



*You crown the year with your goodness, and your paths overflow with plenty.
Psalm 65:11 (ELW)*

The year 2023 brought us again to in-person worship and events after the long disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. What we did not do as a synod was to return to everything as it had been before. Recognizing that God always calls us forward into a new future, congregations discovered myriad ways to build on the lessons and new practices learned during the pandemic. Likewise, the synod embraced new ways of doing familiar things and experimented with new ideas and programs.

Here are some highlights of the investment of time and energy by the synod office during 2023. All these are made possible because of the generous financial support that passes from congregations to the synod. Thank you for helping us be a church together as we all find ways to be faithful to our callings in a changing and complex world.

An undeniable highlight was the presentation of a check for \$1,000,000 to Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota during Synod Assembly last May. The check is for renovations to a building that will house the Families Together East Side Preschool on the lower level of Grace Lutheran Church in St. Paul. This partnership is one of the pillars of The Planting Hope Campaign, which has raised \$1,473,861 to date at the end of December 2023. This is one half of our overall campaign goal.

In addition to this transformational work with LSS-MN, in 2023 we also launched the first summer of paid internships, funded through The Planting Hope Campaign. From June through August, nine young adults served in a variety of congregations and Lutheran agencies. We are grateful for the work of Pastor Bristol Reading (St. Luke, St. Paul) in overseeing this project. Also, we gave significant financial support to congregational vitality through the campaign. Those investments are detailed later in this report.

Alongside the work of The Planting Hope Campaign, congregations like yours continue to contribute toward our budget of \$1,885,000 in mission support. Fiscal Year 2023 ends on January 31, 2024 and we hope to be at the goal by then. Again, thank you for seeing how your congregation's work is supported and expanded through our common funding of synod and ELCA churchwide ministries. Despite needing to navigate new realities in a post-pandemic world, God continues to crown our efforts with God's abundance. The synod's financial work is guided by David Roinas.

During 2023 there were 28 persons in the candidacy process, preparing to serve the wider church as pastors or deacons. Currently, 22 persons are serving their first call in the Saint Paul Area Synod. They also participate in a structured program of First Call Theological Education (FCTE). Both candidacy work and FCTE are led by Deacon Krista Lind. This past year two candidates received calls in other synods. As you might imagine, this work is important for the church today and for the church in the coming years.

Candidates ordained in 2023 include Pastor Jennifer Luong, Pastor Jua Jay Her, Pastor Carrie Stiles, Pastor Amy Vigesaa, Pastor Reed Fowler, Deacon Katherine Lindberg. We also received Pastor Stanley Ayashim, recently ordained in the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, as a first call pastor through our partnership with the Lutheran World Federation. We welcome these seven new rostered ministers.

In addition to first call candidates, the synod staff works with call committees in more than two dozen congregations each year. In addition, the call manual was revised this past year and new protocols were developed to assist congregations to be open and ready to receive candidates who are persons of color or from the LGBTQIA community. As a synod, we know how important the gifts of all leaders are to the work of God's church.

During times of transition, the synod finds pastors and deacons to serve in interim roles. Those serving in interim ministry meet monthly for prayer, mutual support and learning and are directed by Rolf Lowenberg-DeBoer. With Rachel Holsten, front office administrator and registrar, Rolf coordinated the Tool Kit for Congregational Leaders in February, which brought together 165 participants from 52 congregations. The two most attended workshops addressed issues of racism and implicit bias, issues which matter to all of us in this synod. In 2023, the synod also inaugurated the Deeper Dive series, a Zoom gathering for presidents and vice presidents. Twenty-four congregations participated in this inaugural series of monthly leadership training and support.

The synod also provides other initiatives to address congregational vitality. These workshops, which include Tools for the Church, Spiritual Gifts, Stewardship for All Seasons, Building a Culture of Generosity, and Liberating Structures, are led by Pastor Justin Grimm and members of the vitality team. In 2023, participants numbered more than 300.

