

Northwest Washington Synod Bishop's Report, May 2025

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer enslaved or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:27-29

In my lifetime, I have received at least fifty quilts. From my grandmother who made me my beloved “ducky” quilt. From my mom who has lovingly created quilt wall hangings, quilt table runners, quilt lap blankets, and quilts for beds. From the many people in congregations who have given me quilts when I had my babies, battled cancer, arrived at a new congregation, departed from a congregation, and more. Every quilt I have received is stitched with warmth and kindness, wrapping me in both comfort and love.

Beyond the gifts I have received, I am mindful of the thousands of quilts that have been made by so many in this synod and throughout the ELCA – given to shelters, to hospice, and so many gathered and sent by Lutheran World Relief. Together these quilts have provided care for so many.

As I begin this Bishop's Report, I am mindful of the many ways that we are woven together into the story of God. As we journey together in the Northwest Washington Synod, may we trust that God is mending what is torn, strengthening what is weak, stitching us together in transformative ways - weaving us ever more closely together and into the fabric of God's redeeming love.

Joys, Concerns, and Workings of the Synod

Congregations and Ministry Sites

Overview

As you might know, I travel to different congregations almost every week. Throughout this past year, I have preached, taught, presided, led workshops, met with councils, celebrated anniversaries, helped facilitate disagreements, both welcomed and said goodbye to partners in ministry, shared in sorrows and joys, listened, learned, advocated, and much more. I am so thankful for the ministry being done in our various faith communities throughout the synod:

- The proclamation and living into the love of Jesus shown in our worship services through the spiritual practices of confession and forgiveness, singing God's praises, praying both in thanksgiving and in need, confession and forgiveness, mutual consolation, holy community, and receiving the gift of the body and blood of our Savior.
- The faithful work congregations are doing in welcoming and serving neighbors through food banks and free suppers, creating warmth through quilting groups, providing places to sleep for those without shelter, and more.
- The innovative and collaborative ways that our established congregations are working with each other and with our ecumenical partners including sharing pastors, buildings, social ministries, and more.
- The good and deep work that is being done in many of our congregations and ministry sites to confront the realities of exclusion and injustice – whether this is based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, a person's socio-economic status, and so much more. As conscious community is formed, all voices are honored, everyone's personhood is valued, and all are welcomed as beloved children of God.
- The mission support given by congregations and ministry sites that helps to steward and nurture the gospel of Jesus. This support makes possible the accompaniment work carried out by the synod, the wider church, and the ongoing growth and flourishing of various ministry partners.
- The parents and children and all the new people coming and finding belonging in our congregations through fellowship and the sharing of Jesus' love and grace.

In conversations with rostered ministers and lay leaders, I also am aware of other dynamics that are causing distress and hardship:

- Political polarization: Tensions are palpable in some congregations – especially in what are often called “purple” congregations. I’ve heard from both rostered ministers and laypeople regarding this. Some express frustration that sermons are too political; others are concerned pastors don’t address today’s pressing political realities enough. I’ve spoken with those who feel the ELCA is too “liberal,” and I have spoken with those who have recently found a spiritual home here.
- Christian Nationalism: Christian nationalism misrepresents the Christian faith by merging it with national identity, often placing political loyalty above the message of the gospel. This movement is sabotaging the true message of the gospel of Jesus. It must be stated clearly that Christian Nationalism is not a religion and is a distortion of both faith and civic life. It is harmful to both the church and the nation, as it promotes exclusion and fear rather than love, justice, and reconciliation.
- Justice, Equity, and Belonging: We continue to wrestle with the reality of historic and ongoing systems of oppression in this church that have caused deep harm particularly to communities of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, people with disabilities, and others whose identities do not conform to dominant norms.
- Other concerns and dynamics: Diminishing resources, aging of members, increased secularization of society, worship attendance, fatigue, depression and mental health concerns, the shortage of rostered ministers, and more.

All of these things – and more – are real and significant difficulties in this synod and in our world. It would be easy to be fearful, withdraw, or simply give up. And yet, we need to gather, have conversation, share with one another, see one another, and, above all things, trust that God’s Spirit is present and active, even in times of uncertainty. As we partner together, may we be a synod that is open to one another, learns from one another, and knows that God goes before us and with us. For together we are pieces of a quilt that are connected in God’s grace – bringing us courage and hope. Below are some of the ways we are being woven into each other’s stories and, most especially, God’s story.

