

Associate to the Bishop, Director for Evangelical Mission

With my first full year in this position under my belt, I think it's safe to say that it's been quite a journey! In the realm of the DEM world, my portfolio includes new starts and congregational vitality, both areas where there has been significant movement this year!

New starts:

- **Synod Mission Table** - throughout the last year the Synod Mission Table has come to fruition! This team of both lay and rostered leaders are charged with listening deeply and thinking creatively to explore where and how the Holy Spirit is calling the ELCA to show up. This team has developed a pathway and process for new start ministries to happen, and meets quarterly to discern next steps for these ministries.
- **LuMin - Green Bay** - in 2023 we started a Synod Approved Worshiping Community (SAWC) Exploration on the UW-Green Bay Campus. Pastor Jeff Greathouse was designated the exploration leader, and faithfully went to work building partnerships and relationships on campus. He has continued that work up to this point. However, with changes in funding capabilities from the churchwide office, the Synod Mission Table, in partnership with Pastor Jeff, are discerning the next faithful steps for developing this ministry.

Congregational Vitality:

- **Holy Conversations** - Last year we rolled out the [Holy Conversations booklet](#), which lays out nine different pathways for congregations to take when they realize significant changes need to be made for the vitality and future of their congregation. Since that roll-out we have had 19 congregations enter into some kind of conversation and discernment around one or more of those nine pathways.
- **Pivot! Renewal Process** - Beginning in June 2023, a small team of innovative leaders has been developing a renewal process for congregations. That process is in the final stages of formation, and we hope to roll it out in summer of 2024. This process will be available to all congregations, and will come at tiered pricing thanks to grant funding left over from the *Seeds for Change* project.

Holy Conversations

Holy Conversations is a discussion guide that presents options for congregations considering a sustainable future. It describes nine pathways.

CHOOSING TRANSFORMATION

- Intentional Vitality Process
- Redevelopment
- Sale of Church Building
- Lay Leadership

CHOOSING PARTNERSHIP

- Shared Ministry
- Merger/Consolidation
- Anchor Congregation

CHOOSING RESURRECTION

- Word & Service Mission Post
- Holy Closure

East Central Synod of Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

- **Identity, Purpose, Values-** Some of my favorite work I do is with congregations who are exploring their identity. Getting the opportunity to workshop alongside congregations as they identify their purpose and values has been a true gift this past year. I look forward to walking alongside more congregations to help them explore how God is calling them to be church for the sake of the world in the years to come!
- **Synod Coaching Network** - This year has been a year of development and infrastructure building for our synod's coaching network. We were excited to bring Pr. Andrea Fluegel on board to partner with Pr. Kimberly Stowell as our synod's Coaching Co-Coordinator. Together the three of us have been promoting coaching as a way for both individuals and congregations to discern next faithful steps in their ministry.



Pastor Andrea Fluegel

Pastor Kimberly Stowell

Synod Coaching Co-Coordinator

Looking Ahead: In addition to continuing to build-on and develop all the things listed above, this year I'm looking forward to learning more about [Fresh Expressions](#) which is a new way of being church in the world. As the church shifts slowly toward a culture of being lay led and clergy supported, I'm also dreaming up ways of equipping, empowering, and investing in lay leaders of our synod.

Together we will get to lean into the call to be curious, to be courageous, and to be Christ together in 2024 and beyond!

Candidacy Report 2024: Always Reforming

2023-2024 has been a year of reformation for the ECSW Candidacy Committee – a year of re-evaluating, of re-dreaming, and of restructuring.

In the fall of 2024 we ended our bi-synodical partnership with the Northern Great Lakes Synod candidacy committee. This ending came as a result of a difference in vision and direction between the two synods. We give thanks for the many years of faithful partnership and collaborative work we shared, while also looking ahead to some new directions and initiatives here in the East Central Synod of Wisconsin.

On a practical note, the dissolution of our partnership created some immediate changes in how our candidacy committee is able to function – with only working with one candidacy committee, we are now able to gather more frequently either online or in person, with minimal logistics and significantly less overhead cost. This means that our committee is able to shift our energy to put more focus on supporting our candidates throughout their journey, rather than simply conducting interview panels a few times per year.

