



Report of Northern Illinois Synod Bishop Stacie Fidler

“¹¹ He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”

1 Kings 19:11-13

What are you doing here, Elijah?

The Lord asks that of Elijah a couple of times in the story from 1 Kings. Elijah has had a great run. Listening to the call of God, he has found sustenance in the deepness of drought; been God’s instrument in raising the widow’s son; and in very dramatic fashion defeated the prophets of Baal. You can’t say that he hasn’t done well.

But the tide has turned. The king has sent agents after him to kill him. And Elijah has decided to just give it all up. He’s tired, and he is done. He actually pleads to God for death, even while God sends him what he needs to survive. He is hiding in a cave when the still small voice of God comes to him and asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

What are you doing here?

After this, God reassures Elijah that his work is not done. Perhaps more importantly, God makes sure that Elijah knows that he is not doing it alone. Perhaps it’s that sense of being utterly alone, feeling like everything rests on his shoulders, that pushes Elijah to despair. God reminds him that is not the case. God still has things to do, and he will strengthen Elijah for that work. He names a few partners for Elijah. He promises him that there is life ahead for him (though, frankly, not everyone). His ministry and the work of God will live beyond him. The despair that has consumed Elijah does not and will not win.

As I write this report, we are at the beginning of the Easter season. It is the time that, as Christians, we learn that lesson even more profoundly than Elijah did: death does not get the last word. Death and despair do not win. We’ve learned again during Holy Week that there are times that it feels, profoundly, that death has hold. But we have been reassured at the empty tomb, on the road to Emmaus, and in so many other ways and places that even when it feels like it’s time to hide in a cave, God is always at work. God is always bringing resurrection in some way. We may not immediately see it. But we are marked on our foreheads by that promise. We are sent forth every day in that assurance. That promise of life over death is what holds us and sustains us in our ministry and lives.

I have returned to Elijah a number of times in the last eight months. There have been days when I have felt the power of his victory on the mountain, days when I have seen remarkable ministry among you, days when your stories have helped me be utterly confident in how God is leading us. Then there have been moments when, like Elijah, I have looked for the cave. I am not telling

you any secrets when I say that being the church today is hard. Every single one of you knows this. There are voices that yell at us with the force of earthquake and fire as they tell us that faith and community are futile and foolish. They push us deeper into the cave with fear.

It is on those days that you, me, and the church are called to listen for that still, small voice. We listen for the one that calls us by name and asks what we are doing.

It is that voice that reminds us that we are not called to this alone.

It is that voice that reminds us that God is still at work and vibrant in this world.

It is that still, small voice that pulls us out of the cave and shows us the way of life.

This is our work now as a synod together, as congregational communities, and as individual leaders both lay and ordained. Together, we are called out of those places where fear has pushed us to listen for the voice of God, to consider what we are doing in our communities and why we are called there, and to go out together. None of us does this work alone.

To walk together with you on this journey, the synod staff and I have spent this first year facilitating ways for all of us to listen for that still, small voice. During the Lenten season, we partnered with the Lilly Foundation's Thriving Congregations grant team at St. Olaf College, the Nourishing Vocation Project. Lenten resources were provided to assist congregations in hearing their call. Some of you chose to do that while listening to Jonah. Many of you followed the lectionary stories for this year which were long and beautiful tales of call stories and the work of Christ in our midst. We all gathered at the Congregational Resourcing Event (CRE) for an experience of exploring the values that guide us as a synod. You have since received the materials that help you to do this work in your own congregation. The Lenten worship resources were built around the word VOCARE (meaning call). Each week, you were asked questions to help guide you in listening to the still, small voice in your midst. We will build on that listening in the months ahead.

At Assembly, The Reverend Dr. Char Cox will be with us again along with The Rev. Peter Schattauer. Together, they will help us consider what it means to be called, both as an individual and as community. "What are you doing here" is not just a question for Elijah. It is a question for all of us. It is not just our ordained leaders who are called. Each of us is called in everyday life to multiple vocations for which we are equipped and sent. Some of you are called as parents. Some of you are called as teachers and farmers and bankers and service workers. As the baptized people of God in the world, we see that vocation infuses and weaves its way through our entire lives.