Transition and Mobility

While most of our congregations in transition will call a new Rostered Minister, we are also exploring new ways of providing pastoral leadership and care due to a congregation’s lifecycle, geography, finances, and other factors. We are finding that more congregations are finding it difficult to call a full-time pastor. In these situations, we are working with congregations to find innovative ways for staffing and other considerations. This includes discussion about sustainability and vitality, property matters, partnering with other ELCA congregations, connecting with ecumenical full-communion partners, lay leadership, lifting up a Synod Authorized Lay Minister (SALM) for the community, and more. We encourage good and honest conversation – not just at transition time – but all times as we listen to the Spirit and what we are being stitched together towards where the Spirit is calling.

As we continue to discover, each congregation is unique, and we cannot have a “one style” approach for each transition. Therefore, we in the synod office are committed to continue to accompany, listen, and journey alongside congregations in transition as we pray and discern a congregation’s next faithful step.

Since the last synod assembly, we have filled eight congregation vacancies with ELCA rostered ministers and full communion partner ministers. Currently, we have eleven congregation vacancies. Please see the Secretary’s report for current transitions, calls, retirements, etc. We are thankful for the thoughtful work of Assistant to the Bishop Andy Yee along with transition pastors, care pastors, transition facilitators, transition teams, congregation councils, call committees, and congregations – as we navigate congregations in transition. Thank you!

*In congregations in transition, we are **woven into God’s story.***

Mergers

We are in the process of transforming two ministries in Renton - Roots of the Table and Luther's Table – into one Synod Authorized Outreach Ministry (SAOM). We are grateful for the discernment and partnership of the South King Cluster along with community members towards this renewed ministry. We are especially thankful for Nativity Lutheran Church, Renton, who contributed significantly from their property sale to Luther's Table in order to reinvigorate this ministry. Thank you to Director for Evangelical Mission Judy Brennan for her leadership and care. We are excited to welcome Deacon Bobbi Cyr and we trust that in this time the Spirit is leading us and guiding us towards new life and new hope – as we share the gospel of Jesus.

We are also excited that the two congregations of Cross and Crown Lutheran Church and Nativity Lutheran Church – both in Renton – have merged to become Living Hope Lutheran Church, Renton. We thank the two congregations for their faithful discernment, for their partnership, and for the leadership of Pastor Heidi Calhoun. It is exciting when two congregations share in ministry, envision a new future, and now, together, they are truly living hope through Christ.

New Union Congregation

In partnership with our siblings in the United Methodist Church, we celebrate the union congregation of United in Grace in Monroe. A number of years ago, Morning Star Lutheran Church and Monroe United Methodist Church began collaborating together – including sharing one pastor. After prayer, discernment, conversation, and vision, they are now ready to join together as a union congregation named United in Grace. Please celebrate this ecumenical partnership!

New Synod Authorized Worshiping Community (SAWC)

Love of Christ Lutheran Church is a Chinese speaking SAWC in Bellevue. This congregation meets at Cross of Christ Lutheran Church and is being led by mission developer Pastor Wendy Cheung. She is also mission developer for Community Grace Lutheran that meets at Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church. This ministry specializes in ministry to special needs children in the Chinese community and their families. We are so grateful to these ministries.

Cultivate / Fresh Expressions

There is a deep need for belonging in today's world of fragmentation, political divide, individualism, secularization, and more. To deepen relationships and foster a sense of belonging, many of our congregations and ministry sites are experimenting with Cultivate / Fresh Expressions. This is a movement to connect congregations with people who are not yet members of any church. From dinner church to wild church – from "messy" church to creative church – these offerings are for lay and rostered ministers to together explore how to live into our Lutheran faith traditions and discover other faithful ways of gathering. We are looking for every congregation to invest in Cultivate / Fresh Expressions as we move out of the walls of the church and into new ways of being church. If you find this intriguing, please know that there are grants available for different Cultivate / Fresh Expressions explorations.

Emerging and Strategic Ministries:

Through partnership grants with the ELCA Churchwide organization, the NWWA Synod supports a wide range of vibrant and strategic ministries. These grants fund strategic congregations, synod authorized worshiping communities and synod authorized outreach ministries, congregational outreach ministries, and synod collaboration/vitality ministries. The worshiping communities reflect the wide diversity in our region including Chinese, Korean, and Spanish speaking ministries as well as ministries focused on children, youth ministries, and those who have been unchurched or de-churched. Many of these communities center the experience of those who continue to be marginalized in this society including immigrants, the BIPOC community, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Several ministries are also exploring creative and adaptive ways of gathering, including reimagining how church buildings and spaces can serve the wider community. To learn more about these ministries, please go to the synod website or reach out to Judy Brennan, Director for Evangelical Mission.

