

BISHOP SUZANNE DARCY DILLAHUNT
REPORT TO THE ASSEMBLY 2021

Stronger and Better Together...Joining Jesus in the Restoration of the World

Abundance

John 6:1-14

Grace and peace be with you in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

Welcome to Southern Ohio Synod's first virtual Synod Assembly. Last year we planned on meeting but that didn't happen because of the pandemic. In our world, we adapted quickly to be flexible. We learned how to mute and unmute, to use the chat feature and share screens. I know some of us missed seeing each other in person for assembly. But here we are together again in the new and exciting way we do business...Virtually. It is the way we gather in life since March 2020. Assembly will feel different but the important thing is that we will do the business of the synod, worship, and see what's happening in the territory, because ministry didn't stop in 2020. It flourished. Though difficult and weird, 2020 showed us several things: **Opportunities, Pivots, Thinking Differently** and **Abundance** for the sake of the mission and vision of SOS and the Church. The Mission does not change. We proclaim, share and invite others into the Love of God in Jesus Christ. The Vision is morphing as we navigate where God's calling us to go now and in the future.

We welcome Pastor Mike Ward as our Keynote speaker. He has become part of the synod family for the last several years though our work with GSB and Thrive!

We welcome Bishop William Gafkjen, Bishop of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod as the ELCA Representative.

Opportunities

Moving...Physically

Late June, the dumpster was full and the moving trucks loaded up the remaining stuff from the old synod office. We said good-bye to 300 S. Second Street and hello to 9200 Worthington Road. Our new home is fun, modern, and waiting for you to come for a visit. It's smaller, brighter and gives us opportunities to use the space for videos and recordings and the day to day running of a synod office.

A New Call Process and Transitions Manual

While the pandemic has presented challenges, this has not prevented congregations from working with the synod to call a new pastor. Since March of 2020, nine congregations in the Southern Ohio Synod have called new pastors, and one deacon, sometimes having to do so with great creativity. Some have had "parking lot" congregational meetings using FM transmitters, others did so with members calling a conference call number. Still other congregations held outdoor, socially-distanced meetings, and others spaced their membership out within the church building with video feed. But the fact is, the

work of the Spirit continued, and God provided pastors for God's church. All of the call votes that were conducted were successful.

But this continued activity in the area of pastoral mobility has made clear to us two important things about the status of the Southern Ohio Synod. First, our overall vacancy rate, especially for full-time pastors, is currently very low. Of our 183 congregations, as of the time of writing this report, only eight have full-time vacancies (including two-point calls) – a rate of about 4%. Another four congregations have a part-time pastoral vacancy. This means that for all congregations who are actively seeking a called pastor, the vacancy rate is about 6.5%. Compared to some of our nearby sister synods, this Mission Territory is able to meet our called pastoral needs well.

Second, it became clear that our call process materials needed an update. So, Pastor Abrams and Josh Brodbeck, our Synod Administrator, worked this past year to update the materials we use to train congregation call committees. The new document is entitled "A Guide To the Call Process", and contains several new features: a "definitions" section to explain the call process terms and abbreviations we use in the ELCA; a detailed flow chart to help call committees and councils to know where they are in the process and what to do at that stage; an expanded list of suggested interview questions; suggested prayers to open meetings; and suggested hymns for the day of the call vote. This new resource has been received well by congregations.

Challenges do remain, however. The fact is, there are fewer pastors available nationwide for call to a congregation, and compared to earlier times, fewer graduating seminarians seeking their first calls. So, we must continue pray, to encourage those who have the gifts for pastoral ministry to consider a call in the church, and to be proactive in recruiting talented pastoral leaders to come to the Southern Ohio Synod.

Lay Worship Leaders and Synod Authorized Ministers

We are excited to announce the rollout of the Southern Ohio Synod's Leadership Academy, the home of the Synod's new Lay Worship Leader and Synod Authorized Minister programs. Lay Worship leaders undergo training and certification in order to boost the ranks of supply preachers who fill pulpits in congregations without a regular pastor or whose pastor is unavailable on a Sunday. Synod Authorized Ministers are trained, certified, and appointed to serve in a single congregation where it is not possible to provide appropriate pastoral leadership. They preach weekly and provide additional functions depending on the needs of the parish. While these leaders have existed for many years, the programs have been on hiatus awaiting restructuring. The first cohort is already underway and we look forward to announcing the second one in the future.

Congregational Resource Team

Our Congregational Resource Team (CRT) continues its work with pastors and congregations despite the pandemic, and has provided much-needed accompaniment for our rostered and lay leaders. This has taken the form of Zoom coaching sessions and written feedback and questions for pastors to consider as they approach difficult issues. As their work becomes a more established part of our Mission Territory's life, more of our leaders have decided to take advantage of this rich resource. Please contact Pr. Abrams if you would like a CRT referral.

While the CRT was saddened to have two of its members move to different synods, it was pleased to welcome Ms. Marjorie Ellis, and Pastor Michelle Terry to join it in its work.

Pivots

Worship

Worship is always central to our life as Synod, especially at Assembly. Instead in 2020 like a lot of you we had some recorded services.

The Bishop's office staff provided: Good Friday, Easter Vigil, Emmanuel 9 Commemoration and Lessons and Carols. Resources were also available from SOS and the ELCA.

Vibrant Church Conference

Our new Vibrant Church Conference Team had been working since 2019 on the first annual conference for the equipping of congregational lay leaders. When the pandemic hit, they quickly pivoted to an online version: a monthly online workshop on a variety of topics, ranging from a how-to on digital ministry to DIY Christmas pageants and VBS and how to build stronger connections to your community and share the good news through evangelism. These workshops are free and easily accessible to anyone who can join us online!

Website

Like many churches and organizations during the pandemic, the synod realized it could serve the mission territory much better with a new website & database. The new website is much easier to navigate and will help both rostered leaders and lay leaders equally. Both will have sections on the new website. The new website also consists of the "Community Sandbox." The sandbox is a platform for congregations and its members to share virtual resources. You will be able to find videos, documents, audio files, and much more available for download in the sandbox. There will also be a feature so you can ask for a resource if you can't find it. Everyone who wants access to this area will be given a login and password. Please check out our new website when it launches soon!

Synod Council faithfully met in July, September, December, January, and April. Beside the routine work, the Council passed a Resolution Against Racism. I want to thank them for their work. The Executive Committee meets regularly and we say goodbye to Pr. Ralph Wolfe who finishes his terms on Council and Exec Committee. Thank You!

Worship is different. The normal is online. Many SOS churches moved quickly to adapt to the reality that in person worship was not safe. Services from living rooms, kitchens, basements, backyards could be seen all over the territory. Online, in person, hybrid...is how we worship now. We in the Bishop's Office were able to "visit" several services on Sundays and we were "invited" to join Zoom Fellowship and Coffee Hours. Summer outdoor worship services gave us opportunities to come together in person and online. Some congregations transitioned in the fall to in person and online. When Ohio's COVID numbers rose in the late fall, many congregations transitioned back to online services only. Some were able to still come together in small numbers. We learned to be flexible.

We look with hope and anticipation to the time when we can join together in person...it's coming! Thank you all for what you've done this year! It's been challenging but you stepped up and created opportunities for ministry to happen differently.

I hope we learned from the past year. I hope the connections made through Facebook, Videos, and Live Stream worship continue. Don't stop your online presence! I hope the connections made online, with people we may have never met before, are connected to a faith community who can nurture and encourage discipleship. People joined in virtually to hear the message of Jesus. A message of hope in a scary time. How do we help make connections to local ministries so we all can live the faith in our neighborhoods and communities. That is the next opportunity.

Wait until you see what's happening around the Mission Territory during the Assembly!

Thinking Differently

It was the week after Easter 2020 when I decided it was time to think outside the box. The pandemic wasn't going away soon. Easter was different only in that we were not together to celebrate the resurrection BUT Easter came and Christ is Risen. Sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves and lamenting wasn't going to get us anywhere. That week I called together people from and not from SOS to help me think how to tweak the vision of this synod, Stronger and Better Together...Joining Jesus in the Restoration of the World (Cultivate, Collaborate, Clarify).

We were stronger and better together before it became a commercial or tag line for the pandemic. We were miles ahead.

Outside the Box was born. Under the leadership of Mr. Chris Clothier the team has helped us think differently. We are one of the leaders in the church as we develop resources for congregations to do what you are called to do: be and make disciples for Jesus.

Outside the Box started by helping churches to overcome the technical hurdles associated with recording or streaming worship. To that end, we've issued several technology grants to congregations in need. The program has evolved to help our Synod congregations to drive connection. Mentoring sessions are providing congregations with ideas on how to make worship more engaging for an online audience. Congregations are re-connecting with people who were underserved pre-pandemic: the homebound, the infirmed, snowbirds, and those with schedules that prevented them from participating on Sunday mornings. Congregations are connecting with each other, to exchange ideas and resources and to share worship. And we expect these connections to evolve towards regional communities, where resources can be better leveraged to serve the needs of everyone in the region.

