



Bishop's Report to the Synod 2023

Bishop S. John Roth

Central/Southern Illinois Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

“To the Glory of God”

This Annual Assembly begins and ends with the hope and commitment that all that we do, we do to the glory of God. To do everything to the glory of God involves volitional effort on our part, to be sure; that is where commitment comes in. But commitment alone is inadequate. Our resolve may be good, but our judgment faulty; so, we hope, not in our own sufficiency, but in the benevolence of God.

As a synod, we have rightly put considerable effort into processes for discerning our identity as a synod and mission as a synod. I anticipate that these efforts will continue, and that the synod will grow into its identity and mission in this time and for this context. And energy for these efforts will flow from the hope and commitment that we take them on to the glory of God.

Synod Council

The Synod Council meets six times a year: four “regular” meetings, and two “visioning” meetings. Among its responsibilities, the Synod Council tends to be vision and purpose of the synod, acts on recommendations regarding the rosters of the synod (for example, “on leave from call” requests and “retirement status” requests), oversees the ministries of our synod committees and synod staff, recommends budgets to the Synod Assembly, and advises the bishop. In addition, the Synod Council approves appointments of persons from our synod to boards of directors of our affiliated ministries, such as Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, Lutheran Outdoor Ministry Center, and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. You can peruse the minutes of the meetings in the Assembly Reports. In addition to participating in the four meetings the Synod Council has each year, each member has an additional responsibility with a committee or group in the synod.

The most recent visioning meeting was a highly fruitful workshop with Pastor Sunitha Mortha, who took us on a journey into understanding and appreciating diversity, equity, and belonging in our church and communities. The Synod Council has asked the Anti-Racism Working Group to work with our Conference Deans to bring this uplifting experience into our synod Conferences.

The Synod Council is informed of significant matters pertaining to congregations in our synod, particularly in instances where a congregation is considering dissolution or disaffiliation; in some of these instances, Synod Council action is required. Before writing this report, I glanced at my first report as bishop to a Synod Assembly. In that report, I noted that during that year, four congregations had completed their mission and ministry as a congregation and dissolved; and three congregations had disaffiliated

from the ELCA. With a bit of de je vu, I report that over this my final year, four congregations have completed their mission and ministry as a congregation a dissolved or merged into other congregations: Christ Lutheran Church, Nauvoo; St. John Lutheran Church, Lacon; First Lutheran Church, Varna; and St. Luke Lutheran Church, Irving. Also, three congregations have disaffiliated from the ELCA. We are grateful to God for the witness to Christ and the fellowship of the saints in those congregations that completed their faith journey as a congregation. We are grateful to God for the past partnership in the gospel we had with congregations that have disaffiliated and wish them God's grace as they go to other denominational affiliations.

I am completing seventeen years on Synod Council, five years as a conference dean and twelve years as bishop. It has been an overwhelming joy to work with the faithful, and highly motivated disciples, past and present, who have served on our Synod Council. I gained mentors, new friends, and a lasting appreciation for the giftedness and excellence of leaders in our synod, lay and clergy.

The Only Constant is Change

As individuals, congregations, the C/SIS, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we have experienced far-reaching and increasingly rapid change, both passive changes, i.e., changes that pressed upon us, and active changes, i.e., changes that we have initiated or adopted. Perhaps a glance at a few past synod changes will make the prospect of future changes appear less daunting.

- To address funding issues and a synod-wide desire for a greater sense of connection between congregations, pastors, and synod staff, assistant to the bishop staffing was changed to a system of part-time positions, ramping up the number of congregational visits and clergy contacts.
- Difficulties with the long-standing venue for Synod Assemblies provided the opportunity to change the synod's policy of having all Synod Assemblies in Springfield and hold Assemblies in a variety of venues around the synod.
- Adult Faith Formation classes have gone from being exclusively in-person events to being a hybrid of online and in person in some cases and exclusively online in other cases.
- Synod-authorized ministry has become an increasingly integral part of serving congregations.
- We have refined and continually modified our development of multi-congregation parishes.
- We have expanded our staffing commitment to top-quality communications, now with a full-time director of communications.
- We have increased our participation in ministry arrangements with full communion partner church bodies, most frequently with interim ministry and pulpit supply, but also with pastoral appointment, that is similar to a regular call.
- The Synod Council began a new initiative, adopted by the 2019 Synod Assembly, to commit ourselves to dwelling in Scripture and prayerfully seeking to discern who and what God is calling us to be as the Central/Southern Illinois Synod. This initiative has led to synod-wide book groups (e.g., *Growing Young*) and multi-congregational workshops (e.g., Faithful Innovation)

