

**Annual Report 2022-2023 for Rev. Genelle Netland**  
**Associate to the Bishop**

*Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

*Portfolio: Call Process; Constitutions; Conflict; Chief of Staff and Chaplain (Engagement Minister) to Conferences 3 & 4*

My dad was a great storyteller! His optical shop was a ministry outpost, and lots of stories were told. Some over and over and over. At his funeral, we heard some of those old, old stories of my dad, but more importantly, the story of God's great love for my dad was told and it was a story that transformed sorrow into hope. This is the power of an old story being told to bring something new!

Embedded in God's story of love for all of creation, my work in the synod clings to the old, old story, and it is a delight to hear the story told in new ways as it plays out in our faith communities and beyond.

Some highlights of ministry for me this year include:

- Establishing a constitution review team and getting constitutions reviewed and approved
- Personnel handbook for Northwestern Minnesota Synod Staff updated and approved
- Clarifying roles and structure for our conference deans, presidents, and nominations process

Bringing good order to the work of our synod is a great joy and privilege. Upcoming projects include:

- Ready to Retire retreat planning
- Welcome to the Synod orientation
- Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) handbook and process

But all this good work pales in comparison to the great honor of praying for you as rostered ministers and SAMS in our synod and praying for each faith community. Whether we are together for call process, milestone celebrations, or conflict, you have all deeply impacted my life and faith. God's love is so evident in the lives of your faith communities and the individual lives I get to meet and work with. Thank you, church for telling the stories of God each and every day. You inspire me to grow!

**Annual Report 2022-2023 for Rev. Rebel Hurd**

*Director for Evangelical Mission*

*Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

That old, old story has been told, lived, sketched, and embodied over and over again, AND what a gift that we get to tell it, live it, reframe it for today, and champion it in a new, new way. In Luke 5:17-26, the healing of the paralytic, Jesus was staying at a house in Capernaum. A group of men tried to bring a man living with paralysis to Jesus to be healed. They couldn't reach him as there was a large crowd both inside and outside of the house. The men had to find a creative way to get to Jesus. An old, old story that sounds a lot like our current story as we find creative ways to get to Jesus and to bring the gospel of Christ to our neighbors for the sake of the world.

This is the work we do together and the work I do daily as your Director for Evangelical Mission. It has been both an honor and privilege and undoubtedly Spirit-led. Part of that work is entering into your places of worship to preach, teach, and show up. Thank you for inviting me to over forty on-site church visits and consultations this past year; and into too many virtual spaces to count. I am so grateful for the welcome into your sacred spaces.

Another holy space I get to enter each month is our synod's mission developer meeting. I am fueled by the passion of our five Mission Developers who proclaim the good news in new ways, develop and grow faith communities, work for justice, and welcome all to the table of grace. Our Mission Development sites are A Community Called Grace, Peoples Church, Table of Mercy, Rural Revival, and A New Journey Parish. Please include them in your prayers as we are called to do this work together.

I also appreciate your prayers for our mission together throughout the synod and am sincerely grateful for your financial generosity, which enables this vital work to happen. Your over-and-above gifts for our current vitality program: Rural Revival, along with Churchwide grants, have given us the opportunity to practice, listen, learn, tweak, and find the best way forward to engage more people and congregations with opportunities for vitality.

**Together**, through the Rural Revival program, **we** develop a plan to move forward in ministry focusing on the following:

1. **Spiritual Practice:** Dwelling in God's Word, listening to God's Holy Spirit, trusting in God's leading, and abiding in prayer.
2. **Assessing:** Understanding your current mission field and needs.
3. **Stewarding:** Imagining the sharing of resources with surrounding places of worship.
4. **Leading:** Assessing the possibility of new church leadership through lay leadership, shared pastoral services, and/or Synod Authorized Ministers.
5. **Equipping:** Building a plan together with concrete possible next steps, which may include focusing on evangelism, generosity, and hospitality.
6. **Trusting:** in God's promised future for the community of faith and the followers of Jesus where you are planted and, in your capacity, to take the next steps.

It is Holy Spirit-driven work! Many of you have also inquired about how you can be a part of it. In response to those requests, we are creating new pathways for you and your congregations to enter into this work. Please watch for future announcements of Vitality Days coming soon.