Remember playing in a sandbox? SOS we are playing in the **Community Sandbox**. What do you do in a sandbox? Build, create, knock down, use buckets, shovels, water, to use imagination for what can be and you invite others to create and build with you.

Here's what is happening in the SOS Community Sandbox....

The Sandbox Project FAQ's

What is the Sandbox?

The Southern Ohio Synod is developing a resource website called "The Sandbox." The intention is to gather resources in one location for the benefit of Southern Ohio Synod churches and its members. The site will be for all ages, open to all faith and church related topics and can promote any resources you have found helpful.

What type of resources will be in the Sandbox?

The Sandbox will contain a virtual smorgasbord of topics and materials, including but not limited to resources for worship, devotionals, a Bible Study series, discipleship, education, digital church, technology, marketing, community engagement, stewardship, curriculum/resources for children's, youth and/or family ministries and confirmation materials

Who will have access to the Sandbox?

All members of Southern Ohio Synod congregations. Eventually, an avenue will be made available for those outside of Southern Ohio Synod churches.

Is there a cost to gain access to the Sandbox?

No, there is no cost to gain access to the Sandbox for any Southern Ohio Synod church or member. There will however, be a log-in feature.

Who do I contact if I have questions and/or wish to have something added to the Sandbox?

Contact Gary Pecuch at gpecuch@southernohiosynod.org

Abundance

Thank You SOS for Mission Support! **In a time of great uncertainty, you continued to share generously with the Synod and the larger church—just over \$1.5 million!**

Your generosity this past year was awesome! We have 183 Congregations and only 17 congregations gave \$0. That is down from previous years and I hope next year I can announce we have 100% of our congregations giving to mission support.

Check out the giving from your congregation in the Pre-Assembly Materials.

Thank You! To remind you, Mission Support is offerings given from individuals to the congregation, congregational giving to the synod and synod giving to the Churchwide organization. The synod gives 40% of what we receive in unrestricted funds to the ELCA. So, when you look at the Mission and Ministry Plans you will see how much money stays here in the territory for ministry. We are indeed stronger and better together.

Remember THRIVE! Equipping Vibrant Churches Together? T-Shirts were auctioned off in 2019 as we kicked off the SOS Mission Campaign for you and then COVID hit and we PAUSED the campaign. BUT IT'S BACK! Pastor Larry Donner, the Campaign Manager, has a fantastic report about Thrive! Check it out in the Pre-Assembly Booklet. And...Just wait to see what we have planned at the Assembly.

Abundance doesn't just mean money.

God has blessed the Church and the Southern Ohio Synod abundantly with you.

As you prepare for Assembly, I am asking you to write down where God's Abundance is seen in your life, congregation, synod, ELCA. Somehow, we will figure out how to share the abundance during the Assembly.

Your Bishop's Office staff are witnesses to the Gospel in their work. We are here to walk alongside of you in the ministry we share together. It is an honor and privilege to serve in these callings. These committed and faithful servants of the Church have doubled and tripled up on their work. Thank you Pastor Bob Abrams, Assistant to the Bishop, Pastor Katie Kerrigan, Director for Evangelical Mission, Ms. Kim Uemura, Administrative Assistant to the Bishop and Storyteller, Mr. Josh Brodbeck, Synod Operations and Administrator, Worship Director and IT guy, Dr. C Lynn Nakamura, Director for Candidacy and Leadership Development, Dr. Cory Driver (thanks to Thrive), Director for Leadership Education, Mr. Gary Pecuch, Youth and Family Ministry Coach and Community Sandbox manager, Mrs. Joy Hacker, Accountant.

We also want to thank Sister Sally Burk, for her many years of faithful service. Sister Sally retired as the Pulpit Supply Coordinator in 2020.

We are grateful for the ministry that is a part of this synod because of our calling as the baptized.

I look forward to "seeing" you at the assembly where we will hear more about what's going on and where we are going, together, as opportunities become chances for ministry and sharing the faith with others in Jesus' name.

Think about the boy who brought his lunch to see and hear Jesus. Five loaves and two fish...and Jesus fed oodles of people. Abundance! We've got it here too.

See you soon and thanks for coming to Synod Assembly 2021. Don't forget to think about the question I asked and come ready to have fun too!

Bishop Suzanne Darcy Dillahunt