REPORT OF THE VICE PRESIDENT

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As I write this report in mid-April, this is clearly the strangest time any of us have ever experienced. Every “normal” activity outside our homes has been affected. Every event cancelled. Meetings happen in an online format or not at all. Probably one of the most important changes for all of us is that we cannot go to our church building to join our beloved church family on Sunday to worship God. Everything seems to be in crisis mode, and no one can answer the question which we all have: when will it be over?

But even in the midst of continued “fasting” from Holy Communion, staying home and away from everyone as much as possible, worrying about and caring for those who are sick, we know that God is always faithful. God will not desert us or let us go – our names are written on the palms of God’s hands. Our responsibility is to trust God and carry out the mission to which we are together called. Walking together on the way, as synod, we feed the hungry as we have been fed by Christ.

In the midst of the virus quarantine, one of the areas where we have tried to maintain our mission is the feeding programs run by so many of our congregations. Recognizing that local congregation mission support would be decreased, we offered grants from our synod Disaster Response Fund, realizing that this quarantine is indeed a disaster. It has been recognized as such with our governor’s declaration of a state of emergency. An additional source of funding for congregations has been from our synod World Hunger Committee, which provides for grants to meet hunger needs to be requested from the money distributed annually from our Legacy (Endowment) Fund (a portion of which is designated for hunger initiatives). Finally, our synod applied for and received a grant from the ELCA to be used for congregations with increased need due to caring for those impacted by the new coronavirus. It is our hope that the funds from our synod Disaster Response Fund will be replenished by donations from members and congregations in the future. In these ways we helped to provide funding so that congregations could continue, and in many cases, increase their care of those who hunger, especially in these times when needs are greater due to decreased employment activity.

The primary ways in which we carry out the core mission of our synod, by equipping leaders, encouraging cooperation, and engaging in new and renewing mission, remain our priorities. In these last three months, the manner in which we do these things has changed and will continue to evolve in new ways going forward, as our state begins moving to some forms of lessened restrictions; but the universal truth is that our core mission has not changed. We are still called to love God and serve our neighbor.

But even in the midst of continuous “fasting” from Holy Communion, staying home and away from everyone as much as possible, worrying about and caring for those who are sick, we know that God is always faithful. God will not desert us or let us go – our names are written on the palms of God’s hands. Our responsibility is to trust God and carry out the mission to which we are together called. Walking together on the way, as synod, we feed the hungry as we have been fed by Christ.

Equipping Leaders

In recent years we have looked with wonder and questions at the ways our society is changing, and how our communities become new and different. We thought we should be figuring out how to support our church leaders through these alterations so that congregations could thrive, and leaders could grow and flourish. And now everything has changed in ways no one could have ever foreseen. Our congregations look to our leaders for guidance and hope as we move forward with living in the midst of a frightening sickness. We want to protect the vulnerable and hold up the weak. We want to support our healthcare leaders and those who govern as they do their best to respond. Through all of this, our pastors, deacons, and lay leaders strive to serve their faith communities. And they are tired! Becoming overnight digital televangelists is incredibly draining. Our leaders have been forced to learn new ways to lead our faith communities with no time for preparation or cautious study to determine what will work best. We have all been thrown into a situation where on one Friday in March, our bishop, our synod officers, and leadership staff felt we had to make a recommendation that congregations cease holding worship in person for the safety and wellbeing of all. You cannot imagine how difficult a decision that was and how it brought us the sorrow we all experienced when we could no longer gather together to worship God in our churches. Week after week, our pastors, deacons, musicians, and congregation leaders have worked diligently to figure out how to draw us together electronically while everyone remained safe at home. Plus, everything has to be considered to make certain that those without internet or electronic devices or ability to manage them are not left out. We know that our synod needs to continue the important work of raising up new leaders, helping current leaders be the best they can be and enabling people to make changes they need to make to follow Jesus where He calls them. Therefore, we work together to equip leaders for this time, for these communities and for what our congregations need most.

Our synod has done what we can to help pastors and deacons through this crisis. We have sponsored electronic conversations to look at ways of “doing” church via social media and telephone. We have held regular online conversations with our rostered ministers and our bishop so that we can hear what their needs are and try to provide support. Along with our bishop and the assistants to the bishop, I have been making phone calls to individual pastors simply to check in, to see how they are doing and find out if there is anything we can do at our synod level to assist and support them.