Your Companion Synod Team has been meeting all year to learn more and discover what our accompaniment relationship can be with the people of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in India. It has been a humbling experience to lead this group. They are gifted, educated, and beyond passionate to be laborers in the field of our global church. Our travel to India in January of 2024 will continue a long relationship to broaden and deepen who we can be together as a Christian community. Please visit [here](#) for resources on our companion work, along with meeting the team. As we wrap up our Spring Appeal, we look forward to sharing half the resources gathered to continue this work and

half with congregations excited to step into a new way of being stewards of the Earth with Green Grants.

We give thanks for our Anti-Racism Team, who has provided training to nurture safe and healthy spaces for the ministry of the Gospel to unfold and shape an abundant future for all in Northwestern Minnesota.

To date, 131 leaders have been trained in our synod Anti-racism events [lay, rostered ministers, SAMs]. We aim to train all leaders [lay, rostered ministers, SAMs] within three years.

Thank you for your mission support! Without it, we could not do this vital work. As we seek to follow Jesus and be the church in our communities, we give thanks for the gift of walking together in shared ministry throughout the Northwestern Minnesota Synod and the world. What a gift it is to do ministry together!

Finally, I continue with my commitment to pray for our congregations, leaders, synod, and church each day. I would rejoice in your prayers and your generous support for the work we do together as the church continues to move forward. May the Lord bless you and keep you this day!

In God's Mission Together,



Rev. Rebel Hurd

**Annual Report 2022-2023 for Kristina Johnson Dernier**  
*Director of Communications, Events, and Youth Ministry*  
*Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

*<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup> constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup> because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:3-6*

I thank God for so many things. This past year, I have been able to continue to serve as the Director for Communications, Events, and Youth Ministry for the Synod. I am grateful that much of my job can be done remotely, as I could work from my father's hospital rooms in November and December and then from home to care for him as needed. I think that my job title is self-explanatory on what I get to do, but here is a little rundown of the past year.

Communications: This has continued to be how I spend most of my time. I have attempted to get you the information you all need in a timely fashion. We launched the website; woot woot! We have our

weekly e-Newsletter, the Northern Lights, that gets disbursed on Wednesday afternoons; if you want to get added to the list, please contact me. Follow us on our social media platforms; we are active on Facebook, Instagram, and a bit on Twitter. I continue to be humbled by the generosity of those who donate to the Synod to help make our initiatives happen; I help with our fundraising, and I am support for our initiatives.

Events: We have had some great events this past year! Thank you to the planning team from Conferences 4 and 6, who helped put on our Theology for Ministry Retreat this past September at the Shooting Star Convention Center. We had our first “Road Trip,” where Bishop Bill and Pastors Rebel and Genelle, along with other synod staff, went out to the eight conferences and met with you all, be on the lookout for this year’s in August and September. We had our second Great Synod Get-Together in Bemidji, and I think it was “great” indeed! Thank you to First Lutheran for hosting this year. I look forward to more gatherings this next year.

Youth Ministry: This is the beginning of my 13<sup>th</sup> year as the Synod’s youth person! We had a truly wonderful Middle School Youth Gathering in November at Luther Crest Bible Camp in Alexandria with the theme “Who is my Neighbor?” I have also been meeting virtually twice a month with the wonderful people in our Synod, that minister to and with those in the first third of life (children, youth, and young adults). I am always awed by the ministry that is happening in our congregations! Also, mark your calendars for the ELCA Youth Gathering, July 16-20, 2024, in New Orleans, and they are adding a Young Adult Gathering for 18-35-year-olds this time.

I am praying for you, I will do my best to help resource you and your congregation, and I am grateful for you and how you have been God’s hands and feet in this Synod.

### **Annual Report 2022-2023 for Cheryl Zeh**

*Office Administrator*

*Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

The synod office has continued to be a hub of activity over the past year, and I have enjoyed welcoming people and tending to a wide variety of office duties. In addition, some of my other responsibilities include working with contributions and other income, providing support to Pastor Jon and our Candidacy program, administering background checks, and providing support to Bishop Bill and Pastor Rebel, our DEM.

As I think back on this past year, I am amazed at the generosity and faithfulness of our congregations and individuals, despite continued challenges. I am grateful for the privilege and joy of serving with our wonderful staff and being a part of supporting the ministries we all share together as a synod.