We are thankful to Rev. Judy Brennan, Director for Evangelical Mission and Edward Moncivaiz, Associate Director for Evangelical Mission, mission developers, and all who are working in these areas. To learn more about these ministries, please go to the synod website or reach out to one of them.

Grants

Besides the grants we distribute in partnership with Churchwide, there are also synod specific grants that individuals and faith communities may apply for.

The current grants that we have in the synod are:

- Grants for Theological Debt
- Evangelical Outreach Grants
- Gloria Dei Endowment Fund
- Mission in Washington Endowment Fund

We are thankful for the individuals, current congregations, legacy congregations, and others who have participated in setting up these grants. Please go to the synod website for more information on these grants.

*In new, renewed, and reimagined ministries, we are **woven into God's story**.*

Faith Formation and Learning

The LiVE Project: Living into Vocational Engagement

The LiVE Project is celebrating its fourth birthday this year. The offerings of LiVE encourage, support, and challenge lay leaders and congregations across the synod to share in conversation, foster curiosity, and to be open to God's Spirit for life today. LiVE serves as an opportunity to create and connect leaders across the synod and beyond into a networked learning community as together they discover and deepen God's calling in their lives through retreats, online classes, readings, online resources, and more.

Some highlights from this past year:

- 27 Congregational Bundles (doubled since last year)
- 145 people registered for *Faith and Public Life* Zoom Course
- 69 people registered for the *Faith and Freedom* Retreat at Seattle First AME
- 30 Rostered Ministers met with Dr. Angela Parker for the *Breathing Womanist Air* education event
- 28 people attended the *Faithfully into God's Future* Property Retreat
- 81 people registered for the *Embracing Difference* Retreat
- 80 people registered for the Lenten Zoom course *Learning Love with bell hooks*
- 54 people attended the retreat *Healing Creation: Sacred Hope in Action*

LiVE also organized an 8-day Zoom *Synod-Wide Prayer Vigil* around the November 4 election. Every day there was time set aside for mutual prayer, reflection, and hope during a time of national anxiety and division. This eight-day vigil fostered connection, offered lay leaders opportunities to lead a synod event, and participants were invited to navigate a polarizing time with grace, love, and courage. We are thankful for our Strategic Team for Authentic Diversity for partnering with LiVE for this event.

Lay Ministry Formation

We are at the end of our second year of Lay Ministry Formation (LMF) and are excited that we have two active cohorts – nine participants are in their second year and six are in their first year. LMF is a two-year, four-module, cohort-based adult faith formation program that equips lay leaders for ministry. Through an integrated approach of theological education, spiritual formation, and practical leadership training, the program deepens leaders understanding of and participation in their own callings as leaders in their congregations and communities.

We are so thankful for the leadership of Rev. Dr. David Hahn, for the LiVE Team, and for the LiVE administrators. For more information on LiVE or Lay Ministry Formation, please go to the synod website or contact Rev. Dr. David Hahn, Director for Formation and Learning.

*Through faith formation and learning, we are **woven into God's story**.*

Paths to Vocational Ministry

Overview

The number of people interested in attending seminary continues to decline. While there is a slight uptick this year, it is still a low number. To be clear, this decline is not just in the ELCA but all denominations – from progressive to more conservative. Besides this reality, we also have ministry candidates who cannot afford or are unable to move to attend a seminary far from their home. So, as we live and adapt to this new reality, there are different paths being created for people who are interested in vocational ministry.

Candidacy

We are thankful for the candidates who are moving through the Candidacy process in formation and discernment to become deacons or pastors in this Church. It is not an easy road to become a rostered minister in the ELCA. It takes preparation, study, money, time, discernment, and more. We currently have twenty candidates who are in the process of becoming ordained through candidacy and seminary. It is interesting to note that most of our candidates are doing a combination of long-distance learning and “intensives” (one or two weeks on campus). This change in how candidates attend seminary also affects internships – as more people need internships close to home. As these students learn and grow, we ask for your prayers as they continue to be faithfully formed through the Holy Spirit.

