

Synod Assembly Report from The Rev. Brenda Bos, Bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA

Grace and peace to you from the God who was, who is and who is to come.

Our 2022 Synod Assembly theme is “Enough.” You may have several responses to this word: it’s intentional. You may think of it as “I’ve had enough of this pandemic,” or you may think “God’s grace is enough.” We find ourselves in exactly this moment: acknowledging incredible loss and stress while also clinging to God’s promises for the future.

This is my challenge as your bishop. I want to proclaim God’s promises of faithfulness and a bright future. But I do not want to ignore the real suffering everyone has experienced in the past two and a half years. How to proclaim Christ is risen... while also claiming He is crucified? When I describe our situation while mirroring the story of our Savior, it starts to make sense. We only have resurrection after death. I believe we are experiencing both death and resurrection at this time.

We feel this most acutely in our congregations. Each congregation has its own story of the pandemic, of racial unrest (or not), of economic realities. Some of you have reported incredible resiliency and flexibility. Others admit the pandemic may be the final blow to a dwindling ministry. The mission of the Office of the Bishop has been to accompany each congregation as it takes an honest assessment. We want to celebrate God’s faithfulness, whether that looks like an international online community or only twelve faithful congregants remaining in a service.

Staffing

Our staffing reflects the changing shape of ministry in Southern California. I have made significant changes in how our office responds to the needs of our congregations.

Our Director for Evangelical Mission, Pastor Chryll Crews, recently said, “We are all mission developments now.” Mission developments are new-start congregations. We have six of these congregations holding that title officially, but all of our congregations need to rethink ministry and their mission after the global pandemic.

One of the questions coming out of last year's budget debate was the loss of our ethnic-specific ministry coordinators. After the ELCA removed our funding for those positions, I made the decision to discontinue those positions. The key thing our ethnic-specific congregations have asked for is resources: financial, pastoral, education. In reality, many of our congregations throughout the synod have asked for the same. My staff has been called to work on intentional resourcing and care. We needed to change the number of people serving and needed to spread them around the synod. You can read more about that below.

I have asked our executive committee and budget and finance committee to look at ways to open more granting possibilities for congregations. We have encouraged intentional conversations about sharing pastors and ministries in congregations who are no longer able to afford full-time pastors. My staff is constantly lifting up areas of justice and inequity as we see situations which have not been tended. We are learning from the congregations and trying to determine what are best steps for them, based in their specific context and need.

Chryll Crews (she/her) is our Director for Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop. She has spent her first months with us understanding the variety of ways our Synodically Authorized Worshipping Communities and Strategic Ministries are funded and operate. We see inconsistencies in policy and operations among these communities, and Pastor Crews is working to streamline operations and help each congregation become more self-sufficient and vital. Most of our SAWCs have not been able to become congregations, and we are trying to develop tangible processes for each of them to do this.

Pastor Toni Castañeda Carrera (she/they) is Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership Development and Authentic Diversity. Pastor Toni cares for candidates and call processes. This was an intentional decision, to have the person tasked with authentic diversity also working in situations where leaders are called and placed. We invite all call committees to consider a diverse pool of candidates as they understand the diversity in their pews and neighborhoods. Pastor Toni is also working with candidates to have a more enriching experience and to think more deeply about their own participation in an inclusive church. Pastor Toni is in deep relationship with many of our ethnic-specific pastors and lifts up their needs and

strengths. She will also be training our synod council on cultural competency and offering anti-racism training throughout the synod.

We need fulltime financial assistance and are working to find a candidate who can manage day to day operations, as well as help us make larger financial decisions for cash flow, proceeds from properties and endowment management. We have committees for this work as well, but we find we need a staff member to implement our decisions.

I am grateful to our Treasurer Michael Metzger (he/him), our clerk Holly Ann Walker (she/her) and volunteer Dale Van Segeern (he/his) for keeping our day-to-day operations moving.

Bill Nuzzo (he/him) is our Property Manager. The synod owns eight properties which require varied amounts of maintenance and security. Bill is the first call for each of our tenants and either handles their needs personally or manages the many vendors we use to care for our sites. Juan Mansilla (he/him) maintains the Glendale property and is on call for other properties as needed.