Grounding ourselves in what it means to be called is vital to understanding and living the future of our congregations.

Some of you will feel called in your communities to innovative ways of sharing the gospel. Some of you will feel called to forms of outreach that reflect the vision of Matthew 25. Some of you will feel called in your communities to share ministry with other communities. Some of you will feel called in your community to consider what your legacy is before completing the ministry of the current community. All of these are powerful callings. None of them are easy. All

of them – ALL OF THEM – and others are ways we live out our baptismal vocation in this world.

Together the synod staff and I are working with you to discern the “Why” of each of our faith communities. What are you doing here? What are you called to be and do?

In the fall as each staff member came on board, our first priority was to show up. As we have entered this hazy time we are now calling “post-pandemic”, every single congregation is in a different place spiritually and emotionally. We have needed to show up to hear your stories. We have needed to look you in the eye and see your excitement and your grief. We are still trying to reach everyone. Please call the synod office if you would like a visit from me or any member of our staff.

As we talk and hear your stories, we are working with you to determine the next best steps in this time and place. The material from CRE and Lent on values will be part of a bundle of congregational planning materials and resources. They will be added to the materials and resources we will use for conversation at Synod Assembly. Congregations will be able to utilize any of these materials when they feel “stuck” or need to discern next steps. They are also perfect for the ongoing spiritual growth of the congregation. We need to continually listen for how God is calling us. God is never done with us.

Through a generous non-budgetary gift, we have called a Pathways Discernment Coach to assist congregations with greater distress to discern their next steps. Pastor Mark Juliot will serve as a part-time transition pastor (formerly called interim pastor) at a congregation discerning their future (the anchor congregation). He will also work with several other congregations at the same time in an intentional process that will assist communities in considering and taking their next steps in ministry. Several people have asked me recently if I have a list of places that need to close. I do not. No one does. But all of us in this “post covid” process are discerning why we gather and how we live out the call of the Gospel in our communities. This process will help congregations discern what is next and to name the “why” of their Christian Community in this time and place. Once they are at that point, they will work with another leader on innovation and vitality, partnership, or a plan for completing their ministry and resurrecting their legacy.

With so much going on right now in our congregations and communities – the deafening noise of earthquakes and fire – we have sought ways to support our rostered leaders and our lay leaders. Part of the way ahead for the church lies in equipping our lay leaders in their own communities. Equipping is one of the core values that the synod identified in 2018/19. “Preaching Among Friends” is one of the opportunities that we have offered lay leaders this year to support those who feel called to preach. While equipping our laity, this is also a support to our rostered leaders who need help with supply preaching and Sunday morning support. We are also sorting out the needs of our Synod-Authorized Ministers and working with the entire Region 5 leadership to come up with common values and expectations for SAMs. The congregational planning and leadership resources mentioned above are part of how we are supporting our rostered leaders. We will also offer spiritual and vocational support through partnership with the Courage to Lead program and through Sabbath Space throughout the year.

We are working to transform and clarify all the processes of the synod office. By necessity, Covid shifted many practices depending on the current situation. We want every process - from communication to transition to discernment - to be clear and helpful to our communities.

We are working on the little process things as we go. The location of a physical synod office is part of that work. While we will not return to full-time in-office staffing, we have learned how important that space can be organizationally. The office space at Augustana has not worked well for this time. Trinity Lutheran Church – Moline has offered to host us as part of a “revenue neutral” agreement. We will move office the first week of May. We may not be unpacked until later in the summer. However, we will be “settled” for the duration of my term. We will maintain the amazing studio at Emmanuel Lutheran – Rockford and are grateful for their continued hospitality.

We have partnered with the Southeastern Iowa Synod to request a “new start” ministry. This development would re-start San Jose Obrero - Moline in coordination with a new effort in Davenport. The former Lutheran President of Guatemala is now living in Davenport with asylum status. He has already started the exploration in Davenport. Pr. Jose Cortes, our current developer, will assist with the transition. The time is ripe for a coordinated effort between these two synods. By the time we gather in June for assembly, we will know whether the churchwide organization has approved funding for this effort.

