



**Report of the Assistant to the Bishop and
Director for Evangelical Mission
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It has been a smooth transition and a real privilege as I have been called to serve in the Northeastern Minnesota Synod. My husband and I moved north of Two Harbors in mid-November. Since then, I have been pleasantly surprised by the immediate warm welcome and invitations to join congregations in worship in addition to facilitating conversations about mission planning, stewardship, area ministry strategies and congregational renewal. I have had the opportunity to attend conference meetings and most conference assemblies as I become further acquainted with the synod congregations and leaders. I am excited to be working with a terrific synod staff and with such a dedicated and encouraging synod bishop, Thomas Aitken. Thank you for the opportunity to be a partner with all of you in the work we share in making the good news of Jesus Christ known in our synod's communities and across the world.

While my work focuses on the congregations and leaders of our synod, my call is actually shared between the Northeastern Minnesota Synod (1/4 time) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (3/4 time). This partnership is a way for us to understand and experience the interdependent nature of who we are as a church body working together for the sake of Christ.

Directly accountable to Bishop Aitken, I am called to focus on the responsibilities of new and vital congregations, renewal ministries, mission planning, stewardship and mission support, as well as evangelical leadership, which includes overseeing the candidacy process.

Mission Planning

I have enjoyed getting to know several congregations while facilitating retreats and workshops using the document that Pastor John Dietz developed, *The Mission We Share*. This document is available for download on our synod's website and numerous copies have been

distributed at synod and conference gatherings. It is a wonderful tool to utilize as a guide when asking how God is continuing to lead and encourage congregations into the future. Our synod has set the goal of having every congregation be at least on the path of developing a mission plan by October 31, 2017. I am available to assist, facilitate, guide and encourage those who would like to develop a new plan or tweak an existing mission plan.

New and Vital Congregations

Although most of the 136 congregations of our synod are more likely to engage in ways to energize existing ministries, we ought to always be on the lookout to see how God might be stirring up something new around us. It is my hope that congregations become keenly aware of who their neighbors are and where relationships might need to be established or rekindled – who are the newcomers and who are neighbors yet unknown with whom we might share the love of Christ? That might very well be an entry point into a new or emerging ministry. I am particularly excited about a new Ministry of Imagination, where visionary leaders from around the synod are committed to dream around questions of where God might be leading us to start creative “out of the box” ministry experiments. Likewise, a key element to revitalizing existing ministries might be to look at relationships with nearby ELCA or ecumenical ministry partners to discuss creative ways for shared ministry and cooperative work together. Currently, multiple conversations are occurring across the synod where congregations are engaged in the faithful work of asking what we could do better together that none of us can do on our own. Area Ministry Strategies are a way to put ideas to paper, and I stand ready to discuss possibilities with those who are bold enough to take some risks. This fall, five of our congregations have taken the courageous step to consolidate ministries and

begin something new by becoming one with neighboring congregations. I suspect that others may soon think about doing similar paths to renewal.

Another way for congregations to renew existing ministries is by focusing on vitality. The ELCA has developed a Congregational Vitality Survey as a way to measure well-being that goes beyond membership growth and financial sustainability. At a nominal cost, congregations can find out how they're doing with targeted questions that get at markers of vitality – where does the congregation excel – what are its strengths and challenges - where could it do better. Information gleaned is used to share wisdom with other congregations throughout the ELCA and resources can be better focused where they are needed most, impacting a congregation's effectiveness. I'm happy to discuss taking this survey as part of a transformational process within any congregation.

Stewardship and Mission Support

I enjoy providing encouragement and support to congregations who are committed to generating a spirit of generosity within their setting. It also excites me to think of stewardship as more than financial giving – but as a way of living a caring, thankful and generous life. In early January, I was part of a panel of “practioners” who were in conversation with senior seminary students at Wartburg Theological Seminary regarding the stewardship practices of leaders and congregations. This opportunity leaves me with confidence that our church is in good hands in the future. We all want to know that our efforts in stewardship makes a difference - and I know that Bishop Aitken and your synod staff will continue to host mission support consultations around the synod as a way to heighten awareness of how our mission support dollars are used for effective ministry across the church. Our Mission Interpretation ministry is also a key way for congregations to understand the work we do together in Jesus' name. Trained Mission Interpreters are ready to present, teach and share how we are personally connected to mission and ministry in our common contexts and around the world, as well as give good insight into where our offerings go.

Evangelical Leadership

We have a strong synodical Candidacy Committee who shares their support and oversight to over 20 students actively in the formation process and willing to serve this church either in Word and Sacrament or Word and Service ministry. In January, we continued the tradition of hosting a combined retreat for first call rostered leaders (those in their first 3 years of ministry) and candidates. We met at Camp Onomia for fellowship, mutual encouragement and education around family systems theory. The Candidacy Committee is hoping to develop creative ways to continue to encourage future leaders to answer God's call to service in this church. Please encourage leaders you know too!

