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) for worship, checking in with one another, discussing and discerning ministry moments, and lunch and conversation. During meetings this year, participants used some of the time to gather in small groups to discern an instance in which they experienced God in their midst. They then used a guided process for group discernment to reflect biblically upon the event. There are about 18 pastors and deacons this year.

A new, but in some ways old, element of the program this year is our relationship with the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania’s Vital and Effective Leadership Program (VELI). 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 attend the annual Region 8 First Call Retreat held in November of each year at Capital Retreat Center near Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. Congregations are expected to make financial and time provision for their new ministers to attend these required formation events. The costs 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
CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCE TEAM

The Congregational Leadership Resource Team of the Lower Susquehanna Synod 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 the necessary resources and support to promote healthy responses to change, anxiety and/or conflict.

Conflict and anxiety occur naturally within the life cycle of congregations and other communities of faith. The Congregational Leadership Resource Team is equipped to provide training opportunities along with interpersonal and group facilitation to assist leaders to develop skills and knowledge for understanding the dynamics of change and how calm leadership can bring about transformation and ongoing support. Team members primarily rely on Bowen Systems Theory and Healthy Congregations as tools to further its work.

The team is comprised of both lay and rostered ministers from across the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

In November 2019, the Rev. Dr. Larry Foster presented a Church Leadership workshop on the application of Bowen Systems thinking in congregations and synodical agencies. The workshop was hosted by Advent Lutheran Church, York. Future seminars will be scheduled and offered to both lay and rostered ministers.

Team leaders are: Pastor Dan Biles, Pastor Glenn Ludwig, Pastor Caitlin Glass Kurtz, Pastor Bill Snyder, Ms. Lois Strause and Pastor Connie Mentzer. Staff liaison is Pastor Rob Blezard.

Pastor Connie Mentzer, chairperson
A year ago, we never imagined how much our lives and our ministries would be challenged and changed by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. God has called us to adapt to a rapidly changing context for mission, and this has required us to learn new skills and new ways of proclaiming the Gospel, caring for one another and serving our neighbors. I am grateful for your faithfulness in this season as we continue to learn and serve together.

We have experienced some authentic grief over our inability to gather in person, and from our inability to share and receive the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. We have also had a collective grief over the loss of our way of life, and of so many things which we once took for granted. And that is compounded for many of us with our personal grief and worry about the shape of our future.

While this season has presented many challenges, it has also made space for God to work among us in new ways as we continue to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. I am especially grateful that we have been able to proclaim the Gospel to people who were not previously gathering with us on Sunday mornings, and many of our congregations are now reaching many more people than we ever had before. Chris Backert, the National Director of Fresh Expressions US, has even suggested that “on April 12, 2020 it is highly likely that more people heard the good news of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead than any other single day in the history of the world.”

In Acts 11:27-30, there is a short episode which is easily overlooked and often forgotten. Barnabas and Saul (who would later be known as Paul) were ministering with the new Gentile Christians in Antioch, when a prophet named Agabus predicted that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman Empire, and the church responded by sending Barnabas and Saul back to Jerusalem to provide aid and support to their siblings in Christ who were in need. Out of that mission of mercy, Barnabas and Saul would also begin a missionary journey which would change the world. All of Paul’s missionary journeys were made in a time of famine and uncertainty, and God used both Paul and Barnabas to spread the Gospel even as they also faced the challenges of life in an age of uncertainty.

We should remember always that change is inevitable, but transformation is not. This current season will continue to change us, whether we want to be changed or not. Our “new normal” will not be the same as our “old normal.” And to meet the needs of our church, our communities and the world, we need to be open to God’s presence and power working among us in new ways, so that we may live faithfully into God’s call and God’s future.

In September 2019, our synod launched the second round of the R3 Renewal Process with 11 congregations participating. And amidst this current season of change, I believe R3 may be needed more than ever and our team is adapting our process to respond to this changing context. Together, with our consultant and presenter the Rev. Dr. Dave Daubert, we are changing and adapting this process to assist our participants to live faithfully into God’s call and to learn and practice new ways of serving together. I am also grateful as always for the shared leadership of Charlie Roberts and the administrative support of Cathy Dietrich which has helped us be flexible and nimble enough to change quickly in response to this season. I am also grateful as always for our coaches who have also remained faithfully engaged throughout this process. In this season, we are learning from one another, and we are learning together how we may continue to serve in new ways moving forward.

Our Readiness for Renewal Process also launched its second round in October 2019, and we have had a good beginning. The pandemic has forced us to postpone our April gathering until next fall, but we are committed to continuing to develop this process in response to the changing needs of our leaders and our congregations.

I am also grateful that we have had over twenty rostered ministers and lay people complete our synod’s Certificate in Missional Preaching. I am especially grateful for our teachers, the Rev. Dr. Paul Scott Wilson and Dr. Tracy Radosevic, who provided faithful instruction and opportunities for our participants to learn and grow in their proclamation of the Gospel.

In terms of my ministry with the ELCA churchwide organization, I continue to serve on the ELCA Domestic Mission Unit’s Congregational Vitality Team, and Dave Daubert and I have now led two trainings to equip synodical teams to lead congregational renewal and trainings in their own synods. We will continue to provide this training, but for the foreseeable future, we will use Zoom and other resources, rather than gather in person.

I wish to acknowledge that by the time you read this report, we will no doubt have experienced further challenges and changes in our ministry, and I will continue to look for ways to adapt our work together, so that we may continue to grow into God’s call for us today and in the future.
As always, I believe that the ongoing renewal of the church is God’s work among us and through us, and I rejoice that we are partners in this ministry. I am always grateful to my colleagues on our synod staff who continue to encourage and equip me in this work and for my many colleagues and partners throughout our synod and beyond, who share in this ministry.

I am grateful that God has called us to share this ministry together, and I look forward to seeing where God will lead us in the future.

The Rev. Richard E. T. Jorgensen Jr., director for evangelical mission
OFFICE FOR FAITH FORMATION AND YOUTH MINISTRY

“Throughout our research, we encountered hundreds of remarkable and diverse congregations who represent tens of thousands of young people. These teenagers and young adults consistently said they felt “known” at their church. They know no matter what happened, their church would feel like “home.”

from Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church

In the fall of 2019, the ELCA churchwide staff sponsored a “Growing Young” Conference, based on the research done by the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary, and compiled in the book “Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church,” published in 2016. Co-author Jake Mulder admitted at the conference that much of their research reinforced research done in the early 2000’s by Dr. Roland Martinson, from Luther Seminary, John Roberto (Roman Catholic) and others, compiled in “Exemplary Youth Ministry Study.”

It seems that across denominational and non-denominational lines and for at least two generations now the best research data reinforces what we know from anecdotal evidence as well, American churches are mostly aging and shrinking. Generation X, Millennials, and soon the iGen or the most recent generation of post-millennials, have left the church. But the research also shows it does not have to be this way. There are pockets of congregations in all socio-economic settings, of various sizes, rural, urban and suburban, and in various traditions, who continue to “grow young.”

In Lower Susquehanna Synod, our congregations like so many reflected in the various studies, are doing a number of things well related to faith formation with those in the first-third of life. The “Growing Young” Research for example, suggested there are six essential strategies that healthy congregations who are growing young exhibited:

1. Keychain Leadership (empowering young people to lead now)
2. Empathy Today (diving deep to celebrate dreams and grieve despairs of young people)
3. Jesus Message (living into this message in demonstrated actions and the spirit of our church)
4. Warm Relationships (a commitment to genuine welcome and a warm, expansive community)
5. Prioritize Young (allocate resources and energy to young people and families inside and outside)
6. Best Neighbors (integrated discipleship that allows us to be neighbors locally and globally)

Many congregations practice some of these strategies, but lack in others. That’s not uncommon. While some other congregations have chosen not to prioritize “growing young.” Researchers admit that those congregations who have prayerfully discerned a missional call to the aging for example, will not benefit from being "partially engaged" in growing young.

Our synod Office for Faith Formation and Youth Ministry continues to curate and make available resources designed to accompany congregations in all aspects of faith formation across all generations, through our Resource Center and Network. We continue to host events, and partner with other institutions, agencies and denominations to equip pastors and other congregational leaders in all aspects of ministry. Details of our events can be found at the synod website under the Faith Formation tab: https://www.lss-elca.org/faith-formation/

Whether the venue is a renewal event like R3, a Bishop’s Convocation, or an actual youth event, our office will continue to explore ways congregations can “grow young” in an effort to assist the church re-engage with these searching generations. In addition, we will continue to practice the essential strategies as we equip young leaders for a life of discipleship and service to our Lord, their churches, communities, and the world.

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

I was called as the Director for Evangelical Mission for the Lower Susquehanna Synod in May 2012 and began my service in this position in August 2012. I realized from the beginning, that I would need a team to partner with me in leading this ministry. I began recruiting our synod’s “Transformational Ministry Team” as soon I as accepted this call, and we had a team in place the day I officially began my ministry. In the past year, we renamed our committee as the “Transforming Ministry Team,” because we believe that we are never done being transformed by God, but instead, we are always transforming to meet the changing needs and challenges for ministry today.

I am grateful for this team which serves as a ministry and mission lab, where we test out new workshops and develop new ideas for how we can serve the church together. This team is also a sounding board and support for my ministry, and they are gifted presenters and leaders in their own right.

I have sometimes said, “I don’t do anything, because together we do everything,” and that is as true today as it was eight years ago. We really do need one another as partners in the Gospel. And I am grateful for this team and their continued partnership and service.

The current members of this team include: Jennifer Lau, Deacon Marsha Roscoe, Pastor Newell Embley, Pastor Joel Folkemer, Pastor Dione Klepetka, Pastor Titus Clarke, Pastor Timothy Seitz-Brown, Pastor Mary Anne Kingsborough, Pastor Tina Minnich, Pastor Kathy Kuehl, Pastor Pam Illick, Pastor Carla Christopher Wilson, Pastor Katrina Holland, and Seminarian Jessica Davis. Once again, I would like to affirm how grateful I am for this team and their continued partnership in our synod’s ministry.

If you would like to learn more about this team and its ministry, or if you feel called to potentially serve with this team in the future, please contact me.

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