Serving as mission developers and redevelopers during 2023 were Pastor Liz Eide, Lutheran Church of Peace; Pastor Jon Yurk, Christ the Servant; Pastor Thomas Tsen, Minnesota Faith Chinese; Pastor Dale Stiles, St. Paul in Wyoming; Pastor William Siong and Pastor Jua Jay Her at Eternal Flame; Pastor Gilo Agwa, Foundation of Life; Pastor Jodi Houge, Humble Walk; Deacon Kari Olson, Shobi's Table; and Pastor Ana Becerra, Cristo Rey. Pastors Ben and Kristen Eisele (Farmington Lutheran) completed an exploration for mission possibilities in Rosemount. When asked what is new (or renewed) in this synod, it's easy to see fresh ideas in all these settings.

During 2023 church groups were again able to travel to our partner churches in Guatemala and Tanzania. Five congregational groups were hosted by the Iglesia Luterana Agustina de Guatemala (ILAG). Two members of the Guatemala Committee, Janet Metcalfe and Jennifer Reinhardt, participated in an ELCA Global Mission international consultation in November. In 2023, 200 individuals from 16 congregations, nine affiliate organizations and two colleges traveled to the Iringa Diocese. As bishop, I was also thankful to be with our partners in Tanzania this past November.

The generosity of members of the synod supports our global companions with scholarships, emergency aid, congregation-to-congregation partnerships, and through prayer. Staff members Kirsten Levorson and Susan Seidel oversee the work of Bega Kwa Bega, which we undertake with our siblings in Tanzania.

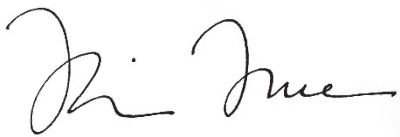
A grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. allowed additional opportunities for pastors to be well equipped for today's challenges. Synod pastors of color and the synod program staff participated in a facilitated retreat in Sedona, Ariz., in February. In addition, this past year 19 pastors, deacons, mentors, and a facilitator were a part of the Second Act cohort for rostered ministers in their fourth through tenth years of service. Our Lilly grant programs are directed by Leslie Ortiz.

Behind the scenes, Mary Smith oversaw the launch of our new website (spas-elca.org), along with 51 editions of the weekly *News and Events* newsletter, 40 companion synod newsletters, 300 social media posts, and other essential communication from the synod. (You can sign up to receive our newsletters at spas-elca.org/subscribe-to-synod-news.)

With all this creative work of the synod staff, you may wonder what the bishop does. As bishop, I work on governance with the Synod Council and Executive Committee, as well as meeting with the finance committee. I ordain new pastors and deacons and preach regularly (29 times in congregations, synod and churchwide events in 2023). I help plan the Bishop's Theological Conference and gatherings of the ministerium. I represent the synod on institutional boards and at ecumenical and inter-religious gatherings. I am a member of the Conference of Bishops and through 2023 served as a liaison bishop on the ELCA Church Council, as well as co-chairing the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue. I work with congregations in times of conflict and oversee the discipline of rostered ministers, when needed. Best of all, I serve as a pastor for the pastors and deacons in this synod, meeting regularly with individual leaders.

If you have visited the synod office, you know that we are not a large-scale operation; but if you think about the range of ministry we do together in this synod, you know our collective impact is mighty. We can do so much because of the dedicated talent of the individuals on the synod staff. I am grateful for all that Rachel, Mary, David, Kirsten, Susan, Rolf, Justin, Krista and Leslie have accomplished this past year. I am also grateful for the work Ryan and Astine Bose did in the first half of the year as our short-term volunteers in Iringa. I hope you will join me in thanking the synod staff when you see or speak to them.

Yours in God's service,



Bishop Patricia Lull



105 University Avenue West, St. Paul MN 55103
651-224-4313 | www.spas-elca.org