

July/August 2023



From the Bishop:

As I write this, I am still re-living a beautiful experience that I had last weekend. Five of my friends and I drove to the Gorge Amphitheatre and we saw Joni Mitchell in concert. For some of you, this might be interesting, for others, you might not even know who Joni Mitchell is. For me, the time was filled with joy, laughter, tears, friendship, and community ... not to mention amazing music and storytelling.

But this isn't about Joni Mitchell ... at least not entirely. For what struck me as I sat on the grass with 26,000 other people, was the church-like feeling that was there. Or perhaps I should say the "Jesusy" feeling that was there. Or maybe the Holy Spirit in action feeling. And this came from the crowd itself.

As we all sat crowded together on blankets and chairs, people told stories, shared food and drink, sang songs, helped those who were having difficulty navigating the hillside, and together we became community. The little children sitting to the right of me danced, the young girls sitting to the left of me accepted blankets from my friend, and the man in front of me told me that he had traveled from North Carolina to see Joni. He told me that he was surprised to discover the Gorge was not located in Seattle!

There was one point in the concert, after it had gotten dark, when Joni was singing and people – one by one – started shining the flashlight from their cellphones towards the stage. Throughout the crowd, little points of light lit up the darkness. Now, if you have been to a concert in the last ten years, this is a common occurrence. Cell phone lights have taken the place of lighters being raised. However, because Joni has not performed in over twenty years, she was bemused by the lights. She turned to the person next to her on stage and said, "It looks like a fallen constellation. Where did they get all those lights?"

I thought her words and her surprise were charming. But as I looked around me, at the people sharing blankets, at those with arms around each other swaying to the music, at the cozy darkness around us and the lights looking like fallen stars, it was more than charming. It was holy.

For a moment, we were a cathedral. For a moment, we were community. For a moment, we were one.

At our best, this is what it means to be church. To be the Body of Christ. To practice hospitality and generosity, and grace. To see Christ in one another. To accept others' limitations and to be accepting of our own.

I confess that all was not perfect at the Gorge. There was a person close to me who insisted on singing every word to every song. While her voice was fine, I was not there to hear her but to hear Joni. There were people who cut in line after we had been waiting two hours to get inside. There was a driver who bullied his way into the front of the very long line of vehicles as we were leaving.

Perhaps this is like church, too. At least church as a human construction. Those of us who have been part of a church for a while, we know that church is not always sharing blankets and food, singing and joy. Sometimes, as humans, we hoard our stuff. We take offense at others. We refuse to listen. We bully. We push. Our voices sometimes drown out other voices.

And yet ... I pray that the moments of grace we receive this summer – from music at the Gorge to singing lustily in church, from sharing food on a hillside to receiving the body and blood of Christ – may we be church together. May we know and make it known that all are fully loved by God – in the times when we are like fallen constellations and in the times we are not.

May your summer be filled with holy moments.



From the VEEP

Burnout. That term has been being tossed around a lot lately. Ever since the acute stages of the coronavirus pandemic, we've heard about so many people experiencing various forms of stress, exhaustion, and, yes, burnout. Did you know that the term burnout was coined in the 1970s by Herbert Freudenberger to describe the consequences of severe stress and *high ideals* in "helping" professions? Doctors, nurses, teachers, pastors, first responders, social workers – these were the first people to be identified as suffering from burnout. The term has since come apply to all professions.

When used by mental health professionals, burnout can be defined as "a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to interpersonal stressors on the job." This doesn't mean that stressors outside work don't impact our emotional well-being, but occupational burnout has its own unique impact on our lives. It is important to note that burnout isn't just extreme exhaustion, but rather it is characterized by three dimensions: feeling of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased feeling of negativism related to one's work, and reduced professional efficacy. Researchers studying burnout suggest it is a systemic issue, arising in large part through a mismatch between people and their work. These mismatches can have to do with workload, which often leads people to equate burnout with overwork, but there can also be mismatches in regard to control and accountability, respect and community, fairness, reward, and values.

Understanding that burnout is a function of mismatches rather than just too much to do with too little time to do it in, can help us reevaluate where these mismatches may occur in our own work lives. I learned all the above by doing research for a presentation to the Synod Vice Presidents monthly gathering. As synod assembly season began to roll around, we learned that many vice presidents were not letting their names go forward for additional terms. Here in Region 1, all three of the VPs in synods where their positions were open for election chose not to run for a second term. Each person had their own reason for not running again, but looking at the broader trends, it seemed we should look at the causes of burnout. We have all been living through very tumultuous times since March of 2020. Our rostered leaders and our lay leaders have been reporting high levels of stress, anxiety, and yes, burnout. We need to recognize that the pandemic created some real mismatches where none existed before, especially for those of us in the helping professions.

Pastors who thrive in relationship with their parishioners suddenly found themselves trying to comfort and care through a computer screen. Teachers who had never used Zoom before suddenly had to become experts overnight. Nurses had to learn to treat patients while wearing layer upon layer of protective equipment. We all lost so many we were trying to help: people in our congregations no longer felt connected, student engagement dropped, and patients died. These mismatches led to mismatches in reward (so much more work, no increase in pay), and control (being made responsible for doing things we didn't have the skills or resources to do well). It is no wonder teachers, nurses, pastors, and other "helping" professionals are leaving. Burnout is real!

As we continue to navigate this new normal of ours, we must be alert to signs of these mismatches. We need to recognize that it isn't always about too much work. Sometimes it is just the wrong work at the wrong time. When you are tempted to take something off your plate make sure it isn't the thing that is nourishing you! Find ways to support your community when someone becomes overwhelmed trying to do things in new ways. Here in the Northwest Washington Synod, we have an excellent coaching staff at Coach NW and they don't just work with rostered leaders – they will work with council and other lay leadership, as well. (Learn more here: <https://www.lutheransnw.org/programs/coach-northwest>.)

Here's what the Synod Council and/or I have been up to in June:

- Synod Executive committee met on June 14.
- Synod VPs met on June 24. Our agenda included welcoming and orienting new VPs.
- I participated with other members of the synod in the Seattle Pride Parade on June 25.

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