

2021 Northern Illinois Synod diakonia™ Annual Report

As with all the Church's ministries, the Northern Illinois Synod diakonia™ program faced difficult decisions when the COVID pandemic was declared in March 2020. For the past year NIS diakonia™ has functioned successfully in a 100% online environment. This has involved purchasing Zoom licenses and helping students and teaching pastors work well together in a virtual environment. We expect to continue offering courses exclusively on the Zoom platform until 2022.

While we still operate with six geographical "locations," we have combined into three online "sites," with students from the McHenry and Mt. Carroll meeting together on Thursday evening, students from Joliet and Rockford also meeting on Thursday evenings, and students from DeKalb and Dixon joining together on Tuesday evenings on Zoom. We expect to continue this pattern through at least fall 2021 and will then re-evaluate the possibility of hybrid (some online, some in-person) courses starting in 2022. We anticipate that some of our courses will always be online to accommodate the needs of some students and teaching pastors who are unable to travel long distances to get to classes.

Thus far, the student evaluations of teaching effectiveness have continued to be very positive about course instruction and learning outcomes achieved. One of the benefits of online courses is that students are exposed to a broader range of teaching pastors and fellow students. Another is the minimal amount of time students and teaching pastors must spend on the road getting to and from physical locations. And even though classes are not meeting in person, a good amount of fellowship has developed among students and teaching pastors. Still, we look forward to the time when we can safely gather together in person for diakonia™ events.

We were unable this year to host a diakonia™ retreat but plan to have an event for current students and NIS diakonia™ in the fall, probably online. We also hope to have a hybrid (in-person and online) graduation ceremony in late September or early October, pending the status of the COVID pandemic at that time.

It is also notable that a number of NIS diakonia™ graduates are participating in a Monday evening Northern Illinois online Bible Study led by Pr. John Seraphine, one of our veteran teaching pastors. Thus far, we have studied the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and the Old Testament Wisdom Literature in addition to other topics. Materials from the Yale Divinity School are used in these studies, which provide a deep dive into scripture. Highlights of the studies have been opportunities to Zoom with experts in these fields, including Dr. John J. Collins of the Yale faculty, Dr. David Rhoads, professor *emeritus* at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and Dr. Norman Habel, eminent scholar of Old Testament and former member of the faculty of Concordia Seminary/Seminex now living in

Australia. We are blessed to be able to learn from these outstanding theologians and we look forward to the future of this promising program, which diakonia™ is proud to support.

Several NIS diakonia™ graduates continue to serve on the national diakonia™ board of directors as well as on our NIS board. Those on our NIS board include: Ms. Cynthia Bowen, Dr. Trenton Ferro, Ms. Donna Kelly, Ms. Nancy Lillevold, the Rev. Dr. Doug Liston, Pastor Denise Rode, Pastor John Seraphine, Ms. Barbara Stark, Parson Bob Stark, Pastor Kenn Storck, and Mr. Douglas Wood. Pastors Liston, Rode, and Storck also serve on the national board along with Dr. Ferro. Several of our representatives on the national board have been highly involved with a restructuring plan for the diakonia™ curriculum.

Speaking on behalf of the NIS diakonia™ board, we are grateful for the support this program receives from our Synod's staff, pastors, and program graduates. diakonia™ continues to be a flexible and vital program of lay theological education and is a blessing to many in our area and beyond.

Respectfully submitted,

Denise L. Rode, Ed.D., M.Div.
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