on the committee was coming to an end. I'm thankful for all of them and the ways they faithfully spoke truth and life into this holy work. I'm



also grateful for Mr. Don Mullins and his willingness to step up and take on the role of the candidacy chair. He brings a wealth of experience, knowledge, and insight that is deeply rooted in his faith in Jesus Christ. We also are blessed to be accompanied by Pastor Becky Resch who was called as the Region 7 & 8 Regional Candidacy and Leadership Manager. Through this relationship, we hope to strengthen the process through which we have been invited to help accompany and empower those in formation for rostered ministry into the ELCA.

While formation is never easy, it's been a joy to see the fruit of this hard, holy ministry. Since last June, we positively entranced seven candidates, positively endorsed three candidates, and approved five candidates for ministry. We have two more candidates awaiting entrance interviews, two awaiting endorsement interviews, and one awaiting approval at the end of May. We have 19 candidates actively in the candidacy process with three more completing paperwork to be ready for a fall interview date.

Since June 2019, Metro DC equipped, empowered, and accompanied 12 candidates into rostered, ordained ministry in the ELCA - two as Ministers of Word and Service and 10 as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The Metro DC Synod is doing good, faithful work preparing rostered ministers that will build disciples of Jesus Christ. I am humbled to bear witness to the movement of the Holy Spirit in each of these candidates' lives and see how they boldly responded to their own calls to serve out God in this vocational way.

With the implementation of the new assignment process, our synod received several first call candidates over the last few years. While 2020 found us gathering virtually for all our gatherings, this group of newly rostered pastors and deacons started meeting in person last fall. Even though we were unable to gather for the annual retreat in November, we are working diligently to try again later this year. I'm thankful for Pastor Ray Ranker and the ways he accompanied this group of leaders.

At the end of 2020, Pastor Lamar Bailey and I received a leadership grant through Duke University to explore an innovative way to engage ministry. Through our respective ministry areas, it became clear that God was inviting us to explore an intentional discernment process to help congregations in transition clarify next steps in their ministries. The grant incorporated aspects of spiritual direction, coaching, and game design theory to empower our leaders and congregations to listen to God more deeply and respond boldly and courageously as the holy invitations arise. We completed our first cohort in December 2021 and experienced such holy surprises that we launched another cohort in January 2022. We have six congregations who



stepped boldly into the discomfort of this experiment and are discovering ways to create room to hear the movements of the Spirit as they listen intently to God and each other remembering what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

To address the health and well-being of our rostered leaders, our synod partnered with Region 9 to offer the annual boundaries training. As we leaned into the second year of this experiment, we recognize a call to be better stewards of all the relationships around us. One of the ways we lived into this awareness was to speak directly to the process of ending and leaving ministries well. We know transitions happen all across the age span for individuals, families, and communities, and we also recognize saying good-bye is hard. As rostered leaders and communities of faith in the ELCA, we are called to accompany each other for a specific season tending the soil so it is fertile ground for the next gardeners that will inevitably be called.

Just like the rest of the church, the synod office is experiencing our own transitions. We say good-bye to Katie Evans as our part-time administrative assistant as she embarks on her seminary education. We were blessed by her and all her gifts over the last year. Please keep her in your prayers as she boldly responds to the call to enter the formal candidacy process and this season of intentional formation.

I also ask for prayers for our Bishop and the synod staff (those newly planted and those more firmly rooted) as they engage a time of transition as I, too, boldly responded to an unexpected invitation to return to parish ministry in Plano, Texas. As I've reminded you time and again, the Holy Spirit inevitably shows up in surprising ways, and the Spirit did just that in the Swenson-Reinhold household calling us to a place we never anticipated but clearly to the place where we will be planted, fed, and nourished so the seeds that were planted can flourish and grow.

It's been a blessing and a joy to spend time with you, hearing your stories, and learning how God is moving in your lives. I'm hope-filled and excited about the future and the ways the Spirit is doing impossible things in the Metro DC Synod. Thank you for joining us in mission and ministry and being followers of Christ together.

Peace and Blessings,
Pastor Erin Swenson-Reinhold