**Annual Report 2022-2023 for Joan Meulebroeck**

*Financial and Data Systems Specialist*

*Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Philippians 4:4*

This verse was my mantra while navigating my work and life during the pandemic. It continues to be a verse I try and live into, even during times of sadness, anger, confusion, and just plain tiredness!

The work I am part of in the synod supports the larger church, not just an individual congregation as I did for so many years. Whether it's working with synod financials, database information for congregations and their leaders, the call process, or the work of our Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs), I find satisfaction that leads to joy in my work.

One of the big things I have learned from my work here is that I have to trust in God's timing. My impatience with things not happening soon enough can be disheartening. There's not enough time; there's not enough pastors, there's not enough money, etc. I miss it so much if I try and skip over what God is doing in my life (our lives) right now!

*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:9*

I will continue to share the "old, old story" through my work, and it will become a "new, new story" daily!

Peace,  
Joan

**Annual Report 2022-2023 for Pr. Jon Olson**

*Minister for Vocations*

*Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

My name is Pastor Jon B. Olson. I am privileged to work with Candidacy and the First Call program in our synod. It's a joy to accompany Candidates and First Call Rostered Ministers who have said 'yes' to telling the old, old story for the love of God's world.

First Call: All rostered ministers (pastors and deacons) in the ELCA are part of a First Call Theological Education program during their first three years of ordained ministry. I coordinate this program for the Northwestern Minnesota Synod and the Eastern North Dakota Synod. In these two synods, our First Call rostered ministers are placed in a Colleague Group where they meet monthly with a seasoned facilitator to discuss the joys and challenges of rostered ministry. I wish to extend heartfelt thanks to the three rostered ministers in our synod who serve as Colleague Group Leaders: Pastor Mary Suomala Folkerds in Moorhead, Pastor Jerry Lanes in Alexandria, and Pastor Ron Gladen in Bemidji. Your work with our FCTE-rostered ministers is greatly appreciated.

In addition to the Colleague Groups, our First Call rostered ministers participate in the yearly Core Event retreat. In 2022, we held our Core Event in Crookston, MN. I worked closely with Pastors Devlyn Brooks, Michele Jenson, and Rachel Johnson this past year in planning this retreat. Thanks to all three for making this retreat such a meaningful event.

Candidacy: In my role with Candidacy in our synod, I have the joy of accompanying the nine Word and Sacrament candidates and the two Word and Service candidates who are discerning calls to rostered ministry. As I work with them through Entrance, Endorsement, Internship, and Approval (the steps in Candidacy), it's become clear that we have some very faithful and gifted candidates in our synod. These talented men and women will serve the church well in the years ahead!

Thankfully, I share the work of candidacy with a dedicated Candidacy Committee. I extend gratitude to Dr. Lois Malcolm (Luther Seminary), Pr. Greg Isaacson, Pr. Tim Megorden, Sr. Krista Anderson, Rebecca Harrington, Dr. Tim Hiller, Pr. Judy Holmen, Cheryl Zeh, Pr. Eric Clapp, Phyliss Neuenfeldt, Pr. Chris Eldredge (Chair), Pr. Greg Billberg, Dn. Ruth Blom, Pr. Dominique Buchholz and Kale Johnson for the many ways they serve the church through the Candidacy Committee. Our Candidacy Committee conducts the interviews of our candidates, offers encouragement as relators (mentors), makes recommendations for the Fund for Leaders scholarships, and attends to the other business that comes before us.

Again, it's a pleasure to be your partner in ministry through Candidacy and the First Call program in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod.

God's Blessings

Pastor Jon B. Olson

### **Annual Report 2022-2023 for Kathy Levenhagen, SAM**

*Synod Minister for Community and Leader Engagement*

*Conferences 1 and 2 – Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

As I take a moment and review all that has happened in Conferences One and Two, I am overwhelmed by all God has been up to. Each church has had its share of ups and downs. All of us are asking the same question; "Where is our congregation?"

No matter where you live, you will have a sign outside of city limits that will tell people how many people live in this place and time.

If we look out at a congregation of 30 people and the population sign says 240 people, we have about 200 people who might need the invitation to worship with you. In the past, families brought their own families to church; there wasn't a choice to stay home for the day. Today, we are so busy that we don't want to stop and rest even one day a week. I wish I had a simple answer for you about where the people are, but what I do know is that if each one of us invited just one other person to hear the Gospel's good news, it could be life-changing for both of us.