Responding to changes around us (e.g., environmental, technological, demographic, and cultural) has become standard operating procedure. That said, I wonder if we will ever fully grasp the impact of COVID-19 on our ministry. As congregations nobly scrambled to keep members connected and to move to technologies to deal with “shelter in place” and social distancing, the synod office did likewise to support congregations and rostered ministers. One learning over the past three years is that COVID brought both challenges and opportunities. Perhaps going forward, we will be able to give more attention to opportunities.

Note on Our Relationship with Companion Synods

We continue to nurture our companion synod relationships. The year 2023 began the fourth year in our second five-year plan for financial partnership with the Ambovombe-Androy Synod and the Faradofay Synod. Thanks to your generosity through Synod Assembly offerings, congregational and individual designated contributions we have sent our promised \$18,300 for 2023 to ongoing ministries in these two companion synods. Again, thanks to the generosity of many of you around the synod, the synod sent an additional \$11,352.69 to Madagascar for cyclone relief and other projects.

Note on Full Communion Ecumenical Relationships

This year’s Assembly will provide the voting members with the most fulsome experience of our full communion partnerships ever at a Synod Assembly. It is our treat to receive greetings from Rev. Elisa Bailey, Stated Clerk, Presbytery of Great Rivers, PCUSA; Rev. Rebecca Blair, Lead Presbyter for Transformation and Stated Clerk, Presbytery of Southeastern Illinois; The Right Reverend Brian Burgess, Bishop, Springfield Diocese, Episcopal Church; and Bishop Frank Beard, Illinois Great Rivers Conference, United Methodist Church.

Staff

The Central/Southern Illinois Synod, and I personally, have been blessed by outstanding, caring, faithful, hard-working, energetic, and just really fine people on synod staff. I am going to introduce the current synod staff. And then I will name the others who have served on synod staff during my time as bishop. As I introduce the pastors on synod staff (assistants to the bishop and the Director for Evangelical Mission, I would like you to be aware that these assistants to the bishop will be ending their service on synod staff at the end of my term – retiring again – and the DEM’s call is coterminous with the bishop’s call. For those of you who may not be aware, my term ends at the end of August and the new bishop will take office on September 1.

Assistants to the Bishop: Pr. Maureen Stein, Pr. Ken Sandlin, and Pr. Ken Tegtmeier

Director for Evangelical Mission: Pr. Elise Rothfus

Office Manager: Ms. Laura Lee

Director of Communications: Mr. Michael Horn

Bookkeeper: Ms. Jennie Ruth

Former staff here please stand as I call your name.

Ms. Glenna Senters, Ms. Cindy Koonce, Deacon Terry Moore, Pr. Ron Moorman, Pr. Wayland Middendorf, Pr. Jim Reents, Pr. Bob Dealey, Mr. Tucker Good, and Mr. Brett Gosteli (before he became Pr. Brett Gosteli).

Before concluding, let me lead the Assembly, recognizing and thanking former synod treasurer, Mr. Ken Finkle, for his service as treasurer. Ken Finkle was elected treasurer in 2015 and re-elected in 2019; Ken stepped out of the office at the end of this past February. In addition to his duties related to the financial management of the synod, as treasurer, Ken was an officer of the synod and sat on the Executive Committee of the SC. We have been deeply enriched by his involvement and leadership in our synod. And we are enormously grateful for his service. We wish him God's rich grace in the future.

I am awed by the trust that you have put in me and by your prayers you prayed for me over the past 12 years. As I said earlier, I am bishop until the end of August. After that, I will continue to pray earnestly for God's rich grace, vitality, and faithfulness within the Central/Southern Illinois Synod. In all that you do, in all that we do, may God be glorified.

Together with you in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "S. John Roth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "S." and last name "Roth" clearly distinguishable.

S. John Roth, Bishop