We are also thankful for the NWWA Candidacy Committee who is walking alongside the candidates. In the last two years they have committed time and effort in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion by hiring a consultant to identify and improve the candidacy process for all candidates. They have also been incredibly adaptive to the change in landscape in our seminaries and the needs of the candidates. Co-Chairs Deacon Liz Colver and Pastor Erik Samuelson have provided wonderful leadership to this synod and to the larger church. We continue to invite our congregations to help identify potential public ministers among you. And we would love to have more congregations identified as potential internship sites.

SALM-Synod Authorized Lay Minister

As we look at our synod, we realize that there is a developing need for Bible-focused, thoughtful, and culturally relevant leaders to help with the pastoral needs in existing congregations – especially smaller and rural communities. We are now training lay people to do pastoral care and leadership in congregations that, for various reasons, are unable to have an ordained rostered minister.

I mentioned the Lay Ministry Formation cohort above. While not every LMF participant will become a SALM, some might feel called to this ministry. A SALM is a layperson who is authorized by the bishop to do pastoral ministry in a specific site. They are required to do the two years of LMF as well as continuing education and other obligations. If this interests you, or you think your congregation might want to look for a SALM, please contact the synod office for more information.

*Through different ways that God is calling us into vocations, **we are woven into God's story**.*

Partnering with One Another in the Synod and Beyond

Clusters

As mentioned above, we encourage individuals, and faith communities to work, partner, and be in conversation with one another. We especially encourage you to be active in your particular cluster. Many clusters already have text study groups and monthly gatherings for rostered ministers. Besides these gatherings, I also encourage other groups to gather: congregation presidents, treasurers, office managers,

youth, children, and more. In this time, it doesn't make sense to try and do all things alone. When we work together, a more expansive understanding of ministry occurs. One example of a cluster working more closely together is the East King Cluster. They are working on forming a "parish" model where congregations and rostered ministers are connecting in a myriad of ways. If this intrigues you, I encourage you to reach out to the East King Cluster or work on your own gatherings in your settings.

I will also mention here that because of congregational closures in past years and other factors, the deans – with the approval of the synod council – are proposing a new cluster configuration. The proposal is to reduce the number of clusters from eleven to ten and move some congregations from their current cluster to another cluster. The deans are also proposing changing the name "cluster" to "conference." You will see this action during the synod assembly. As one pastor said when I approached him regarding his congregation moving to another cluster, he said, "I see this as a necessary renewal of our cherished bond."

Organizing for Mission Network for DEIB Work

The synod is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, and deep belonging. You might remember that initially we contracted with a different group, and we started an audit of the systems and structures throughout the synod. Unfortunately, this group did not meet the needs or desires of the synod. Therefore, we have now contracted with ELCA's *Organizing for Mission Network* with Brother Steve Jerbi. Please know that this is not fast work. This work is built on accountability, deep reflecting, listening, learning, acting and reflecting again. Led by the synod council along with other key leadership, we have now formed an equity team that is currently having conversations with different lay leaders in the synod and partner organizations. This is not a "one workshop and all is good" type of model. Instead, this process, developed by Leaven Community and the Church Council of Greater Seattle, is shaped by BIPOC and LGBTQ+ leaders and is intentional in creating a generative pattern for engaging in the work of diversity, equity, inclusiveness, and belonging. While we are disappointed that the process of this audit has taken longer than we wanted it to, we are grateful for the work and anticipating deeper equity and belonging. We trust that as we do this work, the Holy Spirit continues to form us into a synod with authentic diversity, relationship building, and systemic change.

Ecumenical Relationships

Hearing the calling to be even more inter-connected in partnerships beyond the ELCA, the NWWA Synod is experimenting and partnering with our full-communion siblings in Christ ([find a full list of full-communion partners here](#)). We have partnerships that are being fostered in the Skagit Valley and in Maple Valley as well as longer-standing relationships in Seattle, Monroe, and other places around the synod. During this last year, we have worked across denominations and now have pastors serving ELCA congregations who come from the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church USA. We are enriched by these gifted pastors.

Besides these partnerships and pastors, as bishop I am committed to being in ecumenical and interreligious spaces throughout the Northwest. I am thankful that there seems to be a deeper sense of connection among the different judicatories as we navigate this time in our world. We have shared in joint statements, had deep conversation, and are committed to fostering our relationships as we go forward. I am proud that the ELCA has the most full-communion partners within the Christian expression, and I am grateful for the commitment we have made as we work within our values with other expressions of Christianity and faith in this world.