We will continue to do whatever we can to provide support for our ministers. We are beginning to investigate how we can put required continuing education programs online, such as racial justice training and boundary training. We are looking at ways to help worship
leaders grow and improve electronic gathering of our faith communities. We know that it is not likely, nor even desirable for us to “go back to the way it was before” for calling God’s children to worship. Events should probably move to some sort of hybrid manner because alternative forms of gathering will continue. Even in the midst of what is happening, we hear stories of ways people have made connection with congregational worship through mechanisms they never have before. We will find new and different ways of equipping our leaders. Our R3 Renewal Process will continue, currently electronically, and perhaps in the future with some parts that are in person and others that are not. We will need to equip our leaders for digital online faith formation, worship, and evangelism because the need for remote gathering is not going away. We are poised to adapt the R3 Renewal Process for this changing landscape and are currently in the process of applying for major grant funding for this work going forward.

Work around raising up leaders for our church has continued as best as we are able. Caring for candidacy and the mobility of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Ministers of Word and Service is work that must be and can best be carried out by our synod. Our bishop and those who serve in our synod office work diligently in this area even though it, too, has been changed right now. We continue to support congregations that are experiencing vacancies and pastors, deacons and seminarians seeking calls. We are working on figuring out ways these processes can move forward while being true to our church’s policies and the laws of our state regarding meetings of official bodies such as congregations (and our synod).

As vice president of our synod, one of my responsibilities is to chair our Synod Council, which serves as the elected leaders of our synod, our “board of directors” with responsibilities to oversee the governance of our synod between the annual synod assemblies. As the Synod Council, we take seriously the duties we have as elected leaders, both lay and rostered, to serve and make decisions in the best interest of our congregations and our church. We strive first to ask the questions that need to be asked before we even begin to make decisions or plans. Our Synod Council works as a fellowship, holding one another in prayer and spending substantial time making certain that we carry out our responsibilities. Regarding the current restrictions, I have been in communication with the vice presidents of other synods as we all investigated ways to move forward within our various constitutional requirements. Some synods do not hold annual assemblies, choosing instead to meet every other year. Our governing documents require an annual meeting which has to take place between May 15 and June 30. This is a bylaw, so we could not, within our constitutional rules, simply cancel our assembly. In addition, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, within which we are incorporated, requires an annual meeting of the members, a requirement we meet via our annual Synod Assembly. We have sought legal guidance regarding these specifics. I proposed, and the Synod Council adopted a plan to meet the bylaw requirements and make a change to the date of our assembly within Robert’s Rules of Order. At this point, we hope to hold an assembly in October. But for now, we have no way to know what future months will bring. There is a parliamentary procedure by which we can “adjourn to the call of the chair” which would allow us to call an assembly meeting at a later date (a date which would be officially announced in advance as required by our constitution), even though it may not be until sometime in 2021. This certainly is not the way I would have hoped my last assembly as vice president would go, but none of us would choose all that has happened, and so we go forward, trusting in God.

Bishop Dunlop has continued to graciously include me in the regular conversations of our program staff, our assistants to the bishop, our director for evangelical mission, and our director for faith formation and youth ministry. This has allowed me to stay completely current on the work that we share and decreases the time the bishop and I needed to spend keeping each other informed. Our synod treasurer and synod secretary join for these meetings, and we have developed into a most effective staff. This has been a real gift to all of us who work together in our synod office. Beginning on March 16, 2020, we have frequently met as often as four times per week, and I have found it to be a significant source of support for all of us who work regularly as part of our synod office. I was also honored to conduct Bishop Dunlop’s biennial evaluation, and I hope it was and will be useful to him in his work.

Encouraging Cooperation

The very nature of being a synod is that we work together. As the Synod Council, we are continually focused on how we might better assist our congregations and ministries to be in cooperative work together. We do this by assigning a liaison from the Synod Council to every conference, in order that strong lines of communication are always open. In this way, we hope to make certain those who attend conference meetings receive clear information about the work of our synod and the Synod Council, and the Synod Council is able to hear from the conferences in return. We also provide a liaison to every committee that is part of our synod structure, again to keep important lines of communication open, and so that everyone is aware of the work being done by our synod. Since regular in-person meetings of the conferences have ended, many conferences are meeting via electronic means and a number of Synod Council members continue to participate. Twice (as of May 1) our bishop held meetings with our rostered ministers via Zoom in groupings of three to four conferences. These meetings have seen particularly good participation, with up to 55+ attending per call, and there is much sharing of information and advice. When someone suggests questions or ideas, we are often able to put together a topic-specific Zoom meeting for anyone who wishes to learn more (for example, “Tips and Tricks for Digital Worship,” and “Ways to Fund Church during the Quarantine”). We are planning to continue this practice, scheduling Zoom meetings in the near future about childcare centers and schools and information related to the loosening of stay-at-home mandates. All of these represent cooperation that is happening in new and exciting ways, and cooperation that we never planned, but which has resulted from the current situation!
One incredibly significant way that our synod as a whole is encouraging cooperation is with our R3 Renewal Process moving beyond our synod boundaries to include the Upper Susquehanna and Allegheny Synods, as well as the Episcopal Church in Central Pennsylvania. As this partnership expands its work, we expect increased opportunities for working together.

I attended the Churchwide Assembly last August in Milwaukee. This was the sixth assembly at which I served as a voting member, and it has been a blessing and a gift to be part of our wider church at these events. I have made so many friends among the vice presidents of the 65 synods, most synods designate their vice president as one of their voting members according to their constitution. We are invited to arrive a day early with the synod bishops and meet in conjunction with the bishops and the Church Council. In addition, we meet separately before and during the assembly which allows vice presidents to cooperate to learn how others function and hopefully find better ways to do things. In addition, the vice presidents always share new ideas, knowledge, and suggestions for effective board functioning. I am continually impressed with this group of servants, all of whom spend untold hours serving this church as volunteers. This time is always helpful to me in my functioning as synod vice president. In the year of a Churchwide Assembly, the church covers the costs associated with the Vice Presidents Gathering, just as costs are covered for all voting members of the assembly. For the other regular annual Gatherings of the Vice Presidents, the churchwide organization covered all the costs of the meeting for the first several years I was in this role but switched in 2014 to requiring the synods to pay the cost of the travel in years when there is no assembly. There are many synods who are unable to cover this cost, so their vice presidents do not attend, and I have been so thankful in the past that our synod has paid for my travel, recognizing this as a way for lay leadership in our synod to be supported in cooperation with others. Unfortunately, the churchwide organization has announced that this year’s Vice Presidents Gathering in October has been cancelled.

Engaging in New Mission
The Synod Council is constantly at work seeking ways for all of us together to engage in new mission. Most of the time new mission does not take the form we traditionally expect. A new mission can mean so much more than planting a new worshipping community. In addition to the responsibilities we have for regular fiduciary oversight, we move to generative conversations, most recently thinking about where the Christian church in the world is moving and what would it look like to decrease the number of synods in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Lower Susquehanna Synod Mission Fund (formerly the Bishop’s Congregational Mission Fund) Committee considers financial requests from a fund which has been established for this use. Bishop Dunlop has encouraged leaders to step out and take risks for the sake of the Gospel, and this fund helps to provide some of the startup costs for this work. It has been exciting to serve with this committee and hear about these proposals. In our currently changed landscape, I have no doubt that great new opportunities and ideas will come to light that will allow us to serve in vastly different ways. Again, our synod will need to learn to create new ways to move forward. These new ways should motivate us to listen even more carefully for the voice of the Spirit directing us to support congregations in their vital ministry of making disciples for Jesus.

Where do we go from here?
The next steps belong, as always, to God. As vice president of our synod, I have seen my role to be one of moving our mission forward. We are completely invested in the mission of our synod, which begins in feeding the hungry, as we have been fed by Christ. We will continue to equip new leaders even while we seek to find better and expanded ways to do that. We will continue to encourage cooperation, even while we seek to expand the ways we work together at every level. We will continue to engage in new mission, recognizing that some things we risk will not succeed, but we will learn the lessons they bring. In everything, we rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us to know the kingdom is coming.

I especially want to recognize and thank those members of the Synod Council who are completing their terms following this assembly: the Rev. Joel S.B. Folkemer (6 years), Virgil Gibson (5+ years), Jennifer Lau (3 years), the Rev. Timothy J. Seitz-Brown (3 years), and Carlotta Strevig (2 years). Particular thanks to Virgil and Carlotta who were willing to come on board to complete unexpired terms. Thank you all for your years of attendance at many, many meetings, your work on committees, and your willingness to serve as elected leaders of this synod. I pray the Spirit’s guidance for all the balloting at assembly.

With Overwhelming Gratitude to God
It has been one of the most extraordinary blessings and my pleasure and honor to serve our synod as vice president. I love to end these reports with thanks to those who have taken part in the work of our synod. It is a joy to give thanks to God for each of them and to recall how we have worked together. At this end of nine years as the vice president of our synod and encompassing the years since the first time I was elected to the Synod Council in 2000, my list is long, and my heart is full. Through those years, I have been gifted to work with every bishop, secretary, treasurer, and vice president who has served our synod. Bishops Edmiston, Hendrix, Hoover and Dunlop; Secretaries Peterman (although I worked with her when she served as a consultant to the Synod Council, not when she was secretary), McKee, and Schlegel; Treasurers Herr, Seagrist and Stephansy; and Vice Presidents Appleby, Garber, and Price; each have taught me different lessons and been models for service. I have worked with a number of assistants to the bishop, including Pastor Dave Fisher, Pastor Mel Dick, Pastor Judy McKee, Pastor Tom McKee, Pastor Virginia Cover, Pastor Richard Jorgenson, Pastor Rob Blezard, Pastor Sharron Blezard, Pastor Jennifer Hope-Tringali, Pastor Beth Martini, and Pastor Dana Blouch-Hanson. They have all brought such varied talents to their work and were always open to teaching me new things and supporting me to serve as best I could. Charlie Roberts has also been a vital part of our synod staff through all those years and even though he often says he’s “the lay guy in the room,” his
voice carries with it knowledge and power and such love for our church and its people. It is so wonderful to see all the gifts people bring to ministry in our synod. I have been blessed also to work with some exceptionally fine quiet servants on our synod staff, people like Pam Drenner, Barb Myers, Joanne Wilhelm, Brenda Rockwell, Cathy Deitrich, Linda Lubold, Carol Krouse, Marty Shifflett, Cathy Paul, and Denise Ferguson. Few people know how much work and mission is carried out by these ladies who are in the background every day, doing whatever is needed. I appreciate each of them so much.

Being part of the Office of the Bishop is being part of a family who loves each other fully and deeply. There is an extraordinary camaraderie among the family and lunchtime is the best part of the day when everyone who is in the office comes together, and the laughter just spills out of the room. I shall miss those times so much!

I have served with so many Synod Council members over these many years, too many to name (and once you start naming names, you always risk missing someone purely by mistake, so if I have missed someone above who should have been on this list, forgive my feeble brain which is trying to remember names and faces from 20 years’ worth of days and meetings). People have many different reasons why they are willing to be open to serving as part of the Synod Council, and at the end of the day, each has said “yes” to service and brought themselves to the task. Many have given much time and effort, and I thank all of them. In particular, I wish to thank Marcus Thomsen, who served for a number of years as vice chair while I was vice president and was of particular support and encouragement.

When you are in a position like the vice president, you always come in contact with some people who influence and bless you in a particular way. If you read the beginning of my annual report from last year, you would have read in depth of my gratitude for Pastor Thomas McKee and the years we worked together. Tom was such a gift to me, always willing to help and guide me. He is the finest example of a churchman that I know. Judy Garber mentored me through many years. She always answered my calls and my questions, spent time with me helping me understand the role of vice president, and came to my rescue more than once when I found myself in what felt like an overwhelming situation, especially one year in the middle of a Synod Assembly.

Regarding those with whom I have worked in more recent times, I would like to give thanks especially for my friend Debbie Clark, who serves as our bishop’s executive assistant and has listened to me, aided me and supported me in innumerable situations and efforts. She is so kind, unfailingly cheerful, incredibly efficient, willing to do whatever is needed, and is simply amazing at what she does. I can’t tell you how many times I have thought of something I should have done, and she had already taken care of the matter. What a gift she is to our Office of the Bishop! Marsha Roscoe also became a dear friend and guide in these years. She brings such a level of energy and sheer joy in serving Jesus, that she calls forth the best in a person. I give thanks to God for her wisdom and her willingness to serve as God calls her. I appreciate all the times that she has helped me understand mission, encouraged me to see the ways in which I could serve, and affirmed me. She has taken on tasks she may not have preferred to do but did because the church needs her. I pray every blessing on the important work she is doing now on behalf of our synod making disciples for Jesus. When I am gifted to work with these two women, we three make an excellent team!

Finally, I cannot end this report without expressing my gratitude to God for our bishop. I was privileged to be part of his election in 2013 and began meeting with him two days later. His heart for the church has been such a gift to me, as well as his vision, his leadership, and his willingness to risk for the sake of mission. The bond we have developed over these years has been the most incredible blessing, both a personal connection and a working relationship I never would have imagined we might forge. I will miss him and working with him more than he can know. I pray God’s guidance and wisdom for him as he continues this most important work, that he might lead as God calls him through the difficult days ahead, as he strives to help the church find her best way into God’s future.

I am overwhelmed with love for these people and for God’s church. These seem like difficult days, and in the midst of all, I give thanks for you, and I know that God’s hand is leading us, and God’s love is supporting us. And I pray that I may go out from this service as vice president with good courage. Amen.

Lucinda L. Bringman, vice president