It may seem strange that I am this far in my report and am only now mentioning the budget. We are anticipating a deficit in the year ahead. Congregational statements of Intent for 2023 have come in much lower than expected or were not received at all. I suspect that as congregations have come out of the shock of covid, they are now adjusting to the reality of life in 2023. We are preparing for the possibility of having to adjust the current year/2023 budget. The budget we have presented at Assembly for 2024 is based on a continuation of this trend. We are aware, I am aware, that this is a time of contraction. Many of the procedures already put in place by the synod office reflect these concerns, including the online only registration for Synod Assembly and events. That alone saves the synod thousands of dollars. We have condensed down to one synod car, for the Bishop, who puts on the most miles and for whom this makes the most financial sense.

The 2024 budget is lean but missional. It was put together with two missional priorities: building lay leadership and supporting congregational ministry. I want our individual congregational missions to be supported in whatever way they need to be. We have increased the staff travel budget back to pre-pandemic levels to facilitate staff being physically present to congregations. We will also be using technology that most congregations and leaders are now able to utilize. The proposed budget maintains or increases our investment in committees to facilitate these goals.

We are re-establishing synod stewardship and generosity work. Some of that will be supported by the ELCA, such as the Generosity Project, which has shown promising results in our congregations. Some of that will be built up in-house through leaders in our synod who are gifted and passionate about leading the people of God in being faithful and generous in our gifts.

The painful piece that you will notice is a decrease in our shared financial investment with agencies and institutions. That does not mean our commitment to these partners is any less. These are longstanding commitments of our hearts. However, for the health of our long-term commitment to these partners, at this point in time we need to invest in deeper support of our congregations. We are all in the process of “right sizing”, including the synod. These institutions have also been in the process of adjusting to new financial expectations and understanding these shifts.

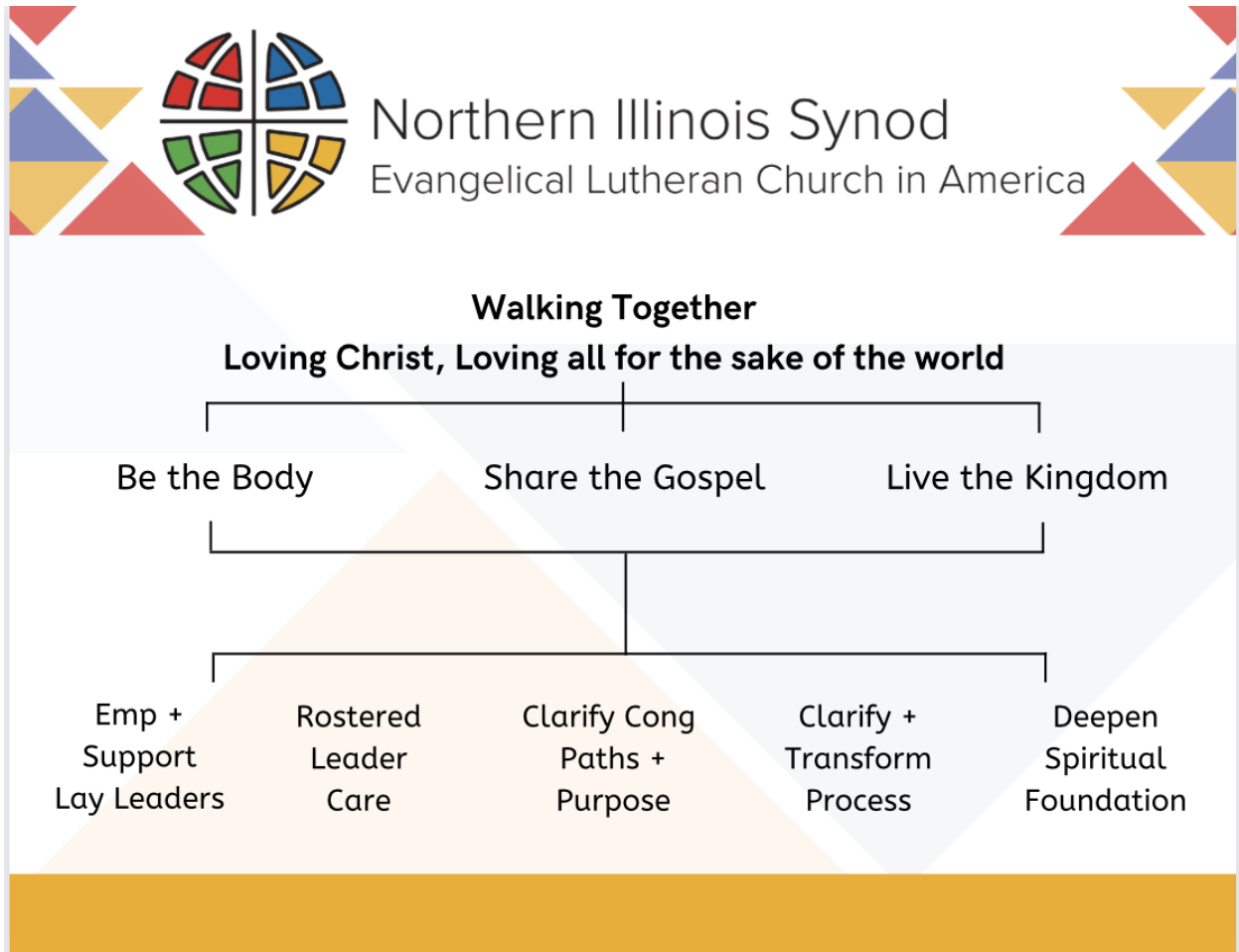
Looking to the Biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 41), this is a “skinny cow” year. However, we are committed to tending to these agencies and institutions by investing in other ways and discerning “fat cow” means of support. For example, in anticipation of changes to synod budgets, LSSI has called The Rev. Kelly Nieman Anderson as Manager of Church and Community Engagement for the specific work of developing congregational relationships. We will work with LSSI during these adjustment years to build up the other ways we are mutually invested.