Companion Synod: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia

Along with Pastor Hector Garfias-Toledo and Ms. Mary Muller, I was delighted to travel to Novi Sad, Serbia to meet with our brothers in Christ from our companion synod: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia (ELCR). I invite you to watch the video during the synod assembly where you will see pictures from our meeting. Also, during synod assembly, there will be a resolution asking the NWWA Synod to re-commit to our relationship with the ELCER. As is mentioned in the video, there is much discrimination against Lutherans in Russia. They are looked at as being "enemies" and as "other" because they are not Orthodox. We want to continue to pray

for and partner with our siblings in Christ. If you wish to join the Russian team in our synod, please visit the synod website for further information.

There are so many vital committees, task forces, ministry partners and more that I do not have the space to name but are vital as we share in the gospel of Jesus. Please visit the different ministry tables at the synod assembly. I invite you to take time to visit with them, learn about their ministry, and explore ways you and your congregation might connect more deeply. Together we are the Body of Christ.

Properties

God calls us to be faithful stewards of the land we have inherited, recognizing that we have received both a gift and a responsibility. As we reflect on the generosity and vision of past generations, we are invited to care for our properties in ways that reflect the heart of the gospel. Property is not simply an asset (or a burden) but is a place of gathering and a way for ministry to happen. Since becoming bishop, I have discovered that faithful conversations about property are a meaningful expression of our values and theology. These conversations often reveal both our fears and our hopes. I invite these conversations to be shared not only with congregations, but also with cluster partners and synod partners. When we can discern together, we can see how land can best be used now and into the future – seeking not to preserve for the sake of preservation and not to sell without careful reflection. For these assets are something to steward with great care, remembering those who came before and those who will come after.

In the NWWA Synod, one of our core values is to acknowledge that the land we occupy is the traditional and ancestral territory of many Indigenous tribes. With this in mind and recognizing that the synod office is located on Duwamish land, we have budgeted a dedicated line item in our synod budget to contribute to Real Rent Duwamish. This is a small but meaningful act of recognition, and we hope signals our continued commitment to truth-telling, justice, and an ongoing relationship with the original stewards of this land.

Synod Owned Property:

- 7400 Woodlawn-Seattle: The ministry site is home to Emmaus Table and several community groups.
- Luther's Table-Renton: As mentioned above, this site is being renewed as a Synod Authorized Outreach Ministry. The property is one of two ground floor condominium units in a building that provides affordable housing for veterans.
- Columbia City Church of Hope-Seattle: In a process that Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Seattle began in 2010, El Centro de la Raza built a church facility as part of the Four Amigos - Beloved Community affordable housing development. El Centro recently deeded the church condominium unit to the Synod, in shell condition. Columbia City Church of Hope and the synod are finalizing plans for interior build-out. We anticipate that Columbia City Church of Hope will move into the space in mid-2026.
- Shepherd of the Hills-Concrete: Last year we announced that we were gifting this property to the Skagit Tribe. Unfortunately, this did not occur and so we are currently looking for other buyers or options.
- Hope Church-Lake Stevens: Upon its dissolution, Holy Cross Lutheran Church of Everett gifted its real estate to the Synod. The Synod leased the facility to Hope Church, which became an ELCA congregation. The lease between the Synod and Holy Cross provides for the Synod to donate the facility to Hope Church in 2028.

As we navigate property issues, we are grateful to Director of Properties Jay Edgerton and the property task force group – as well as working with ecumenical and interfaith partners in how best to steward the land. If you have property matters in your congregation, I encourage you to reach out to Jay and also to read [this statement](#) passed by the NWWA Synod Council in 2023.

*As we partner together in big and small ways, in justice and in connection, in our values of diversity and belonging, **we are woven into God's story.***

Mission Support

Thank you for your generosity. In the synod office, we continue to be grateful for last year's synod assembly when the voting members voted to raise the salaries of the synod staff to guidelines. We also are grateful for your faithful mission support. The mission support that you give to the synod supports our many ministries, begins new ministries, helps congregations in transition, works with candidates, allows us to be with congregations in joyful and difficult circumstances, and connects us with one another in big and small ways. Your mission support means that we are able to be Church together locally and throughout the world.