Between December 2023 and January 2024 a total of ten focus areas where significant work and energy are needed in the candidacy process were identified, and the candidacy committee honed in on four starting areas to kick off their work for the year. Those areas are:

1. Committee member onboarding and training

2. Candidate orientation and ongoing training that's not included in the seminary curriculum
3. Candidate/candidacy committee relationships
4. Pre-candidacy discernment

To conduct this work, the candidacy committee has organized into working groups who are creating processes and plans for what these areas will look like going into the future.



Tightly intertwined with the candidacy committee's work has been the work of the Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) Committee. That team of people has been working on developing a pathway for lay leaders to preside over the sacraments, with a chief requirement being entrance into candidacy. The partnership of our two teams is still being developed as we navigate the best ways of supporting our SAM candidates. More information on the SAM program can be found at www.ecsw.org/sam.

In addition to re-forming our candidacy committee, we are also in the process of re-evaluating and re-shaping our partnership with Wartburg Seminary in conjunction with the TEEM and Collaborative Learning programs. Because of some difficult and painful situations that affected both congregations and candidates over the past few years, the TEEM and CL programs in our synod are currently on pause. At this time we are not taking any new TEEM or CL students, and work is being put into looking more deeply at both candidate and congregation discernment processes prior to beginning those programs. We hope to finish this work so we can resume these programs by the end of 2024.

Not only has significant re-shaping of candidacy been happening at the synod level throughout this year, on top of that, there's been re-thinking happening at the churchwide level as well. The current candidacy process has been in existence since the beginning of the ELCA, and very minimal changes to the process have happened in that time. Because the process has not been serving all people well, the Churchwide organization has been studying and developing proposals for significant modifications to the process for the future. Findings and updates on that project can be found at: www.elca.org/formation.

Amidst all the change happening with candidacy, there certainly has been a LOT to celebrate. Here's a quick look at our candidates between May 2023 and March 2024:

- Seminary candidates entranced: 2
- SAM candidates entranced: 3
- Seminary candidates approved: 5
- Total candidates in process (entranced, but not yet approved): 12

We give thanks for all the ways the Holy Spirit has been moving in and amongst God's people to raise up new leaders! As the re-forming continues on the candidacy committee, we are looking forward to how God will work within our synod to shape and inspire leaders of the future!

Rev. Dara Q Clifford
 Pastor Dara Clifford

Associate to the Bishop, Director for Evangelical Mission

Associate to the Bishop, Director for Transitions

The word synod comes from two Greek roots: *syn* meaning together and *hodos* meaning road or way. I love this because it points towards what it means to be church - we are together on a road. We are journeying together. We are travel companions. Another word that helps get at this concept is accompaniment. My call to serve congregations and leaders in transition is one of accompaniment. It is a joy and honor to journey together toward what God is calling us to next.

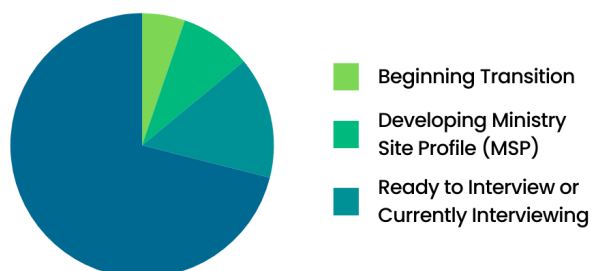


Accompaniment in 2023: I've led or participated in 112 meetings with congregations or groups of leaders and 24 events in the past year. When I began my call here, I was new to our synod. Now as I'm into my third year in this call, it's been a joy not only to be building relationships but also deepening them.

