



## *Our Voice. Your Voice.*

*Gail Kiyomura, Synod Vice President*

We are discerning our new bishop through prayer and the amplification of our synod's voice.

This is

*Our voice.*

*Your voice.*

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African Descent

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Conference

Summaries

The core team had the honor of listening to many of you through our conference gatherings and specific focus groups. Each listening session contained words that resounded over and over again:

- ⊕ Resilience - Creativity
- ⊕ Technology - Online worship— Zoom, Facebook/YouTube
- ⊕ Church is beyond four walls and hybrid church - Connected and outreach
- ⊕ People attending church beyond our doors - overcome physical distance
- ⊕ Strength in lay leadership
- ⊕ Serving our neighbor; be a center for the community
- ⊕ Sharing ministries and resources

### Words that humbled us:

Loss of being with people and human touch

Survival of small congregations

Youth/Young adult - the loss of the year impacted them more than any other group

Better identity of the synod - the word “mystery” was used when talking about the synod

### Words that made us think:

- ⊕ Diversity and an aging congregation
- ⊕ Social justice – make it a verb
- ⊕ Taskforces for diversity areas – keep the focus
- ⊕ Healing
- ⊕ *Unless you are actually invited, you don't know if you are actually welcome.*

### Words for our next Bishop:

Bishop centered in the Gospel; an open and listening ear; vision; boldly speak on matters of justice  
Take risks

### Words for our whole synod:

Not going back but moving forward; embrace our new creativity

Each congregation, from its pastor to its youngest congregation member, has the ability to nurture and grow our church. Even when a pandemic closed our physical doors, God made us get out of our “pity party” and showed us how church could be done.

It is our resilience, creativity, outreach, and love which is the foundation of our church – we are still here and God is now telling us “keep moving forward, don't look back.”



*A prayer for our synod – Thank you Terry Knaus for your beautiful words.*

Almighty God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

We ask your blessing upon the high desert, the rugged mountains, the broad and fertile valley, the bustling cities, and the wave-swept shore, this little bit of your creation that we call northern California and northern Nevada.

Bless all the congregations from those in small rural places to those in large cities and all of them in between. Sustain us in this time when we are apart physically that we may remain united by your spirit. Send the Holy Spirit among us that, even in the dark winter of the pandemic, we may discern the new thing that you are creating.

In Jesus' name. Amen

### *African Descent by AJ Alan Gaston*

This focus group was a good mix of longevity and young vision. The amount of information and sharing in this group was amazing. This group took a little time to get going but once the momentum got going, it was amazing to be a part of. There was focus on innovation, change, diversity, and inclusiveness. The key focuses that stand out are:

- ⊕ We want to see a synod that continues to embrace technology and its ability to strengthen the community.
- ⊕ We would like to see the leadership on the synod visually be more diverse and reflective of the diversity the Synod says they want to be.
- ⊕ We would also like to see a council or committee of African Descent pastors who meet and regularly share their experiences and issues in their churches and communities.

**Call to Action:** Director of Diversity or Committee.



The next bishop should focus on a true plan to build and grow the African Descent churches and their smaller congregations. The new bishop should meet with the African Descent congregations or council of pastors to hear from the community. The bishop and synod should stand up for change and continue moving forward while the fire and need for change is still hot.

### *Asian Descent by Amanda Briggs*

During the pandemic, congregations have pivoted to bringing church to people and forming partnerships with other congregations, both ELCA and non-ELCA. For example, Grace Lao has been working with St. Paul Thai in Chicago to participate in non-English worship Services.

**Call to Action for Anti-Racism:** Beyond the pandemic, there is hope that the ELCA can take seriously the call to action around racism. There is also recognition that racism will not be dismantled in our lifetime, so as we take action, we cannot be driven by financials or the success of the ELCA as an institution.

Networks allow the formation of a larger Asian community, as there are usually only two or three members of each congregation that identify as Asian. The larger Asian community can discuss shared experiences without perpetuating the idea that the Asian community is a monolith of identity or experience. There was also a request for a continuation of time and space to build the community.



The next bishop should be open-minded about change and willing to learn about racism and the Asian communities.

The pandemic forced congregations to use technology to continue worship, Bible study, VBS, and choir. Various internet sites (Facebook live stream, YouTube, and Zoom) were used to continue these activities. Technology grants helped the recipients reach more people. Outreach to congregational members (with masks and social distancing) included visits by youth to help with technology and delivery of Mother's Day flowers and communion packets. Some held drive-up worship services. Outreach to the community included providing sanctuary, advocacy, aid (money, masks, food, information, and vaccines) to migrant farm workers and members of the Latinx community.

