

2022 Northeastern Iowa Synod Assembly Bishop's Report

The Synod staff kept telling me that there would be fog machines and special walk-on music for my report. I know that the Darth Vader theme was suggested on at least one occasion. I wouldn't be surprised if someone suggested the Jar Jar Binks theme when I wasn't in earshot.

It was one year ago, during our online assembly that the Northeastern Iowa Synod reached out with your votes and electronically popped the bubble I had been living and serving in.

I can't pretend that life was somehow easier, or better, or more comfortable in that bubble. Life is hard. Ministry is hard, whether it is done by ordained or lay people. There is a reason that Jesus refers to it as picking up your cross and following him. Even when we are blessed by the ministry we do, and even when we enjoy it, there is always an aspect of sacrifice.

But as a youth and family pastor, I was able to insulate myself a bit in that bubble. There were issues that I wasn't pressed to deal with immediately. I could recognize there were problems in the world, in our nation, in my community, and even in my congregation that I could put on a back burner because they didn't impact me directly. I could tell myself that I should do something about them, but I also had the luxury of waiting until I had the time and energy to really devote myself to addressing them. As you might guess, time and energy for dealing with more problems in life rarely comes up.

Being called into this office popped that bubble.

As a pastor, I might have been aware of conflicts in neighboring congregations and tried to support colleagues who were in those congregations, but I hardly ever knew when a congregation on the other side of the Synod was struggling. As the bishop, I find myself concerned with the wellbeing and struggles of over 140

congregations. As a pastor, what happened in another Synod was a long way away. Now, I am in regular conversation about what is happening in other Synods across the ELCA – for good and ill.

For example, you may be aware of the problems the Sierra Pacific Synod is experiencing. For those who haven't heard, Presiding Bishop Eaton convened a listening team to investigate actions by the Sierra Pacific's Synod Council and Bishop Megan Rohrer in regard to the manner in which Pastor Nelson Rabell-González was removed from his call to serve the people of Misión Latina Luterana on the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe; a very sacred and celebratory day in the life of Mexican Lutherans. The listening team report included descriptions of racist impacts caused by actions of individuals and by the policies we use in the church. Ultimately this led to Bishop Eaton publicly calling for Bishop Rohrer's resignation. When Bishop Rohrer refused to resign by the conclusion of their Synod Assembly last weekend, Bishop Eaton began a disciplinary process and suspended Bishop Rohrer on Monday of this week. Later that day we learned that Bishop Rohrer resigned after a vote of no confidence by the Council of the Sierra Pacific Synod.

To be fair, there are about a dozen other important facts and issues that are part of this situation, and I'm quite certain I don't have all the information. I do know that our siblings in Christ in the Sierra Pacific are hurting, that our church is reeling from the impact of racism and white supremacy and I can't stay insulated from it anymore. If we are indeed, Better Together, we need to create that space for *everyone* to be their unique and authentic selves in the Body of Christ.

And yet we continue to support one another across the church. I received an email this week on behalf of the Metropolitan Washington DC Synod and Bishop Leila Ortiz who are meeting in Assembly this weekend too. At every assembly they pass a resolution to send greetings to and pray for the other Synods who are in assembly the same weekend. I don't think we need the formal resolution, but it feels like prayer would be welcome here. Please pray with me:

Good and gracious God, gathered here in your name, we are aware that the church is not the sanctuary from the brokenness and sin that we sometimes wish for. Help us be better together. Be present in a Spirit of unity with our sibling Synods meeting in assembly this weekend:

Allegheny Synod,	Metropolitan Washington DC Synod
Central States Synod	Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Grand Canyon Synod	*Northern Illinois Synod
*Indiana-Kentucky Synod	Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod
La Crosse Area Synod	Southwest California Synod
New England Synod	Southwestern Texas Synod

And we pray for the Sierra Pacific Synod: for the people, the congregations, and especially the congregation of Iglesia Luterana Santa María Peregrina (formerly known as Misión Latina Luterana; we pray for the Synod staff and Synod Council. In the darkness of this world, at times it can feel like your light is barely shining. Help us all to trust that you are indeed at work, reconciling and redeeming all things. Guide us to open ourselves and our churches to be together in better ways, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Living outside of my bubble, have been exposed to worship in a variety of congregations that are new to me, preached at 25 of those and at three conference events. Sometimes we take worship for granted, as just this thing we do, but providing a place and a time when the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ is proclaimed is an important ministry. It makes a difference in the world. You have done that throughout the pandemic and continue to find new and creative ways for people to be gathered in worship. Well done.

I have been overjoyed to witness the ways you continue to provide food, clothing, and assistance to those in need in your local community and around the world. How you have joined with others to provide access to mental health services through LSI and welcome new neighbors through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. You have sent kids to our Bible camps and day camps, you have helped the homeless find shelter and provided disaster relief in a moment's

notice. No single congregation or person could do all of that. We are Better Together.

Believing that we are truly *better together*, means reaching out across lines of division, like Synod boundaries, to partner with neighboring Synods. In May, Bp. Halaas of Western Iowa, Bishop Current of Southeastern Iowa, and I convened a Campus Ministry Summit for our church colleges and state universities. In addition to the campus pastors at UNI, Iowa State, and Iowa, we invited campus pastors from our church colleges and campus ministry leaders from congregations doing campus ministry. It was a great meeting that is leading to a state-wide campus ministry network. I am excited to report that campus ministry is alive and well, and doing good ministry with young adults.