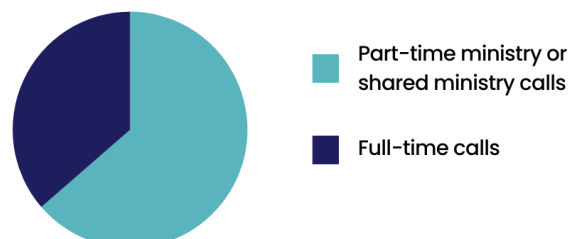
Snapshot of Transitions:

- We've celebrated 10 new calls, 3 ordinations, and 3 retirements in the past year.
- 33 congregations currently in [active transition](#).
 - 17 of these (over 50%) are ready to receive candidates. This is a substantial increase in recent months and I'm shifting my workflow to focus more time on this area.
 - 21 of these (about $\frac{2}{3}$) are going to be a part-time call and/or a call to shared ministry (where a pastor is shared by 2 or more congregations).
- About one third of the congregations in our synod are in transition at any given time. This has been consistent throughout the last three years.
- For every congregation seeking a pastor in the ELCA, there are $\frac{2}{3}$ as many pastors seeking a new call.

33 out of 114 Congregations in the ECSW are in a season of Transition.



21 congregations of the 33 in transition are seeking part-time or shared ministry calls.



Transition Consultants: I am developing a network of rostered ministers to serve as transition consultants to help in a few key areas of transition. As professionals who have been through the discernment and interviewing process before, rostered ministers can provide an outside perspective to congregations on how pastors in the call process might be experiencing them.

- Providing feedback on Ministry Site Profiles (MSPs): After reviewing a congregation's draft MSP, consultants will meet with the committee who wrote it to ask questions and share their reflections and observations. The committee can then integrate any edits into their MSP before it goes out to candidates.
- Mock interviews with Call Committees: Once a Call Committee has questions for their first interviews with candidates prepared, they will meet with a transition consultant for a mock interview to practice and receive feedback.

Resource Development:

- **Transition Videos** - Through a Region 5 grant, Associates to the Bishops throughout our region have worked to develop a set of videos that walk congregational leadership through several portions of the transition process. By helping to give an overview and address some of the most common concerns and questions, these videos will help to free up time and space during visits to focus our work together on what a specific congregation is needing.
- **[Compensation Calculator](#)** - Collaborated with Synod Design Coordinator, Jens Bringsjord, to launch this calculator on our website. Congregations and rostered ministers can use this calculator to help with their planning, whether they're preparing to call a pastor or budgeting for their next fiscal year.
- **Transition Guidebook** - During the coming year, I am going to compile and streamline our existing resources to put into a single guidebook so that they are more convenient to access and navigate.



Pastor Asher O'Callaghan
Associate to the Bishop, Director for Transitions

Associate to the Bishop, Director for Communications and Community

Synod Strategy for Communication & Synod Narrative



As people who live and serve to proclaim the Word made flesh, crucified and risen, our words about the Word and really, everything we do as a synod, is to amplify Christ - what he said, what he did, how he acted, served, and loved. As we work to emulate and share the life Christ came to bring, we aim for our communications to echo the values we hold as we interpret this gospel: warmth, authenticity, and clarity; pride, transparency, and hospitality. Speaking truth to power, our communications endeavor to be words that are helpful, not distracting, informative, comforting, and when necessary, prophetic. Like preaching, we pray that our communications might hold the gospel truth for the day and time in which the truth is most needed.

As the narrative of the synod is shared, we pray that the reflection revealed through story holds truth: both the beauty and the brokenness of the church. Holding both the beauty and the brokenness in tension, we also endeavor that our work as a synod staff team be as sustainable and as healthy as possible. Sustainability is not easy at a time when our culture rewards overworking and poor boundaries are often established due to unexamined or overstrained systems. As bishop and synod staff, we take sabbaths. We disconnect from phones and email when we rest and tend to our families and ourselves and there are times when we are not working. But we also are accountable to each other and to you. We recognize that setting a tone of professionalism and functioning as “whole people” models what we hope the whole church will experience: healthy leaders.

We have many opportunities to openly communicate - and what is communicated through our public channels: the synod e-news, The Wave and blog, The Wavelength, through social media and video. These pieces are carefully curated and come to life through collaborative writing and editing processes. Intentional communication that is thoughtful is our goal. Although we sometimes fall short, we aim for all that we share, post, send, say, and show to be aligned with these values.



