

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A former bishop invited colleagues to reflect and respond to two questions:

- 1) How do you interpret your primary role as bishop? 2) What aspect of the bishop's role has surprised you most? Portions of their responses are reflected anonymously below.
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## HOW DO YOU INTERPRET YOUR PRIMARY ROLE AS BISHOP?

To listen well, pray often and discern where God is calling us as people of faith in this particular time and place. Then to continuously challenge God's people to engage in the vision. This is a position where creativity is essential - looking for new ways to engage ministry in Christ's name.

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Much of my role is that of a teacher and an administrator. I regularly find ways to interpret the scriptures and the Lutheran confessions to unravel, strengthen or correct the practices of congregations and rostered ministers. It is not enough to announce a particular position the ELCA has taken. It is important to be teaching, uplifting and encouraging the Synod Council, the Synod Assembly, the ministerium, call committees and candidates. I am grateful for my lifelong habits as a reader of scripture and theology, which make it easier to preach well amid many other demands on my time. As the chief administrator of the synod, I use skills to oversee staff and budgets, strategic planning and to mediate conflicts.

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To shepherd congregations and Rostered Leaders and especially the youth of our Synod in the gospel; Preach, Preside, and teach and commission adults and youth regularly throughout the synod. It is a ministry of encouragement as much as a ministry of authority. In this I see myself more than an administrator; there are plenty of folks who I can tap - and do - for that purpose and it works well.

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I would describe my primary role with these words from the constitution (S8.12): "As this synod's pastor, the bishop shall: (b) have primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod and its congregations, providing pastoral care and leadership for this synod, its congregations, its ministers of Word and Sacrament, and its ministers of Word and Service." I see my primary role as providing guidance and encouragement to the congregations and rostered ministers of the synod through prayer, conversation, and presence. I would also describe my role as the synod's chief cheerleader, lifting up and celebrating the amazing ministry that takes place in our congregations, and together as the synod.

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(1) To build up God's Church and encourage faithful and fruitful proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus. And (2) a bishop's service is always an "impossible possibility" (Reinhold Niebuhr). The calling always exceeds your capacity with its many twists, turns, challenges and opportunities. Yet by God's grace, again and again you find yourself surprised by what God makes possible. Our theology of the cross grows more and more precious each year I serve.

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For me, it's hard not to focus on the first few lines of the Constitution for Synods "job description" for synod bishops: †S8.12. As this synod's pastor, the bishop shall: a. Preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church. b. Have primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod... It seems to me that, even though bishops DO preside at the Table, the Font (infrequently) and the Pulpit....there is a paradigmatic dimension to how bishops do that. I also would "sharpen the point" of this by adding that, in serving the ministry of Word and Sacrament, bishops specialize in uttering uncomfortable truths, especially in their work with congregational leaders and rostered ministers.

## WHAT ASPECT OF THE BISHOP'S ROLE HAS SURPRISED YOU MOST?

As someone who prefers to be a collaborative leader, I was surprised by how often I would be asked to make a decision on matters for which I normally would have preferred a more collaborative decision-making model. Sometimes this request to make a decision occurs under circumstances that aren't amenable to a less-rushed, more reflective mode of making decisions in the company of others whose input I value. Although this has gotten easier for me to do, I still wish for times when I can consult with others before simply "making a decision."

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The immense amount of conflict we get called into is the negative side. The positive side is getting to listen across the territory I serve to deep faith stories, people's desires that other know the love of Jesus and the incredibly generous people I have met. The power to say NO – to travel, to projects, to the passionate pleas of others, and to distractions. Learning to steward one's gifts and time is crucial to discovering the joy of this calling. May God help the bishop who is not naturally an organized person. Smart staff will help but know that there are thousands of details flying around each week. Taming those can be fun. Failing to do so is maddening for the synod you serve.

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Three things: 1) That I actually know many Constitutional provisions by heart these days! Including Chapter and verse! 2) I've come to realize, to my surprise over the past 10 years, that I have often become more excited about pastors/deacons who excel far more in emotional intelligence than those who have great academic credentials. (It's all part of S.14.18.3) 3) Surprised by both the depth of the dark side of the church - AND the incredible bright side of the church. As a Bishop, I get to see more amazing grace, love and goodness and integrity than was possible in a single parish, and I have also experienced the difficult and even evil situations I probably would have never experienced outside of this office.

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The unrelenting flow of questions, information and requests that come from an unimagined variety of sources.

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I have been pleasantly surprised at the tremendous level of respect and appreciation that there is for the Office of the Bishop in this synod. I have been surprised by the number of meetings that take me outside my synod, such as: Conference of Bishops meetings, other Churchwide meetings, Region 3 meetings, Seminary meetings, Minnesota Council of Churches meetings, Lutheran Advocacy-Minnesota meetings, etc. That's not to say that any of those are bad things, just realities that accompany the role of the bishop. I am convinced that most congregations want to love their pastor, and yet I have been surprised at how few congregational leadership teams have an annual ministry review with their pastor to express their appreciation for the ministry they share, to honestly evaluate the ministry they share, and to enthusiastically anticipate the future of the ministry they share.

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(1) Encountering the amazing gifts of all the baptized and watching those gifts develop and move in people and communities. (2) The church's breadth would be second. The work of God in our congregations, church body and institutions is larger than I understood. It is part of what a bishop supports as they live out their callings. (3) The broken-ness of God's Church and God's people might be a third, but I have had a hard week that may be coloring my viewpoint. Of course, I am deeply broken as well. Yet, God's resurrecting grace keeps working and setting us free to love and serve.

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