**ABX (ALPHA BETA CHRISTOS)**

ABX is a three-year program designed to help integrate first-call rostered ministers into the life of our synod, to foster collegiality, and to provide tools and education for first-call ministry contexts. ABX meets monthly (September–May), this year by Zoom, for worship, checking in with one another, and working toward individual goals. This year, ABX was reimagined so that participants could be more specifically focused on a set of goals determined by a self-assessment at the beginning of the year. Small groups within ABX meet consistently throughout the year to provide accountability and support. There are about 18 pastors and deacons this year.

Despite the pandemic this year, our relationship with the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania’s Vital and Effective Leadership Institute (VELI) continued. We Episcopalians and Lutherans shared our gatherings twice over the course of the year.

ABX meets the requirement for first-call theological education and provides approximately 30 hours of continuing education time each year. First-call rostered ministers also typically attend the annual Region 8 First-Call Retreat held in November of each year. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the in-person conference was not held in 2020. Plans are in place to hold it November 16-18, 2021. Congregations are expected to make financial and time provision for their new ministers to attend these required formation events. The cost for ABX and the retreat are split equally between our synod and congregations.

The Rev. Elizabeth Martini, *assistant to the bishop, first call education and ABX coordinator*
DIRECTOR FOR EVANGELICAL MISSION

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.
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.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3a)

The above passage from Isaiah 43 was written to speak to God’s people at a time when they were finally returning home from exile after 70 years. I suspect that there were probably some mixed emotions. People had hoped and prayed to return home for two generations, and now it was finally happening. But what does it mean to “go home” to a place you had never been before, and to discover that home was an unfamiliar place? Returning home also meant restoring cities which had fallen into ruin, replanting fields which seemed more like a desert than a garden, and finally rebuilding the Temple which had been destroyed. And if rebuilding seemed like a daunting task, perhaps even more challenging was that many people had forgotten who they were and whose they were. And there was a need to relearn and reclaim their identity as people of God.

And to these people who had been in exile far too long, Isaiah offered words of hope and assurance from God. God would not forsake them amidst flood and fire and God assured them that they were still precious in God’s sight and God was indeed their Savior.

And while we have not experienced 70 years of exile, this past year has been uniquely challenging for us as people of faith. So much of what we have known has changed forever. And even as we move toward gathering in person once again, we know that our gatherings will be different. And many of us also realize that we will be living into a hybrid future, one in which the church will be called into faithful ministry both on-the-ground and online.

No matter how we gather or where we gather, we know that God is with us, as God has always been. God still calls us by name and assures us that God will be with us every step of the way as we live into God’s future.

As your Director for Evangelical Mission, I feel deeply blessed to accompany and assist leaders and congregations as they adapt and adjust to the constantly changing needs for ministry during the pandemic and beyond. As we look beyond the pandemic, it is essential to recognize that the next several years will require a great deal of faithfulness and creativity to adapt and serve in new ways together.

Just as congregational ministries needed to adjust to the realities of the pandemic, my key ministries did also. Our signature renewal ministry R3 moved from meeting together in a shared physical space to meeting online. Dave Daubert and I were able to adapt and rewrite our curriculum in response to the changing needs of our congregations. Of the eleven congregations which began this second round of R3, ten have remained fully committed to this renewal process. In response to the pandemic, we have added some additional training opportunities, and we have extended the program into the fall of 2021 so that we can gather in person one last time.

With the conclusion of this second round, we will take a break from the R3 process in order to focus on the launch of a Hybrid Church Academy in October 2021, together with our consultant Dave Daubert. The Hybrid Church Academy will offer an opportunity for leaders and congregations to adapt to the post-pandemic reality of what it means to offer both an on-the-ground and online ministry. The Hybrid Church Academy will be shaped in many ways by the insights Dave and I developed while writing our book Becoming a Hybrid Church, and we will also invite other presenters and mentors as we embrace all that we are learning together in our synod and throughout the church.