Innovation and Communication Tools

This past year, collaboration with **Jens Bringsjord**, Synod Design Coordinator, brought us to new levels of innovation and connection through communications. Jens is the son of an ELCA pastor in the La Crosse Area Synod, a dynamic designer, and [an award winning podcaster](#). Our work with him is possible thanks to the vision cast through ARISE funds. Together we engaged new communication tools: Buffer, for social media management, streamlining content creation through the adobe creative cloud, a [compensation calculator launch](#) that helps congregations in call processes and congregations and rostered ministers to annually review and crunch numbers for compensation, synod [podcast](#) sustainability, and a refresh of [www.ecsw.org](#). Jens is behind our capacity to provide assembly resources to you through our website for the very first time.

Gratitude and Renewed Approach to Mission Support

We developed a congregational dashboard that helps synod staff to better recognize and thank congregations for the mission support dollars they so generously and faithfully share. A thank you plan was established and quarterly mailings containing giving statements now include a touchpoint for resources to help congregations feel connected. We developed a **mission impact report** that gives the synod a glance of how we have been stewarding your gifts and sharing time across the region.

Community

Bishop Anne will often say that the work of the synod reminds each leader and each congregation that “You are not alone.” Through Christ, in baptism, a holy community has been formed, nurtured, and sustained in the East Central Synod of Wisconsin. I will often say of the church in these times, “We are finding our way back to one another.” The truth is that we are connected in the body of Christ. What I pray for is that the Holy Spirit will help us to *feel* and experience this truth in tangible ways. Those who attend Synod Assembly will hopefully have time to feel reconnected as time traditionally spent in workshops will be used for connection as conferences.

Cohorts, continuing education, and ministry through teams are an important part of deepening our relationship with God and neighbor. As disciples of Jesus, we experience beauty and depth in the growth, but also can feel growing pains.

The Synod Youth Team has done incredible work to begin building and restoring relationships for young people and those who lead them alike. Led by the tremendous co-chairs Patty Koplitz (OSLC, Neenah) and Christine Loppnow (Christus, Greenville) the team created several opportunities for youth workers to connect over dinner and youth to connect through activities. Journey with Jesus, our synod’s annual gathering for middle school and high school youth gathered 100 people at Imago Dei Village in February under the theme, “Peace by Piece.”



Again, with thanks to the ARISE campaign, the synod began the search for a Synod Youth Coordinator. The Holy Spirit makes it clear when a plan needs to shift and we soon realized that a Synod Youth Administrator would help us truly bolster post-covid youth ministry and strengthen connections with partner ministries.

In December, **Wendy Black** began serving as the Synod Youth Coordinator. Her role is centered in relationships and visioning. She’s working in the “why, who, and what” of youth ministry. **Amy Moore** began serving as the Synod Youth Administrator. Amy has tremendous gifts for organizing and managing the practical aspects of ministry. Her role focuses on the “where, when, and how.” Like any collaborative effort, these two overlap in their roles to support the synod youth and the synod youth team and to all of our congregations. They are available to you as you do the work of dreaming and supporting young people in your context.



The Racial Equity Team, now in its third year, provided many opportunities to live into the resolutions passed in 2021 and 2022 to be a more just church that actively combats the sin of racism by equipping leaders with resources and training. They convened a land acknowledgement panel, led several cohorts through the curriculum *Now is the Time*, and led racial equity training online for our rostered ministers.

One trend that is very clear to leaders throughout the ELCA is the increase in lay led ministries. One could describe the church in these times as a “Lay led, pastor supported movement.” **The ECSW Lay School of Ministry** is a vital resource in our synod. Led by a faithful and involved board under the leadership of Lay School Director, The Rev. Jennifer Hoffman, Pastor of Calvary Lutheran Church in Merrill, the school has two satellite locations: Christ the King, Combined Locks and Saint Andrew, Wausau. Students can also participate from home online. Visit www.ecswlayschool.org

In the year to come, synod leaders are dreaming of new ways to connect and grow together. Church Council Academy is being scheduled to create a collaborative council retreat experience in the late winter, early spring. A revisioning of the old EPIC (Equipping People in Congregations) is on the horizon. As are cohorts for lay leaders and council presidents. Through Lay School, Connecting with Colleagues, Theological Conference, ad+Ministers, there have been so many occasions to connect in community and to grow. Thanks be to God!



Pastor Jenn Pockat

Associate to the Bishop, Director for Communications and Community