In the last year I have also been watching and listening for ways we can be better together; for ways the Spirit is calling us to grow for the sake of the world. Some of the emerging priorities that I feel will be important include ways

We can be better together when we support our pastors

Research indicates that as many as 40% of clergy think about leaving the ministry regularly. Because there are more congregations than available clergy, those who are in calls are working extra to help nearby congregations during emergencies. The pandemic took a toll on all of us, but pastors have had to deal with not just their own exhaustion but the exhaustion of entire congregations. Not being able to gather in person meant reinventing church. Trying to balance decisions around health with the urgency of those who wanted to come back in person further stressed relationships. And more specifically:

We can be better together when we support Women Clergy

Following some public remarks at the Clergy Spring Day of Renewal, I met with several clergy in the Synod and learned the Northeastern Iowa Synod has a reputation of being unsupportive of women clergy. This is disheartening, confusing, and maddening to me. I was not aware of the extent to which women clergy in our Synod sense that they are alone and isolated in ministry. After learning this, I started reaching out to women clergy inside and outside of our

Synod who have corroborated what I learned. I am grateful for the courage they found to speak to me about it and welcome any others to share your concerns with me.

It is imperative that we address this issue and change the culture and climate among us. I want *every* pastor in the ELCA to think of our Synod as a great place to look for a call. Female clergy looking for a call in our Synod are not only asking me how the Synod supports women clergy, they are doing their research and contacting women who are serving or have served in NEIA and asking them about their experience.

So with the help of several women colleagues, a list of actionable items that I can take as the bishop has been created. These are relatively simple practices that can help us all be aware of frequently inadvertent habits that continue to marginalize women in our churches, workplaces, and communities. They include:

- Opening group conversations with space for women to speak first.
- Creating a network of ELCA trained coaches that can serve as a help line for all clergy, but with intentional emphasis to women clergy.
- Using the “Seriously?” video produced by the North Carolina Synod and the accompanying study guide to raise awareness of the issues in our Synod.
- Providing tools, language and steps to take when we notice women being disrespected or marginalized. For example: We don’t say “Lady Pastors.” Even if it is intended to be respectful, it is often hurtful. I’ve never heard anyone say “Gentleman Pastor” We can just say, “Pastor” or “my pastor” There is no reason to clarify the gender of our pastors.

I have taken initial action on the first two items and am exploring the best way to implement the third and fourth. Women have been ordained to Word and Sacrament ministry in the ELCA for over 50 years. We should be well past this issue by now. I invite you to join me in working towards a more supportive culture in our Synod.

We can be better together when we Support our Small Congregations

Across the ELCA almost 25% of pastoral calls will be shared between two or more congregations because they can't afford a full-time pastor on their own. Support for small congregations includes

1. Continue exploring shared relationships like geographical parishes, or contracting with a neighboring church. We have at least two larger congregations looking into being Hub churches. Smaller, nearby congregations can contract for pastoral services with these hub churches. There are a number of benefits for the pastors and congregations involved in this kind of relationship.
2. We continue to work with seminaries to place Collaborative Learning & TEEM seminary students: These seminary students are embedded in a congregation part time for 3-4 years while they take classes online and work towards ordination.
3. Create a Lay Training Program: I have been meeting an increasing number of lay people who feel called to help smaller congregations by leading worship, preaching, and even presiding at communion. Where this has worked in the ELCA is in Synods that have rigorous training for lay leaders. I believe we can connect with programs already in place, as well as utilize our church college and seminary resources to create a lay minister training program so that our congregations are served well. Scripture tells us not everyone is called to be a pastor. I will not be approving Synod Authorized lay Ministers who have not completed an approved training program or who are not on a path towards ordination. I don't see a training requirement is a hurdle for the way the Spirit may be leading. It's a way for us to discern that leading together as a community.
4. Closure Teams: None of the congregations that Paul started have continued to this day. Every congregation has a life span. When closure becomes inevitable, I want to have teams that can walk with a congregation through a closure, kind of like a hospice team at the end of a person's earthly life. Such teams may have a pastor to provide spiritual care, a lawyer for legal advice, and a real estate expert to help with property issues.

**We are better together when we pay attention to
Diversity, Inclusion, and belonging**

Diversity is important to a healthy church. We can be better together when our different ethnic backgrounds, genders, ages, ideologies, politics, and economic statuses are seen as blessings rather than impediments to life together in the Body of Christ. To that end, my continuing education this year has been training in diversity and anti-racism. If I am called to lead this Synod as the Body of Christ in the world, I feel that I need to learn and grow, get out of my bubbles and understand my own biases. Believing these issues didn't impact me directly was a mistake. We are one in Christ, and if one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. I want the Body of Christ to live into the image of our crucified and risen Lord.

Finally, we are better together when we know each other.

I have to say a word about how fortunate I am in the office of Bishop. I am able to do this because my spouse, Amy, has been a gracious partner in this call. It has been a major adjustment to our calendars and our life together.

Then, God called some amazing people to be part of my team on the Synod staff. And I am grateful, ever so grateful, that they responded to the call. If I have to be outside my bubble, these are certainly people I want with me. These are also the people who I have entrusted with popping any new bubbles that begin to insulate me from the world.

Because there are so many new faces in the Synod office, and because we have shuffled some job duties around, I put together a little video to introduce the Synod staff: