



BRITISH COLUMBIA SYNOD

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
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Bishop's Report for Congregational Annual General Meetings in 2021

(Note: Announcement regarding 2021 BC Synod Convention is found on pages 4-5.)

The year 2020 started out like any other: congregations actively engaged in programming, their Lenten and Easter worship services on the horizon, and looking forward to a full year of activities. In the Synod office, Pastor Kathy Martin and I were well underway with congregational visits, committee meetings, emails and phone calls, planning sessions, conferences, and travelling within BC and occasionally out of province.

And then everything changed...

On Wednesday, March 11, I participated in a conference call for faith leaders as organized by Premier Horgan, Health Minister Adrian Dix, and Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonny Henry. They spoke of the emerging COVID-19 threat and provided helpful guidance for our faith communities. But they also indicated that the situation was rapidly changing.

I was at National Church Council meetings in Toronto later that week, since air travel had not yet been restricted and was deemed low risk at that point. The bishops do not write many joint statements throughout the course of a year. However, things were changing so quickly regarding COVID-19 that in one short weekend we produced two such pastoral letters for the church. Others would soon follow.

Within days, a world-wide pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization. People were becoming anxious. We were not sure if our congregations would be able to continue holding worship services. And then the restrictions started to be implemented. Physical distancing became a new catchphrase. Dr. Bonny Henry became a household name in our province. Businesses and schools were being closed. Restrictions were being placed on worshipping communities and public gatherings. Concerts and plays and sporting events were cancelled.

And then everything changed...

In the face of this new reality, we witnessed our pastors and congregations shift into a different way of being church. Our day-timers began to be filled with countless Zoom meetings and lengthy lists of phone calls. Congregations began recording or live-streaming their worship services. Across the Synod, we began daily "Morning Brew" zoom sessions for pastors. In those sessions, pastors shared their concerns and experiences, talked about what they might do for worship, explored ways to stay connected with parishioners, discussed what to do about funerals and weddings, and talked about ways to enable congregational financial giving. Pastors worked together to ensure that people had access to on-line worship services, whether pre-recorded or live-streamed, of their own parish or that of a colleague.

With Holy Week and Easter on the horizon, pastors collaborated to create a series of synod worship services. I was honoured to be the preacher for the Easter Sunday worship service. Never before

have I finished an Easter sermon six days in advance. I recorded it on a Monday afternoon, sitting in my office — a very different experience indeed!

I cannot tell you how proud I am of our pastors and congregations in responding to the pandemic crisis. People are working so very hard to maintain connections among congregational members and their communities. Congregations have shifted to alternative worship practices and are working hard to ensure that all people have some access to worship and pastoral care. We also have noted how our congregations continue to provide crucial support for service agencies in your communities, such as food banks and shelters.

And then everything changed...

We were saddened to hear that the President of our Global Mission Companion — the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Peru — died as a result of COVID-19. This crisis follows an extremely challenging time a few years ago within their church that resulted in some congregations leaving. Former church president Pastor Pedro Bullon has been elected once again to serve as President. Several of us from the BC Synod participate in zoom meetings with our Peruvian counterparts, as well as with representatives from two of the U.S. synods who also are in a companion relationship. These regular zoom meetings have ushered in a new way of relating to and supporting each other.

Our annual BC Synod Study Conference for rostered leaders was not able to meet as planned, but we arranged for our guest presenter to offer three presentations by Zoom on April 27-29. Around 40 people participated in each session. In addition, the First Call Program shifted to an on-line format and, for the first time, the four western synods and the Eastern Synod participated together in a joint program. Not only were these two events affected by COVID protocols and uncertainties, but both the National Anglican-Lutheran Worship Conference and CLAY (Canadian Lutheran-Anglican Youth Gathering) had to be postponed as well.

In order to provide additional resources for congregations, as well as to assist pastors with taking much needed holidays during the summer season, the bishops and assistants to the bishops provided a Summer Sermon Series. A 2021 Epiphany sermon series is currently in process as well, with sermons prepared by the six ELCIC bishops.

And then everything changed...

It is hard to believe that, as I write this, we are now 10 months removed from the first declaration of the pandemic. Yes, everything changed. But perhaps that is not really accurate. We still worship. We still visit with parishioners (by phone and zoom). We still provide care. We still have Bible studies. We still make our financial gifts to our congregations. We still serve our communities.

I continue to be amazed at how timely and presciently the three key words for our synod have been during this COVID-time: *Connection. Collaboration. Communication.*

COVID-19 has challenged us, but these three key words remain central to what has unfolded this year. There has been a significant increase in collaboration and connection across our synod. This was especially evident early on in the pandemic, when pastors were assisting each other in figuring out how to move their worship services on-line, and when lay leaders were gathering for their session. We have had so many laypeople express their appreciation for the regular Lay Leaders gatherings. “I have never felt so connected to the synod as I do now,” is a common expression. Ten months on, this collaboration continues as congregations and pastors work together and share ideas and resources.

While we might at times feel exhausted from all the Zoom meetings and conference calls, we must admit that we are trying our best to continue to communicate with each other, to share stories and

words of hope, and to keep each other abreast of what is happening in our neighbourhoods and church communities.

Under the leadership of Assistant to the Bishop Kathy Martin, the missional process in which we are engaged as a synod continues in both new and modified ways. Such times as these require pivoting, adaptation, and shifting. Yet the same work continues, just in different ways. We continue to assist congregations and rostered leaders, work with Congregational Guiding Teams, and facilitate congregational discernment initiatives and area conversations. All of this is done with a focus on what it is that God is calling us to as a people of faith within our communities and neighbourhoods. This is challenging, long-term work in which we are engaged. Transformational work takes time. But we are learning, reflecting and discerning. We seek to be open to God's leading. COVID-19 does not stop such work; rather, we are discovering that our work together over these past years has helped us attend to the crisis and the challenges that are before us.

Connection. Collaboration. Communication.

Listening to the concerns and needs of pastors and deacons as the months went by, we engaged the services of Dr. Janelle Kwee of Altus Psychology Services in Langley. Entitled "A Special Brew," these weekly sessions were arranged to provide some psychological support for our rostered leaders, as Dr. Kwee talked about vicarious and community trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout, self-care, grief, stress and wellness during this pandemic. Dr. Kwee graciously offered her services pro bono as a gift to the church and in recognition of what church leaders are doing in our communities.

We have contracted Dr. Kwee to continue her work among us. She now provides monthly "Leadership and Wellness" sessions. In-between these monthly sessions, small groups meet to check-in, reflect on the assignments from Dr. Kwee's presentations, and care for and encourage each other.

Pastor Kathy Martin and I host "More Leisurely Brew" on a bi-monthly basis. This is a time for retired rostered leaders to gather for conversation and to provide support of one another. We also provide updates on what is happening across our synod.

The Morning Brew gatherings now take place twice a week: one session provides a time to check-in with each other; the other typically has an agenda or item for discussion or learning.

The Lay Leaders gatherings have been of tremendous assistance to those in attendance. This was particularly so during the early days of the pandemic when government programs were being announced regularly, and when congregations were trying to figure out how to hold worship services and stay connected as a congregation if they could not be in their buildings. At these Lay Leader sessions, we continue to provide information about different programs and resources. But these sessions also provide a space for people to be able to share their stories and learn from each other. People are buoyed by the connection they are experiencing with each other and with the synod.

We are strengthening connections with each other, resourcing one another, supporting one another, listening and caring for one another. People are able to express their fear, anxiety and concern. Yet they also are able to pray together, be the church together, and explore what this uncertain future might bring.

Connection. Collaboration. Communication.

Yet even though there is such good collaboration and partnership taking place, it is hard. There is a lot of stress and strain on pastors and lay leaders. However, in the midst of the challenges and crises, we continue to live in hope. We turn our eyes to what we are learning about ourselves, our church, our ministry. We ponder what the spirit has in mind for us "outside of the gates," as our

frequently used Dwelling in the Word text reminds us. Our congregations, our lay and rostered leaders, have done an amazing job adapting to the changing world. Already people are talking about some of the ways this learning will shift the ongoing ministry of the congregation, the leadership and our synod.

Connection. Collaboration. Communication.

Even though so much changed throughout 2020, our committees and task forces continue their important work.

The Missions Committee oversees a “Missional Experiment” process, providing grants to fund neighbourhood and community experiments and learning opportunities. Three intake sessions for applications will be offered in 2021. Applications can be found on the synod website.

Several congregations also applied for funds through the Compassionate Justice Initiative. These grants are to assist with hunger and poverty alleviation initiatives. This application form also is available on the synod website.

The Committee for Theological Education and Leadership continues to walk alongside candidates for ministry. We currently have two candidates engaged in their internship locations: Elina Singh (Good Shepherd, Coquitlam, and Trinity, Delta) and Nicolas Alexandre (Hope, Nanaimo). In addition, the Lay Academy — a partnership between the four western synods and the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon — has shifted gears and prepared on-line courses for lay leaders, entitled “Leading in Faith Today” (LIFT). You may wish to visit <layacademylift.ca> in order to browse through the courses offered.

The Climate Justice Action Group sponsored two zoom events in 2020 and promoted the use of Seasons of Creation in the fall. A Saturday morning Lenten event is currently being planned and conversations are underway with a possible guest presenter.

The Journey Towards Reconciliation Facilitation Team continues to promote events, resources, video conferences, and worship opportunities, although the restrictions regarding COVID-19 have shifted the plans for 2020 and 2021.

The planning team for the annual Study Conference for Rostered Leaders is planning for another on-line conference in 2021, and is currently in conversation with a possible guest presenter and is finalizing plans as to the precise dates and the agenda.

2021 BC Synod Convention — OCTOBER 2021

After much consideration, our BC Synod Council has decided to hold our 2021 BC Synod Convention in October, rather than during its usual time in spring. Please note that this convention will be held on-line and not in-person.

We have identified three possible weekends in October and soon will be able to announce a specific date. We are awaiting further information as to possible tech locations and platforms that can handle our needs for such an endeavour. Our bylaws state that a date must be announced six months in advance, so we will make that announcement as soon as possible.

As congregations select their lay delegates for the BC Synod Convention, it is important to stress that delegates will need to access the convention digitally. This means that delegates need access to a computer, laptop or other device that will permit their participation in the convention by audio and video.

Our BC Synod Constitution and Bylaws permits such a meeting (Bylaw 10): “At the discretion of Synod Council, participation by delegates in a regular Synod convention or a special convention may be by telephone or other communication medium, provided all persons participating in the meeting, whether by telephone, by other communication medium, or in person, are able to communicate with one another.”

We anticipate that the Synod Convention will be conducted on a Thursday evening, all day on Friday and Saturday, and for a portion of Sunday. As has been our practice in the previous two conventions, there will be a Synod Learning Event incorporated into the convention.

We also invite everyone to watch the Synod Convention on-line and to consider participating in the Synod Learning Event. Official delegates will have their own password access in order to permit them to ask questions, make motions, and to vote.

The registration fee for Lay Delegates and Rostered Delegates is \$200, which is intended to cover the rental of a tech support space for the electronic gathering, production staff and equipment, a guest presenter for the Synod Learning Day, and for software to handle tasks related to the online meeting.

We are grateful for the continued support of our Convention Manager, who is able to provide guidance specifically for this unique situation, as well as for the gifts she always brings in planning our conventions.

We hope that the online format will provide the opportunity for more people to attend as “guests” for the convention, in addition to the elected delegates, and are able to witness the activities and ministry of our synod and of our congregations.

Peace be with you all,

+Bishop Greg Mohr