At the synod level, we will have to look at all our funds and positions with new lenses in the next five years. We will need to make difficult and faithful decisions. But we are a missional people. We will be clear and prayerful about how we are called and how we are living our call. Our values as a synod will guide our decisions.

Below is the chart that has guided our staff for the last few months. Our synod mission is at the top. “Be the Body” is our vision focus for 2023, while “Share the Gospel” and “Live the Kingdom” will be our foci for 2024 and 2025. The bottom lines of the chart are the strategic filters we have used in planning and organizing our work this year. They are areas of priority.



Northern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



Do not miss this part:

I hate even leaving this part until the end. So please read and know the truth of what I am about to say. We could not have made it to the Synod Assembly without the most remarkable synod staff in the country. I will argue that with anyone. It is a daunting thing to select a staff to face a new time and place in Church history. I am deeply grateful that each one of these people said yes.

I am grateful daily for:

***The Rev. Jennifer Beamsley**, who is Lead Staff Assistant and chief interpreter of what is going on in my brain.

***The Rev. Julie Monnard**, who was recommended to me by several of her colleagues and brings order out of chaos regularly.

***The Rev. Josh Ebener**, who I was fortunate to meet the month before Synod Assembly, whom I turned to for advice the month after my election, and whose prior bishop called and said, "He would be a perfect DEM for you".

***The Rev. Pat Esker**, who interprets numbers like no one else and has been invaluable in helping me understand precedent and expectation in this new role.

***The Rev. Mack Patrick**, who brings his humor and ability to keep me in line along with his skillset and generational wisdom to this team.

***The Rev. Dr. Pam Marolla**, who jumped in for a part-time term call and was invaluable in assisting with the early chaos of transition. She now moves on to innovative Matthew 25 work with her congregation and community.

***The Rev. Michel Clark and The Rev. Denver Bitner**, who remained on staff for a time to help with all things transition.

***Anke Franze and Therese Guise**, both of whom have served in the Rock Island office in the last year and were valuable through human and physical transitions.

***The Invaluable, Wise, and Instrumental in all things Julie Lewis**. I have no words for how helpful and valuable she has been to me in this first year except this: THANK YOU.

Go in Peace Dear Ones. Love and serve the Lord.

A handwritten signature in dark red ink that reads "Bishop Stacie Fidler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Stacie Fidler+