Taylor Dariarow (she/they) is my Executive Assistant and Office Manager and has been working with our pastoral staff and administrators Robin Lujan (she/her) and Claudia Iao (she/her) to make our systems as efficient as possible. Samantha Henderson (she/her) is our Mission Interpreter/Communications person and Paloma Iris (she/her) is working on social media, video editing and the first ELCA bishop Tiktok account. (If you don't know about the Bishop Brenda Tiktok, your kids or grandkids might!) We are thankful to Pastor Stephanie Jaeger for encouraging us to use CharityProud as a database for rostered leaders, emails, financial records and scheduling. Each member of our staff has found ways to use this program to support their work.

The rest of our staff operates in a part-time capacity:

Pastor Abel Arroyo Traverso (they/he) is Assistant to the Bishop for Faith Formation and In-House Theologian. One of the key requests I have received is for lay leadership development. We need our congregational leaders to have strong governance skills and the ability to express their Christian faith. Pastor Abel will be creating curriculum around Lutheran theology, good governance, justice issues and other essential trainings for leaders and parishioners.

Deacon Cecelia Travick Jackson (she/her) is Assistant to the Bishop for Senior Adult Ministry. Understanding our congregations are aging, the Office of the Bishop is pleased to have a staff person focusing on this large and important part of our congregations. Deacon Travick Jackson will be coordinating senior ministries throughout the synod, and will offer pastoral care, education on end of life and senior spiritual health and grief work. She will also be compiling data on our senior population so we can understand the breadth and needs of our senior members.

Lisa Higginbotham (she/her) is an employee of the ELCA Foundation, but she is frequently attending our staff meetings and is a vital part of our strategy for congregational health and sustainability. I consider her a member of our staff and have asked her to meet with many of our congregations after meeting with leaders who ask for financial assistance.

Transition Coaches have been added to our team. When a congregation has lost their pastor and is preparing to go into call process, a coach is brought in, frequently someone very familiar with the local context. They work closely with Pastor Toni to prepare the call committee to have the most effective call process.

I am hopeful the intentionality of these staff positions will be evident in congregational life in future months. Our 2023-2024 budget reflects these staff decisions.

Finances

The next step is strengthening our financial position. Not only will I become more intentional about fundraising for the synod, but I will also encourage the Budget and Finance Committee and Endowment Committee to continue their work to propose new ways of using our endowments to finance mission in the synod. We are blessed with a large endowment and several buildings for sale. It's time to make solid financial decisions about these assets to care for our congregations and our communities. There will be a lot of conversation about this with a lot of people, and I am eager to begin that work.

We will also clarify the processes for Synodically Authorized Worshipping Communities to become congregations and provide more intentional coaching and support for that. I hope to increase the number of Strategic Ministries our synod supports. These decisions are not mine alone; we work closely with the Churchwide organization (the ELCA), our SAWCs and our synodical granting committees to make these decisions. But I know a lot of congregations are

struggling, and I would like to find ways to support them. We have additional Mission and Ministry grants available and will be announcing a second grant season this year.

Our book study on “Ask, Thank, Tell” by Charles Lane was very successful. We will continue to provide resources for financial health and good governance. I have produced a series of videos on financial health, available on our Southwest California Synod YouTube channel.

Lutherans in Southern California

In my first ten months as bishop, I have been most inspired by visiting congregations and meeting with leadership throughout the region. People are exhausted, but hopeful. Some congregations have reported increased giving, or at least stable finances. Others are seeing decline, in finances and in spirit. I am confident God is present in all these settings.

As Southern Californians, we have the privilege of good weather and lots of resources. We are an incredibly diverse part of the country, with people from every nation on earth, speaking dozens of languages, worshipping in a variety of ways. Our state laws ensure the safety and thriving of people with disabilities, various gender expressions and religious beliefs. We can speak freely about topics that are taboo in other parts of the country. I take that seriously and am grateful. What does it mean to be a Lutheran in Southern California? I believe our neighbors are weary and in pain. We can unite to share God’s love and grace, offering practical gifts like food and shelter, but also calling for justice for the marginalized and oppressed. The world needs Jesus, and we are well-poised to share His love and teachings throughout Southern California.

My staff and I are committed to finding Jesus in every situation and, with God’s help, inspire you to find Jesus as well. We know congregations need care and we want to provide that, through prayer, education, strategy, resources, and, with the generosity of all of us, financial resources as available. Thank you for reading this report, thank you for your commitment to the ministry of Southwest California Synod. I am humbled to lead you toward God’s Kin-dom here in Southern California.