

Report of the Bishop

Last year, my bishop's report began with an Arabic phrase: *y'alla, y'alla* ("Let's go! God go with us!") This year, I've been dwelling in the concept of *sumud*: an Arabic word that means resistance through existence, persistence and resilience. The grace of God persists. The Risen Christ is found in the most unlikely, desperate, and difficult places: on the cross, under the rubble in Gaza, in the midst of suffering, grief and loss in our synod and around the world.



When we proclaim the Good News of Christ through word and deed, we proclaim God's miraculous, death-defying *sumud*. Death should be final; the end of the story. Jesus died and rose again; all "shoulds" are out the window. Christ's steadfast, defiant, resurrection *sumud* empowers all creation to joyful, resilient, rebellious resistance against all things death-dealing in this world.¹

One of the many blessings of synod ministry is being reminded of God's persistent and defiant resurrection in our daily interactions with people from around the church. Our ministry is inherently relational—all synod ministry happens in relationship—and in those relationships the synod staff, synod council members, executive committee members, deans and other synod-level committee and team members and I have the privilege of seeing the Spirit at work, and helping to make connections between ministries in different parts of our synod.

To better keep track of that relational ministry—especially who we are (and aren't) interacting with—we are now collecting data on the visits and contacts we're making as a bishop, synod staff, and synod council. We're excited to keep learning from this data, and we've already started to learn:

- Our synod staff team is *out there*.

The synod staff is a fully deployed team working in every geographical region of our synod. Since synod assembly last year, the synod staff and I have visited 57 of our 114 congregations (some multiple times, as you'll see in our impact report) and 56 of those visits invited proclamation of the Word! Thank you for these invitations to share the Gospel.



Whether visiting for support in seasons of transition, facilitating discussion for shared ministry, or celebrating special occasions, our team is committed to being out with leaders across the geography of the whole synod.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Anna Madsen is the source for this definition of the Gospel; The Rev. Dr. Meghan Aelabouni and the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac are two pastors and scholars who have taught me about *sumud* and theology of the cross. For more on the ELCA's initiative, *Sumud: for justice in Palestine in Israel*, visit <https://www.elca.org/sumud>.

One of the ways the staff team stays grounded and connected is through monthly collaborative work days hosted by congregations. This has provided space for deeper connections and hallway conversations that help us better know the congregations we visit. Thank you to the congregations and ministries who have hosted us since this time last year: First English, Appleton; Trinity, New London; Pine Lake Camp; The Christine Center, Willard; Imago Dei Village; Peace, Oshkosh; Gloria Dei, Neenah; Atonement, Green Bay; Prince of Peace, Appleton; Christus, Greenville; St. Mark's, Neenah; Our Savior's, Neenah; St. John's, Marion; Lutheran Church of the Wilderness, Bowler.

- Our synod council is engaged and deployed as synod leaders.

We are blessed with an active synod council that steps up to attend conference meetings, anniversaries, and celebrations. They take part in some of the most challenging aspects of synod ministry and energize and engage in the work of our synod committees and working groups. They have shared a ministry of presence with you alongside myself and synod staff, and they've also made it possible for us to say "yes!" to invitations on weekends when the staff and I are already preaching/engaged at other places. I thank God for the way they connect all of us through their relationship-building and prayers. In their leadership, synod council has responded with care, support, and knowledge about best practices.

- Our synod staff team is adapting to the changing needs of the church.

From the data we are continuing to collect and analyze, and from our own lived experience, our leaders are acknowledging the need to restructure in order to add support for our synod ministries supporting congregations and leaders in discernment, candidacy, transition, and mobility. We also long to be in touch with congregations we haven't visited, and congregations that feel disconnected from synod ministry. We have received and are actively working to respond to important feedback of frustration around communication delays and bottlenecks. I'm grateful for our staff team who are dedicated, flexible, open, and adaptive, and our executive committee for their support, expertise and guidance as we ponder creative staffing and workflow solutions.

- Our synod is generous.

From providing leaders for teams like the synod youth committee and the racial equity team to spending time with neighbors collaborating for ministry, you are a church that desires to connect and *does*. You have shared \$1,186,115 in mission support and this blessing extends far beyond the area of our synod. In addition to mission support, together our congregations shared \$287,236 to feed the hungry, bring comfort and healing when disaster strikes, and support our vital ministry partners. Thank you for all that you have shared and thanks be to God.

At assembly, we will give thanks and remember rostered leaders and lay leaders involved in synod ministry who died this year, as well as giving special thanks and acknowledgement for congregations

that have closed in the past two years. In this report, I want to also lift up two lay leaders who have been particularly involved with synod assemblies, and who we will be particularly missing when we gather for assembly in Oshkosh this year: Walter Rugland and Jerrilyn Schmidt.

Shortly before he died, long-time synod endowment committee chair Walter Rugland wrote his report to the assembly, and passed the baton to our new chair, Dean Gruner. I was honored to accompany Pastor Mary Bauer (First English, Appleton) on one of her visits to Walt, to let him know how grateful I am—and we are, as a synod—for all the ways he lived out his faith: serving God, building community, and caring for neighbors near and far. I told Walt, “Thank you for helping me learn how to be a bishop.” He said, “Well, of course. It comes with the territory.” Thanks be to God for Walt Rugland, and everything he’ll keep teaching us as we remember him.



Jerrilyn (Jerri) Schmidt, a beloved and dedicated lay leader from Oshkosh, died in October, 2023, and her presence and leadership at assembly will be acutely missed. She helped us—and previous bishops and synod staff, too—in so many ways with the ministry and work of the assembly, most recently as part of the voting and credentials committee. Talking to Jerri during break times and after assemblies was always something I looked forward to. Thanks be to God for Jerri Schmidt, and for all the ways and places her witness, ministry and memory continues.

I’m a little over the half-way point in this six year term; we are a team who love to start planning well ahead, so we’re already starting to work on plans for the synod assembly and synod bishop election in 2026. This coming year, we will convene an election committee; the committee will share information at the 2025 synod assembly about plans for the bishop’s election. As we approach 2026, my own discernment will continue alongside our whole community, and I am grateful for your prayers. In the meantime, my team and I are focused on being fully present and engaged in our current ministry, and in laying a solid foundation for whatever the Spirit does next.

I am serving as bishop with an abiding sense of Christ’s peace, and I feel grateful for the ways that peace keeps showing up in surprising, persistent ways. Christ’s peace has been tangible this year: in the faithful, challenging work of advisory and consultation panels; in the way our ELCA Conference of Bishops was able to work together at our Spring 2024 meeting; in the remarkable adaptive, collaborative ministry of the synod staff team; in Good News proclaimed by council presidents faithfully facing challenges with persistent hope; at our deans meetings, executive committee meetings and synod council meetings, and in every aspect of our life together.

For our life together, for *sumud*, and for you - thanks be to God!

In the name of the Risen Christ,

Bishop Anne Edison - Albright

Bishop Anne Edison-Albright
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