Hopes for beyond the pandemic include continuation of digital worship along with in-person worship, after-service fellowship with personal physical contact, advocacy, as well as continuing and building community connections.

**Call to Action for support and networks:** Being part of the synod allows congregations and their members to learn from each other through sharing information, and new ideas, to support each other, build mutual connections between the synod and congregations, and learn and accept different cultures. With synod help, we can achieve our goals.



The new bishop should connect to the different communities and churches and know their diversities. The new bishop should be humble and yet be a strong voice for the church and support and guide the pastors. A bilingual bishop would be nice.

I am the voice of lay leaders, who while we don't serve in a paid role in the church, still serve a vital ministry in leading and caring for each local congregation. We have uncovered a treasure trove of skill and talent amongst ourselves as a result of our recent migration to online ministry, and have been blessed by the increased participation and the sustained financial commitment of those in our congregations.

We realize that while our congregations are no longer limited by geography, many of us still wonder if we will survive with our small, older congregations. Many congregants see the move toward social justice as a political statement which threatens their ongoing association with the ELCA.

Our hope is that the creativity continues, and that we capitalize on the community partnerships we have created both within the synod and with our local faith-based and non-faith-based organizations.

**Call to Action for Diversity:** We may have entered the Ark of the Pandemic side-by-side with a partner who looked just like us, but we are approaching dry land yoked with entirely new partners and with a rejuvenated sense of ministry. For many of us, these partners might be neighbors who are people of color or who identify as LGBTQ or non-binary, for whom our communities and nation have not been a safe and welcoming space.



As we renew our commitment to love and serve each, one who is made in God's image, and to widen our understanding of who exactly is included in the term "we," we seek a bishop and synod relationship that boldly leads us forward to face a world that needs assurance of the grace of God today.

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## LGBTQ by Jeffrey Pennington

Many congregations transitioned to an online format without too much difficulty, using Zoom or livestreaming. Some congregations had the space and were located in a state or county where they were able to worship in their parking lot.

Most expressed a hope that we could continue to use technology. Examples include: digital congregation council or committee meetings to be more inclusive of people; continuing with a “virtual choir” as a ministry to the broader church by sharing the recordings with other congregations; starting a congregational or even synod-wide Bible study on LGBTQ issues to which the greater community can be invited. Everyone is eager to be able to see people in person. One person said: “actually hugging people again.” Another person expressed a concern that people have become too comfortable with at-home worship.

There is an appreciation for the assistance that the synod provides when a congregation is seeking a new pastor. Pastors especially appreciate having a network of support, of being able to meet with colleagues, to see what they are doing and what creativity is coming up in other areas.

**Call to Action:** Some synods have “bishop taskforces” for LGBTQ folks - a way to make sure the voices of these populations are heard.



The bishop should not accept an appeal to the use of “bound conscience” as an excuse to not call or hire members of the LGBTQ community.

The bishop should remind the congregations that adopting a statement of Reconciling in Christ (RIC) is just the beginning of the journey. The biggest mistake would be rolling back any of the acceptance of the LGBTQ population, both laity and clergy, in the synod. The bishop should make it a priority to hear everyone’s voice. However, that does not mean making everyone happy, but making sure everyone feels they are heard. Unless you are actually invited, you don’t know if you are actually welcome.

## REMSDT by Rev. Doctor Frances Le Bas

During the pandemic, REMSDT (Racial Ethnic Ministries Strategy Discipling Team) used Zoom to provide education with a focus on disrupting racism, and hosted panel discussions on patriarchy and racism. We held summer Bible series on reading the Bible through ethnic lenses. Churches formed racial justice groups and racial healing circles.

Recommendations included that all congregations watch the PBS documentary “The Black Church;” that recurring synod events posted in the Synod Newsletter be placed lower in the letter so new events can be highlighted first; the synod should advertise the REMSDT Facebook page more prominently; when the REMSDT icon is clicked, it should link to resources and information; and the synod needs more staff or volunteer time to improve communication pieces.

**Call to Action for dismantling racism:** The hope for REMSDT beyond the pandemic is to activate and develop more fully the “Strategy” part of its name and not just provide advice. REMSDT dreams of having a Synod Diversity Officer. We need a church where all are welcome, and all expressions of church are welcome.

REMSDT values the connections made through conferences to talk and learn. The synod framework is good, but we need to build relationships, trust, and staff to answer questions and identify resources. The synod staff act more like gatekeepers than resources. REMSDT appreciates and incorporates the different ways and emphases of different ethnic groups -- all have value. Perhaps we can incorporate this across the other discipling teams and in the whole synod.



REMSDT needs to be a priority for the synod.

One mistake our new bishop could make is to spend too much time in the first year in “baby bishop” school. It is an unhelpful emphasis. The new bishop should see the people of the synod as the children of God and help unite them. The new bishop should not waste time trying to recapture the old. There is no going back to “normal.” The focus should be to build something new - build relationships and communication within our synod, and among our congregations, and ministers.

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## Seminarians *by AJ Alan Gaston*

This group was truly clear on their wants and visions for the church as well as the direction they wanted to see the synod and new bishop going. They spoke openly about a need for change and being committed to “The synod is all of us.”

### Call to Action:

Seminarians want to see a church willing to grow and embrace a church who not only talks the talk but also walks the walk. The key things that stand out with this group:

- ⊕ They want to see the continued embracing of the use of technology.
- ⊕ They liked the openness and willingness for change they are seeing in congregations and the stronger sense of community.
- ⊕ There is a need for more focus on diversity and cultural engagement.
- ⊕ There is a concern that we as a church might revert to doing business the same way as we used to and fail to embrace the wave of change.
- ⊕ They would like to continue and deepen antiracism work, move from guilt to affirmation, and learn how to be truly welcoming.

 Seminarians want transparency at all levels of our synod to include the bishop's office. There is concern about what the synod will look like when they finally accept their first calls. Will it look the same or will it be a true reflection of the people and culture that exist?

## Young Adults *by Amanda Briggs*

During the pandemic, many of the new ministries or technology platforms focused on meeting the community's needs and maintaining relationships. Some participants shared that the youth and young adult ministries did not feel prioritized over the past year which was a missed opportunity.

Beyond the pandemic, youth and campus ministries may be hit harder because of the shortened time together in ministry, typically only four years. Once restarted they will have lost at least two of those four years of potential interaction resulting in the loss of youth and young adult leadership. There is also concern that youth are being left behind since the vaccine is focused on people 16 and older.

There is also a strong desire to return to in-person interaction and believe youth and young adults have proven they are willing to follow COVID protocols to meet in-person. While they want to meet in-person, there was also an emphasis on the continuation of an online presence.

**Call to Action:** Beyond individual congregations and even our synod, the network of churches can help connect young adults across the country to new churches. We could do a better job leveraging this network to keep young adults engaged in the church as they move.

 The next bishop should not be complacent or make the assumption that things will return to pre-pandemic operations. The bishop should address lay leadership opportunities, the reinvigoration of youth and young adult ministries, and young adult clergy who may be facing burnout from the pandemic because of the additional responsibilities and expectations placed on them.

## Youth by Amanda Briggs

During the pandemic, online worship allowed for additional youth Sundays. SPSYC (Sierra Pacific Synod Youth Committee) was also able to connect and collaborate with youth outside the synod through projects like The Triduum Project and CaliStrong which focused on social and racial justice.

**Call to Action:** After the pandemic there is a desire to continue offering a variety of worship opportunities including virtual service, outdoor worship, and drive-up communion offered beyond Sunday morning. They would also like to build on the work started with other synod youth.

SPSYC provided the opportunity to connect with youth outside of individual congregations and see the number of Lutheran youth. Mt. Cross and SPSYC provide different experiences of “church” which provide an opportunity to connect with God in a way that works for them. Often these spaces are more informal and more intimate than sitting in church.



It will be key for our new bishop to support adults who work with youth, student leadership, and faith formation of families across the synod. Congregations need training to engage young families and parents of youth in their own discipleship. Youth need opportunities to explore faith questions, spiritual practices, and adult mentoring.



## The Commission of the Core Team

The Synod Council committed to an in-depth listening process to support the synod’s discernment of the next bishop. They accomplished their goal by appointing the Core Team to carry out this work.

The Core Team, listed below, has faithfully listened to over twenty-four hours of conversation - to you!

In addition to the voices we have amplified, the team listened to you in these groups.

- ⊕ Conferences 1-9 Gatherings
- ⊕ Deans
- ⊕ Synod Council
- ⊕ Synod Staff

Our questions were refined after listening to the Synod Council and Deans as we became more focused listeners. On the following pages are the summaries of the responses from the above voices. Thank you for showing up with your thoughts. We are still listening to the Holy Spirit, as together we vote for more than the next bishop. We are discerning the future of our church.