In April 2020, we completed the Certificate in Missional Preaching with our preaching mentor Paul Scott Wilson. We had a total of 23 preachers who completed this process, and it was a joy for us to learn and grow together. In October 2021, we will offer a new continuing education opportunity for preachers, which will launch following the Bishop’s Convocation on October 21, 2021. This year we will partner with Dr. Joni Sancken, who teaches homiletics at United Seminary in Ohio, to explore what it means for us to hear the Gospel amidst times of trauma and chronic stress. Dr. Sancken will also accompany a “Preaching Support Group” over a period of approximately six months so that we can offer support for our rostered ministers as they proclaim the Gospel, and to help all of us be renewed in our life and ministry together.

During the past year, I have continued to teach for the Stevenson School for Ministry as part our synod’s partnership with the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania. Deacon Marsha Roscoe and I have co-taught a number of classes including the Message of Mission, Foundations for Evangelism, Community Listening as Evangelism and Gospel Hospitality. I also taught a class on Praying with the
Psalms. These teaching opportunities have been a blessing as I have been able to work with people from many different places and backgrounds who are growing in their sense of call and commitment to ministry.

I continued to lead workshops and retreats for congregations (mostly online) during the past year. I have also been able to either lead or co-lead several online forums to assist leaders as they adapt to the changing needs for ministry. I believe that this season offers a unique opportunity for us to learn from one another as we continue to serve our Lord Jesus Christ together.

With respect to my ministry with the churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in February 2020, I co-led a training event for synod leadership teams on cultivating congregational vitality and renewal. The February event was held in San Diego (prior to the pandemic). In August 2020, we moved the training online and worked with additional leadership teams. We will launch another online learning cohort in the spring of 2021.

One other personal accomplishment was that Dave Daubert, and I co-authored the book *Becoming a Hybrid Church*, which was published in the fall of 2020. We wrote this book to assist leaders and congregations to adapt not only to the pandemic, but to plan for the future of ministry. I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to serve the church in this way. My portion of the proceeds of this book will be directed to our synod’s Mission Fund to help new and renewing mission in our synod.

Finally, I would like to celebrate our ongoing partnership in ministry. I am grateful for all my colleagues on the synod staff and the ways in which we are called to serve together. I am also grateful for the leaders and congregations of our synod and the ways in which you live out your mission and ministry in the various places where God has planted you.

It is remarkable how much our lives have changed in the past year, but I continue to trust that the same Lord who has called us into this ministry, will guide and nurture us into the future. I remain grateful that God has called us to serve together. May God bless and keep you.

The Rev. Richard E. T. Jorgensen Jr., *director for evangelical mission*
LEADERSHIP SUPPORT TEAM

The Leadership Support Team was formed in 2014 at the request of Bishop James Dunlop and approved by the Synod Council in 2015. The purpose of the team is to provide congregations and leaders of the Lower Susquehanna Synod with the necessary resources to promote healthy responses to change, anxiety and/or conflict.

Conflict and anxiety occur naturally within the life cycle of a congregation. The Leadership Support Team is equipped to provide training opportunities and interpersonal and group facilitation to assist congregations and leaders with skills and knowledge to understand conflict as a potential tool for transformation. Team members utilize Bowen Systems Theory, Healthy Congregations and various resources available through the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center.

The Leadership Support Team is comprised of a mix of rostered and lay volunteers from across the Lower Susquehanna Synod. A chairperson/convener is appointed by the bishop.

Team Members: the Rev. Dan Biles, the Rev. Caitlin Kurtz, the Rev. Tasha Genck Morton, the Rev. Mark Russell, the Rev. Glenn Ludwig, the Rev. William Snyder, Mrs. Lois Strause, the Rev. Connie Mentzer, and Deacon Marsha Roscoe, synod staff liaison.