*As we financially support the mission of the church and God's mission in the world, **we are woven into God's story.***

Other Things of Interest and Work that Occurs in the Office of the Bishop

I am blessed to work with many ecumenical judicatories and interfaith leaders. We continue to work together in a variety of ways as I mentioned above. I am encouraged by the passion and the advocacy from so many of my colleagues as we work together.

I seek to be a public presence and voice throughout the synod and beyond by attending public events, meetings, rallies, and more.

I serve on several committees and task forces within the synod and am so thankful for the other volunteers on these committees and task forces.

I serve on several boards and committees including PLU Board of Regents, the Luther Seminary Board, Lutheran World Relief, Middle East Ready Bench, and Immigration Ready Bench.

I partner with my bishop colleagues in Region One and the Conference of Bishops. We learn from one another, have mutual consolation with one another, sometimes argue with one another, and we work towards being faithful in our callings. I am glad of the collegiality and the care that we have for one another. I am thankful that we are being a more public voice as we work together drafting letters and public statements.

I visit many congregations and faith communities where we gather for worship, installations, anniversaries, ordinations, closures, difficult conversations, and so much more. I sit with many rostered ministers as they discern, seek guidance, laugh, cry, struggle, and more. I am grateful for the trust that you place in me and in the synod staff as we work collaboratively and in partnership with you. I am truly thankful for you all – lay leaders, rostered ministers, and ministry partners.

Thank you

I am so grateful for the individuals that I have the pleasure and joy of working with daily. I am so thankful for their dedication, hard work, joy, faithfulness, and care:

Staff:

Rev. Andy Yee, Assistant to the Bishop

Rev. Dr. David Hahn, Director of Formation and Learning

Rev. Judy Brennan, Director for Evangelical Mission

Susan Berg, Director of Communications and Events

Tabetha Myatt, Synod Administrator

Contract employees:

Jay Edgerton, Director of Properties

Edward Moncivaiz, Assistant DEM

Laurel Allan, LiVE Administrative Assistant

Antionietta Breitenfeldt, LiVE Administrative Assistant

We thank Mandy Neill, LiVE Administrative Assistant, who recently resigned from this position to pursue other avenues. We are grateful for her work and ministry.

Thank you to Vice President Kay Edgerton and the members of the NWWA Synod Council for their thoughtful reflection and discernment.

Thank you to the Deans of all of the Clusters – for their willingness to gather, to provide care and collegiality, for their wisdom and for their theological deliberation.

Thank you to all who serve on NWWA Synod committees, task forces, and in so many other places where there is need.

In Conclusion

As I look at our world, our communities of faith, and our Church, I close with this:

In this fraught time, I urge us to invest in relationship building, to listen deeply and compassionately, and to recognize the complexity and depth of every person's story. Above all things, I encourage communities to engage in scripture together, learn from one another, and reflect on the ELCA's social statements as tools for dialogue and discernment.

As Lutheran Christians, we are grounded in the belief that salvation comes by grace alone and by faith alone – not through power or nation. As Lutheran Christians, we always point towards the cross – where God meets us in humility, suffering, and mercy. We are called to serve the neighbor, uplift the marginalized, and bear witness to Christ's love in a broken world. This is our foremost identity and our calling.

May we remember always that we - and all people - are made in the image of God. Because each of us is beautifully and wonderfully created, because we are all saved by grace through faith, there is no room for exclusion of people based on race, immigration status, neurodiversity, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical disability, socio-economic status or any other "otherings." No. We are called to be a community where we practice love, where we have authentic belonging, and where every person is embraced as a beloved child of God.

I encourage you all to love and care for one another – lay leaders and rostered ministers. There is a lot happening in this world and sometimes when stress or exhaustion or fear are prominent, it is difficult to be at one's best. While these emotions are valid, I also encourage that you listen to one another, hold space for one another, and find places where you can rest and breathe.

As you know, the theme for this year's synod assembly is Woven into God's Story. Just as individual pieces of fabric – each unique in color and texture – are sewn together to form a unified whole, so our lives, joined in Christ, become part of a larger divine design. Sometimes the stitches aren't straight, sometimes the fabric is stained, and sometimes the threads begin to fray. Yet, in God's hands, even the imperfect pieces are stitched together with grace, forming something beautiful. In a world that often feels fragmented, we are called together in Christ, to be a place of hope and connection. May we rejoice in God's story, may we be swept up in the Spirit, and may we always be woven together in Christ – clothed in Christ – knowing we are beloved children of God.

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee