

“What will serve the Gospel now?”

2020-2021 Annual Report

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Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

In the Old Testament, Ezra's third chapter tells the story of God's people beginning to rebuild after the deep losses of a time of exile in Babylon. We have been living through a much less damaging pandemic but it has made this text one of my favorites for this year because it names both the grief and the joy of God's people.

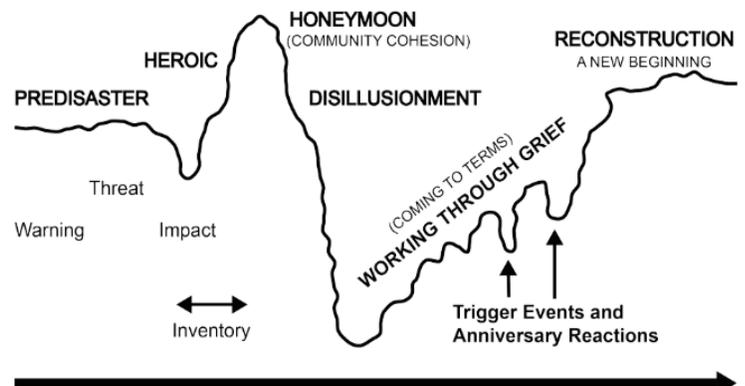
¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

*And all the people responded with a **great shout when they praised the Lord**, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹² But **many** of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, **wept with a loud voice** when they saw this house, though **many shouted aloud for joy**, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.”*

That is the state of my heart as I think back through the journey of the last year. I want to weep and lament for the ways our lives and communities of faith have been damaged by the virus, by our own choices, and by the choices of people around us. I want to weep for the lives lost, friends who have or will leave us, and fears about the uncertainty of the future. I also want to shout with praise to God for leading us through this season and getting us to this point nearing the end of our wrestling with this virus. Looking forward I have concerns and fears, but I have a deeper confidence that trusts God is with us and guiding us through this wilderness. Like God's people in troubled times in the past, I trust God will work in the lives of people, congregations, and synod to grow us stronger and more faithful through this time of struggle.

We will soon need to imagine the reconstruction process after this slow unending disaster. Like God's people struggled coming out of the wilderness during the Exodus, we will have our challenges in what will be a delayed, messy, and likely confusing process of returning to in-person ministry, worship and congregational life that will unfold unevenly in time and across our synod.

Emotional Life Cycle of Disaster



We have new gifts for this part of our journey that have been developed and discovered. I give thanks for the muscles grown. We have grown more comfortable discerning and deciding as God's people. These skills will bear fruit for decades. I give thanks for the many adjustments and innovations we have made that will serve the Gospel now and after the virus' threat has ended. The learning and capacities will not be lost. I give thanks for the many lay people who have stepped forward and our ministers, too. Most of us could never imagine we could do what we have done. We have not gotten everything right, but God has kept leading us, protecting us, inspiring us to forgive and to execute new strategies for all forms of ministry – worship, faith formation, youth ministry, pastoral care, serving our neighbors – to safely navigate this time of the virus. In the coming days, weeks, months, and years we are called to work together to build a better “normal” for our lives, families, congregations, communities, and world. It will take faith and hope. God will inspire us to love, have courage, and practice forgiveness in the coming year.

God's Spirit inspired our imaginations, called us through a wilderness of challenges and opened our eyes to revelations in this apocalyptic time. An “apocalypse” is literally “an uncovering.” It reveals or uncovers our brokenness – personally, communally and in the systems of our shared life. Yet, there has been an equal or even greater uncovering of our assets, capacity, willingness to reform our life together for the sake of the Gospel and to protect the most vulnerable in our communities and congregations. In the coming year congregations and leaders will continue to be called to...

“Listen to God, each other, ourselves, and the World.

Reconnect with God's story and God's faithfulness.

Define the challenges we are facing.

Reframe our expectations and goals.

Cultivate new ways of being the church through spiritual practices and innovation.”

-Luther Seminary Faithful Innovation Project

I invite you to join me in the balcony and look at our life together as a synod for a bit. It has been something, this past year. The challenges, growing pains, threats have been many and hard. The opportunities, learning and transformation have been stunning. Even as we move forward, make more exciting discoveries, and learn new ways, we also need to be aware of people's various emotional and spiritual journeys. In this season of uncertainty, tension, and conflict, we will need to monitor and pace our plans for the future. We can both plan and move forward, while attending to the folks who are grieving and struggling with the deep change of the past and coming days. As I shared in the past, four great questions are:

What is lost? What is left? What is possible?

What will serve the Gospel now?

Most people have been focused on navigating their personal lives, keeping their businesses going, and living in a reality where we cannot relate to each other in normal ways - both in our families and our communities. Your synod staff has likewise worked hard to sort out how to do our work in Zoom and other electronic forms of communications. We have had to develop capacity and competency using new tools that help us collaborate and sustain the core of your synod's functions. Reconciliation ministry has been a place of major investment of energy. At the same time we have encouraged and sought to grow people to serve in their congregational roles, some as rostered ministers. We have sought to answer our calling to “equip” by supporting congregational life. Transitions have been more challenging and needed more attention. Pr. Dee Pederson and a team of people have encouraged mission through initiatives like our two churchwide grants, which were deployed to love our neighbors in need and encourage hunger ministries. Task groups have gathered around themes like faith formation, racial justice networking, and thinking about “Growing Young” in our congregations in this time. We have also sought to share information about the virus and best practices

from across our synod and church. I will not list off all the great work of your synod staff team, but I could. I am thankful for each member of your synod staff and governance.

People often talk about the synod like the synod is your bishop, but I know the truth. It is a team of committed and caring people who each bring their gifts to our shared-life with a confidence that “together, by God’s grace, we have all that we need.” This team also includes our council, deans, conference chair people and conference ministers. The word “synod” means to be on the road walking together. At the deepest level it includes all the baptized ones who have cared for siblings in Christ in neighboring congregations and in proclaiming the Good News by what they have said and done. As I looked through our calendar for the past year thinking of the journey, deep gratitude washed over me for all the ways God has worked through the faithful to care for God’s Church and God’s world.

Your synod office is thankful for your ongoing generosity and support. Your support of your congregation and your larger church has been heroic, noticed and appreciated.

I am remembering and giving thanks to God for 17 years of walking together on the road of faith and through this chapter of the synod’s history. It has been something. It has been a great challenge and an amazing privilege to serve in this way.

We are thankful for the servants who have served your synod in many ways. This year we particularly want to express gratitude to our whole synod staff and governance system. We will miss Conference Minister, Pr. Joyce Graue, who retired. I also want to express deep gratitude and appreciation for the sacrificial love so many lay leaders have shown in this crisis. We all give thanks for the next generation of people who have and will step forward to serve in and guide our synod, including someone who will serve as the next bishop.

I am confident the coming election process will not only open space to discern who will serve as the bishop, but also provoke a deep and meaningful conversation about our synod’s mission field and what kind of leaders and vision will best serve God in the coming chapter of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod’s life. We trust we are called into God’s preferred and promised future, **Embracing God’s Mission and Equipping God’s People - Equipping Congregations, Engaging Leaders, and Enhancing Local and Global Mission.**

I invite you all to join me in being available to read scripture daily, pray for God’s guidance in your life and practice our faith in daily callings in life. I currently am reading a chapter a day in the New Testament. Yesterday, this text showed up.

“Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you.” -1 Thessalonians 1

A helpful prayer:

*O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings, and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 76)*