The Rev. Connie Mentzer, chair
OFFICE FOR FAITH FORMATION AND YOUTH MINISTRY

GenZ, the iGen, or the post-Millennials, whatever you want to call them, the most recent generation of young people in the United States are coming of age, smack-dab in the middle of one of the defining cultural episodes of the past three generations, the COVID-19 pandemic. The implications for their personal, educational, and faith maturation are much more far-reaching than we can likely imagine in this moment. However, government-mandated restrictions have further exacerbated some existing realities for a generation who already had a complicated relationship with the institutional church.

“For years now, religious leaders have been paying attention to the wrong things when it comes to understanding young people. We have to start looking at who they really are, what they believe, and how they form their identities, not just paying attention to which box they check on a survey.”

Dr. Josh Packard, Executive Director of Springtide Research

The State of Religion and Young People, 2020

Like their predecessor generations, this generation has experienced a further erosion of their trust in the institutional bodies that define our American culture, including the church. Research studies, college courses, and even books are being dedicated to the exploration of these trends, so it is far too complicated to get into in an annual report. What is important to note however, and significant for Christian educators and those tasked with faith formation with those in the first third of life, is the trust and value this generation places on authentic relationships, especially with caring adult mentors.

Dr. Packard and his colleagues at Springtide refer to this phenomenon as “relational authority,” a desire by youth to search out and place their trust in mentors who display five primary impulses:

1. Those who listen deeply and not merely with the intent to respond.
2. Those who exhibit integrity in their own life choices and their interactions with others.
3. Those who are willing to be transparent and authentic, especially when admitting their own mistakes.
4. Those who exhibit genuine care for the whole person.
5. Those who are willing to share their expertise, not based on title, but based on “lived experiences.”

Packard’s research reinforces what many of us in youth and family ministry have known for years, and as the authors at the Youth & Family Institute wrote in 1997, “faith is formed through personal, trusted relationships.” Most youth are looking for caring, trusted adults, who witness faith and who are willing to engage in authentic and honest conversation about the intersection of faith and life. This does not mean “programs” do not work, or that community with peers and caring adults is insignificant. It does indicate that those programs and communities need to be dotted with adult staff and volunteer mentors willing to truly engage with, and enter into authentic relationship with, the young people who attend. It goes without saying, healthy boundaries need to be honored.

I would contend this is what has made many of our synod and congregation youth ministries successful over the years. We have fostered leaders who are compassionate, caring adults, who are willing to authentically engage with our young leaders. We name it as a priority.

In 2021, our plan is to return to many of our in-person events that focus on accompanying youth as they grow and mature as disciples, perpetuating a culture of authentic, caring community that welcomes and celebrates all.

In a year of limited in-person events, the opportunity to nurture relationships with young people and even with our peers still exists. I have felt blessed to be engaged in more one-to-one or small group conversations by phone or videoconference than in prior years. The opportunity to consult with peers in ministry, young people and their parents, and emerging young leaders who are discerning their call to church vocations is expanding. The research reveals an opportunity for all of us to practice authentic, caring listening and mentoring skills with the young people in our own lives, and within our faith communities. Thanks be to God for that!

Charlie Roberts, director for faith formation and youth ministry
TRANSFORMING MINISTRY TEAM

The Transforming Ministry Team serves alongside the Director for Evangelical Mission to provide insight, support, and feedback for our synod’s renewal ministries and support for our new missions. Team members serve as coaches and assist with planning and leading workshops and retreats throughout our synod. The team currently consists of the following members: the Rev. Titus Clarke, Seminarian Jonah Davis, the Rev. Newell Embley, the Rev. Joel Folkemer, the Rev. Katrina Holland, the Rev. Pamela Illick, the Rev. Mary Anne Kingsborough, the Rev Dione Klepetka, the Rev. Kathy Kuehl, Ms. Jennifer Lau, the Rev. Tina Minnich, Deacon Marsha Roscoe, the Rev. Timothy Seitz-Brown, and the Rev. Carla Christopher Wilson.

The Rev. Richard E. T. Jorgensen Jr., director for evangelical mission