



## **Bishop's Report to the Oregon Synod Assembly 2020**



*Let your gentleness be evident to all. Our God is near.  
And do not be anxious, but in all situations by prayer and petition  
with thanksgiving, present your hearts' requests to God.  
And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 4:5-7*

Dear Partners in Ministry,

These words of hope and encouragement from Paul's letter to the Philippians were some of my Presbyterian grandfather's favorites. Though he'd lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918, the Great Depression, and World War II, he remained a gentle, faithful and generous man all his life. Grandpa Baldwin's thoughtful, kind ways modeled much of the Christian life for my younger sister and me. I have tried to lean into his example as I've transitioned into this office, worked with Greg Shea our new Oregon Synod Vice President, called a talented new staff, listened to you through a whirlwind tour, Zoom events and ongoing conversations, and learned the basics of the immense calling to serve as your bishop.

Paul's instructions are words for all of us now, as we wade through the pain and loss of 2020. And there is much loss.

In all situations, but especially in these days of collective and individual trauma, Paul invites us to remember that our God is near. I've seen that in you. You have responded with tremendous grace, adapting quickly to: loving the neighbor through physically distancing and masks, worshipping exclusively online, leaning into intentional learnings and actions on racism and genocide in our state and nation, opening your hearts, buildings, wallets and parking lots to those displaced by fires, offering the sweet kindness of weekly phone calls or letters to those most isolated, continuing in generosity through creative acts of giving, deepened connections with ecumenical and interfaith neighbors, and so much more.

As a synod, we are blessed and we are blessing! We are 119 congregations and mission starts of the synod, weaving our lives together through worship, bible study, relationship, learning, service, leadership development, advocacy, protest, prayer and more.

As our Synod Horizon Statement tells us:

***Moved by the Mystery of Love, we are, and are becoming, a wild web of relationship, a communion of communities and cultures walking into life as we seek the life of the world together, trusting in the liberating Spirit Jesus brings.***

This past year, despite the challenges of an unprecedented pandemic which, overnight, completely reconfigured how we gather, worship, prayer, study and accompany God's beloved world, our financial support from you and congregations like yours continued with faithfulness and generosity. Thanks to you, synod mission support from congregations is down only \$13,000. I am also inspired by our capacity to maintain relationship. Despite a general dawning awareness of structural racism and a painfully polarized electoral season, we continued to dialogue with one another and our neighbors with integrity and respect. In fact, as a synod, clusters and congregations we have engaged in brand new and often difficult conversations around the history of racism in Oregon, the political responsibility of the church, climate change and its relationship to wildfire and pandemics, unfolding ecumenical partnership opportunities, disaster preparedness and how it connects to congregational vitality and so much more.

American Christianity is changing rapidly, as you all know, hastened by the pandemic. Statistically fewer people are finding their way to institutional religion of any kind. Yet, when has community, prayer and hope been more important? Because of you and your engaged and life-giving Christianity, the Oregon Synod installed eleven new deacons and pastors, and ordained five. These new rostered leaders include: Pr. Jessica Putland, pastor at St. Matthew Lutheran in Portland; Pr. Weston Walker, pastor at Grace and Mercy, Hermiston; Pr. Matta Ghaly, pastor at Mt. Carmel in Portland and mission developer at The Flame in Portland; Pr. Patti Welch, senior pastor at St. Luke, Portland; Pr. Manuel Borbon, pastor at Immanuel Lutheran, Silverton and mission developer for mid-Willamette Valley Latino Ministry; Deacon Bonnie Beadles-Bohling, deacon at Central, Portland; Pr. Eric Dull, pastor at United in Eugene; Pr. Sarah Schaffner, pastor at Our Savior's Lebanon; and Pr. Remy Remmers, pastor at Our Savior's in Prineville. We also birthed a new mission start: Storyline in SE Portland, installing its two new leaders for the work of innovative and locally engaged spirituality - Pr. Sara Gross Samuelson and Anna Hoesely of the United Methodist Church.

The vocation of each of these new leaders grew through years of nurture and spiritual formation in congregations like yours. They heard and followed a call to leadership within a campus ministry or congregational context, to college and other paths and eventually to seminary. In the past year, despite the challenges of COVID, the synod has walked with 22 candidates as they prepare to serve as rostered ministers. Currently our candidates are attending 7 different seminaries with the greatest number at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota and Claremont School of Theology now relocated to Salem, Oregon.

Earlier this year, Together Lab of the Oregon Synod applied for and was one of very few national institutions awarded a \$1,000,000 Thriving Congregations Grant from the Lilly Endowment. Pr. Ron Werner has shepherded the application and will be holding the sacred space for this five-year grant, which will help resource our continuing work with innovation and vitality, especially around cultivating leader-full ministries, expanding grassroots learning communities like Spiritual & Theological Mutual Accompaniment, and deepening collaborations that link the work of developing thriving congregations with the work of developing thriving communities. This all happens alongside both ecumenical and movement partners like IMIrJ (Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice), EMO (Ecumenical

Ministries of Oregon), and the Leaven Land & Housing Coalition. You will hear more about emerging cohorts around the state for ordained and lay leaders as we work together in 2021.

This year the Oregon Synod held its first “Online Synod Day of Learning,” where more than 100 Lutherans and friends from all over the Pacific NW joined together to worship, learn and grow. We discussed adaptive leadership, sacramental organizing, disaster preparedness, congregational vitality, social justice, renunciation of the colonial and inhumane Doctrine of Discovery, COVID and racial inequity in our health care systems, our ELCA statements on race, authentic diversity and White Supremacy and more. We helped lead a first-ever ELCA, UMC and PC-USA Ecumenical Partnership Workshop, with dozens of congregations joining to explore the power of collaboration for the sake of the gospel and congregational mission and vitality. And we continued to meet weekly as a rostered ministerium in Oregon for prayer, discernment, learning, relationship and encouragement in these challenging times. Together we are truly building a “wild web of relationship” grounded in God’s liberating grace. Holy Spirit is thickening those filaments of trust, respect and love between us, and is preparing all of us to move into the future together, stronger and more empowered to be and build God’s Beloved Community. As we move, we will step firmly on these six stepping stones:

1. **Scripture and Spiritual Practice** - All team meetings, congregational gatherings, educational ventures and shared actions begin with spiritual grounding. Leaders are rooted in the life-giving stories and symbols of their spiritual ancestors.
2. **Shared Power and Respect** - Gone are the days of clericalism: a deacon or pastor with all the answers or power. Collaboration is central to our work at every level and all people, lay and ordained, are recognized as part of our collective genius and the priesthood of all believers.
3. **Sustainability** - Our collective work aims to be thoughtful and durable, not oriented to quick fixes. Ecologically, financially, emotionally, physically and spiritually we do not “use up” what has been given to us: our earth, our financial resources, our pastors and deacons, our emotional energy or our spiritual capacity. Instead we think strategically for the long run, seeking to serve not only the living but also the not-yet-born seventh generation.
4. **Story** - Our mission and horizon are rooted in the depths of our authentic stories, and we listen for the ways God’s empowering story moves within our own lived story, our neighbors’ stories and our collective stories. Acting out of the ache, hope and truth of our lives, we seek to build a wild web of relationship, rooted in God’s justice and peace.
5. **Siblings** - We seek deep connection not only with other Lutheran leaders, but with Christians of every faith tradition, partners of other faiths and people who claim no faith tradition at all. We know with healthy humility that we have much to learn and much to share.
6. **Shameless, Fearless Innovation** - We experiment, collaborate, dream dreams and see visions. For the sake of courageous love, we try new things, dare to make mistakes, learn as we go, and walk in that ancient monastic tradition of falling down and getting up again.

You will also hear more this coming year from our three “Synod Tables” -

- **A Courageous Stewardship Table**
- **A Spiritual and Theological Education Table**

- **An Ecology of Innovation and Vitality Table**

In this first year our challenge has been to populate the tables and begin to discern and engage the work. Each table is charged with holding a crucial aspect of “Walking into Courageous Love,” our theme for the next few years based on Deuteronomy 31:6. In addition to defining and developing a Theme, Horizon Statement, Stepping Stones and Core Values for the Oregon Synod, we are eager to share with you our hope for deepening connections, liberating love and emboldened action. If you were not one of the many congregations that invited a synod staff member to preach in 2020, please do so in 2021. We are excited to share with you God’s Word as we hear it unfolding all around us in Oregon.

As we move into 2021, I am grateful for the work and witness of your congregation, campus ministry, social ministry or mission start! Thank you for being bearers of gentleness, grace, prayer, trust and bold action for the sake of love. I am so grateful for the ways you have welcomed me as your new bishop, and so grateful for the ways you witness well beyond the ELCA and in the wider neighborhood and world. As I walked into this office, the groundwork was set for life, vision and incredible spiritual health in the Oregon Synod and I thank all the deacons and pastors and lay leaders of Oregon who have gone before us for that, especially Bishops Paul Swanson and David Brauer-Rieke. I have also to thank the incredible Oregon Synod staff who have put in tremendous labor of body, heart and mind this year: Juan Carlos La Puente, Bishop’s Associate, Pr. Melissa Reed, Bishop’s Associate, Jemae McCanna, Synod Administrator, Sarah Strausbaugh, Synod Communications Officer, Deacon Laura Gifford, former Candidacy Coordinator, Deacon Bonnie Beadles-Bohling, former Transformational Leadership Initiative Coordinator, and Katy Rustvold, former Synod Grant Coordinator. What a joy it is to serve you in the Oregon Synod.

Yours in God’s service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laurie L. Caesar". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Yours in God's service,".

Bishop Laurie Larson Caesar