

First of all, what an honor it is to serve you—the people of the Western Iowa Synod. Thank you, Bishop Scott, and to the rest of the synod staff for your patience and support as I continue to grow into this new role. And thank you to the congregations and leaders who have invited me to join you in listening together for where the Holy Spirit is calling us—as congregations, as a synod, and as part of the larger body of Christ.

One of the striking things I heard recently was from my predecessor Pr. Judy Johnson, who shared that just a few years ago congregations in transition could expect a wait of about 9 months to a year before calling a new pastor. Now, many congregations face a wait of 2 to 3 years.

It's been deeply fulfilling to walk alongside colleagues and congregations in the call process. Often what's most needed is simply a space to share experiences and frustrations—and a gentle reminder of where hope for the future still lives.

As our synod staff comes together, it's exciting and deeply fulfilling to see where the Holy Spirit is leading us. One of the clearest calls we've heard is to equip and empower the leaders of the Western Iowa Synod. Pr. Emily Dalen and I have taken a fresh approach to First Call Theological Education, and we continue to explore how we can all collaborate share wisdom with one another—developing practical and relevant skills for ministry in this changing time.

Isaiah 43:19 reminds us, “For behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth—do you not perceive it?” How we *do church together* continues to adapt and shift as our culture changes—but through it all, I see the Holy Spirit at work. God is inviting us to come together as the body of Christ in new and life-giving ways. In my ministry journey, before seminary and across different denominations, I saw again and again how the need for lay ministry leaders continues to grow.

Synodically authorized ministers make it possible for churches to have pastoral leadership when they might otherwise go without. I recently met a young woman for whom the traditional seminary path isn't a possibility right now. As she begins training to become a SAM, she has a meaningful opportunity to explore her call to ministry—and it's a joy to be a part of her journey.

Instead of telling you what I've been learning about our synodically authorized ministers (SAMs), I've asked one of our SAMs to share from their own deep and faithful experience.