*With deep gratitude to this team!*

### Support Team:

- ⊕ **Gail Kiyomura,**  
Synod Vice President
- ⊕ **Jeffrey Pennington,**  
Synod Secretary
- ⊕ **Rachel Line,**  
Administrative Assistant to the Bishop
- ⊕ **Deacon Peggy Hahn,**  
LEAD

AJ Alan	Gaston	Bethlehem, Oakland
Amanda	Briggs	St. Paul, Oakland
Pastor Tony	Rhodes	St. Philips, Carmel
Diane	Torry	Holy Cross, Reno NV
Pastor Frances	Le Bas	St Paul, Lodi
Pastor Karen	Johnson	Faith, Murphys & Mountain Ranch
Pastor Lucy	Kolin	Peace, Danville
Sandra	Hamilton Slane	St. James, Redding
Terry	Knaus	Trinity, Ft. Bragg
Myra	Squeo	Hope, Fresno
Adam	Erickson	Mt. Cross, Felton

**1**

What creative or innovative things has your congregation done during the pandemic?

*Summary by Adam Erickson*

Responses in order of most frequently heard to least frequently heard in answer to this question:

- ⊕ Transition to different ways of “delivering” church
  - ⊕ Worship
    - Zoom
    - Facebook/YouTube
    - Pre-recorded
    - Outdoor/Drive-through
  - ⊕ Online Education
    - Bible study
    - Sunday School
  - ⊕ Online fellowship/Coffee Hour
  - ⊕ Online Youth Group
  - ⊕ Online Annual Meetings
  - ⊕ Seasonal packets/boxes mailed to members
  - ⊕ Daily Devotions online
- ⊕ Partnered with neighboring congregations (Lutheran and non-Lutheran) for worship and social justice ministries
- ⊕ Focused on racial justice and healing
- ⊕ Re-imagined and/or began social justice ministries (figured out how to safely deliver existing services, assess needs, and develop new services as appropriate)
- ⊕ Created/instituted lay-led pastoral care systems
  - Council phone calls to members
  - Phone trees
- ⊕ Younger generation helping older generation learn to access/utilize technology so they can be part of the community when in-person gatherings are not available
- ⊕ Virtual choir
- ⊕ Welcomed visitors and new members from around the country, not just local community
- ⊕ Invested in quality AV/recording equipment so online worship can continue after restrictions are lifted
- ⊕ Made online giving an option

**2**

What are your hopes for what your congregation will be beyond the pandemic?

*Summary by Terry Knaus*

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
Isaiah 43:19*

Embrace the new creativity that the response to the pandemic has brought. Engage those who have found our online presence. Find comfort in the digital realm. Do not return to the old normal. Expand the use technology to overcome physical distance. Continue both in-person and online. Continue and expand the use of technology.

Broaden our worldview beyond the church walls and Sunday morning. Show less reverence for our buildings as monuments for our identity. Commit to a new mission and purpose with a new realization of why we are a congregation. Take risks for the gospel. Grow younger as we venture outside the walls. Think of the church as an organism growing and adapting to a new climate and environment. Share our distinctive Lutheran voice apart from culture.

Follow the Holy Spirit, as she leads us to find new ways to worship and serve our neighbors. Utilize kitchens and parking lots. Look out for our neighbors. Support the homeless. Reestablish the church as a center to serve the community so that the church is used every day. Live and breathe with the community. Become neighborhood churches.

Share our ministry with other congregations including those of other faiths. Collaborate to worship together, sponsor youth groups and hire staff with technical skills. Be one of the churches that are out front and in a leadership role leveraging the lessons learned in the pandemic. Be a bold prophetic voice in the places where people gather. Act on social justice, racial and gender equality. Bring in people that have been lost due to the long isolation. Get more senior members involved in using technology. Celebrate postponed events.

Find a time of communal mourning for all the losses. To once again feel vibrant and full. Connect with God, each other and the world.

## 3

What do you value most about being a network of congregations like our synod?