The recruiting in Conference One has been mostly great. At the beginning of this year, Pastor Mary Gilthvedt retired to sunny Florida, and Pastor Brigitte Simpson accepted a new challenge in the Bemidji area. Conference Two has had some movement with the three churches in Thief River Falls; now the churches are being served by Pastor Stephanie White at Redeemers, Pastor Eric Miller at Trinity, and Pastor Kristin Ostercamp serving Zion. We have spent much time and energy looking for pastors and SAMs who would serve many small congregations that still have faithful people showing up each week.

Part of my job is working with the Synod Authorized Ministers (SAM) in our synod. Four years ago, we had about 15 SAMs, and now there are around 30 people who have felt God calling them to lead a congregation. We continue to ask that if you see someone in your congregation with some good leadership skills and a deep love for God, we would love to have a conversation with them. The lay classes offered at Luther Crest continue to grow. It has been helpful for the SAMs who hold other jobs, as well as SAMs for a church, to attend by Zoom.

I have thought about the work I help with as a staff person and sometimes find myself frustrated that as hard as we try, there are no names of pastors or SAMs we can share with you. But then, I remember God is in charge, and maybe, just maybe, He is trying to do something new in your congregation. Life with God is never settled, it is on the move, and He is guiding and leading us into something we may not yet understand. What is our job? Being faithful and loving our neighbors. We can do that.

### **Annual Report 2022-2023 for Pr. Chris Leach**

*Synod Minister for Community and Leader Engagement*

*Conferences 5 and 6 – Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

Greetings, Dear Friends in Christ,

I have been serving as an Engagement Minister for just over a year now, and I find myself returning over and over again to a deep sense of thankfulness for the faith leaders of our synod, as well as our churches that each share God's story of love in beautiful and unique ways. Traveling around, seeing your sacred spaces, meeting with call committees, and reflecting with leaders during exit interviews has been a joy. God is moving a great big way throughout our synod, and I am thankful for the gift it has been to hear your story.

While we have a detailed call process with several helpful resources, I am thankful that many churches make it their own within their context. There is space to be creative while discerning the Spirit's work in our midst. It, of course, has come with many challenges as there are many more openings than there are candidates, an on-going challenge that has led us to explore solutions creatively. This, too, feels like the work of the Spirit, and I am thankful for your prayer and imaginativeness as we explore ideas together. We trust that God has got this.

I am especially thankful for the times I have sat down with leaders to visit about their ministry in their exit interviews. I have found that time to be rather sacred, a space to name, celebrate, and even let go as needed. The care and openness of those gathered have touched my heart, and I am thankful for the stories of love that have filled those spaces.

It is a wild ride that we share in ministry, but I am thankful for you and the care you offer to each of our congregations of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod. Blessings on this next year, and know that my thoughts and prayers are with you. Peace on the journey!

Pr. Chris Leach

**Annual Report 2022-2023 for Pr. Dennis Preston**

*Synod Minister for Community and Leader Engagement*

*Conferences 7 and 8 – Northwestern Minnesota Synod – ELCA*

As the title describes, my part-time role on synod staff is to engage with congregation leaders, SAMs, and pastors in the Fergus Falls and Alexandria conferences. I thoroughly enjoy reaching out to these leaders with phone calls, texts, and emails to offer support and a listening ear. There are always more opportunities for engagement than my part-time status allows. Here is an overview of my work, always seeking to work closely with the rest of the synod staff:

- An average week consists of several phone call check-ins with call committee chairs, council presidents, SAMs, and rostered ministers.
- When needed, I will lead exit interviews with a pastor or SAM as they conclude their ministry in a congregation.
- I give orientation and support to church councils as they enter a time of transition.
- I offer training and support to call committees and walk them through the process. Because of the shortage of available pastors, walking alongside a congregation will span many months and even longer.
- I attend staff meetings, synod events, and conference-rostered minister gatherings when possible.

It is exciting when a new ministry partnership begins between a rostered minister or SAM and a congregation. I seek to be an available and supportive resource in Conferences 7 and 8. I am blessed to be able to work with a Spirit-filled, hardworking, knowledgeable, compassionate, and delightful synod staff. It is a joy and a privilege to have the opportunity to serve God's church as one of your Engagement Ministers.