Summary by *Pastor Karen Johnson*

### Highlights of what we value most

- ⊕ **Connections** – collegiality, relationships with other clergy, other congregations; we are not “lone rangers,” not alone in this, supporting each other, camaraderie, accountability; “we are part of a family;” we are the body of Christ
- ⊕ **Sharing of resources** – ideas, training, best practices, both congregation to congregation and conference/ synod to congregations; weekly synod updates with resources and links; information and documents on the synod website; don’t have to “reinvent the wheel”
- ⊕ **Pooling of resources** – collaborating with other congregations in ministry; we can do more together
- ⊕ **Support through transition/call process** – providing interim ministers, guidance through call process
- ⊕ **Diversity in our synod** – languages, ethnicities, urban/ rural, LGBTQ; building bridges and learning from each other, creativity, open-mindedness; the Gospel brings us together
- ⊕ **Special Ministries** - Mt. Cross, Lutheran Office of Public Policy, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Lutheran Social Services
- ⊕ **Support during pandemic** – help with technology and how to do congregational meetings, re-opening; bishop’s messages helped with responding to parishioners wanting to reopen
- ⊕ **Networks of support** for youth, Latinx, Asian Descent, LGBTQ, African Descent
- ⊕ **Connection to ELCA Churchwide** – social statements and justice statements, Lutheran Disaster Response, Lutheran World Relief, sister synods, National Youth Gathering

### Challenges we have identified

- ⊕ Would like to have a synod-wide resource clearinghouse, where we can go to find people and congregations with expertise, e.g. HR and employment laws, “MBA

knowledge,” confirmation curriculum, tech, accounting, preschools, projects and ministries

- ⊕ Confusing / conflating “the synod” and our bishop’s office; need a better sense of “we are the synod,” help facilitating collaboration and connections
- ⊕ Some conferences struggle with collegiality and connections
- ⊕ There is some disconnect and distrust of “the synod” in some areas
- ⊕ Having to accompany many dying congregations

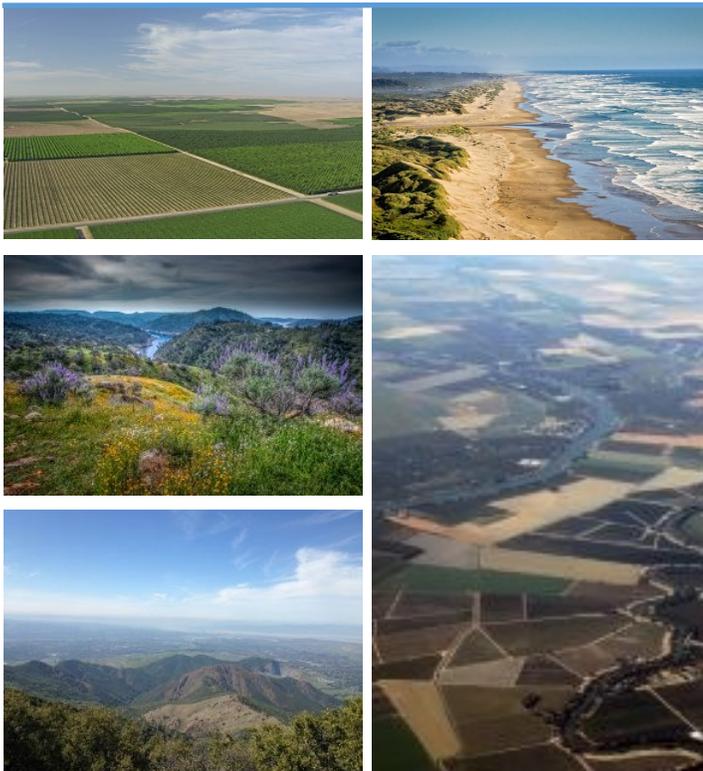
## 4

What qualities does our synod seek in their next bishop?

Summary by *Pastor Lucy Kolin*

### A person who is:

- ⊕ Centered in the Gospel, faithful in prayer and the means of grace, and grounded in their significant personal relationships and community
- ⊕ Willing to listen deeply to the Spirit and to the variety of views and experiences of synod rostered leaders and laypeople, in order to learn and discern, then lead
- ⊕ Ready to optimize technology to serve, connect, and unite the synod across two states
- ⊕ Eager to envision how the synod is structured to move faithfully and boldly into the future
- ⊕ Called to speak and act prophetically about matters of justice, especially racial and gender justice
- ⊕ Prepared to attend to their pastoral role as well as to their administrative role
- ⊕ Gifted as a communicator
- ⊕ Committed to working with the synod staff to carry out the strategic work of the synod
- ⊕ Authentic and transparent
- ⊕ Able to have healthy selfcare and practice a good work/ life balance



## Hear the words of Isaiah:

**43** <sup>1</sup>But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.** <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>16</sup>Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, <sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: <sup>18</sup>**Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.** <sup>19</sup>**I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?** I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. <sup>20</sup>The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, <sup>21</sup>the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

(NRSV)

 Consider this as you discern our next bishop:

- ⊕ Where are we now? (see Isaiah 43:18-19)
- ⊕ Where do we feel God calling us?
- ⊕ What kind of leadership will help our network of congregations adapt to this changing world as we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves?