

2019 Report of the Assistant to the Bishop

The Rev. Leila Ortiz

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This coming August will mark 3 years since I joined the synod staff and began my work as Assistant to the Bishop for mobility and candidacy. In that time, I've had the honor and privilege of walking alongside councils, transition teams, call committees, interims, deacons, pastors, seminarians and people discerning their call to ministry. I've listened and observed. I've paid close attention to every dream and concern, every want and need, and for every time fear or glee filled the room. I can tell you that there is a true desire to grow the church and to fill our sanctuaries with many children and young families; that many among us want what we see in our local communities reflected in our pews Sunday morning: a diversity of people, of different colors, ethnicities, politics, worldviews. I can tell you that many in our synod are tired of talking or hearing about racism, white supremacy, white fragility, privilege, immigration, walls, separation of families... I can tell you that so many think they are alone in this sentiment and are relieved to learn that they are not alone. We're tired of talking and hearing about it all, too. We rather live in a world where social justice matters were irrelevant to our ministries and to our church; where these injustices and threats to humanity didn't exist at all. And yet, here we are, squirming in our seats and wondering, "If we're all so tired of it, why is she bringing it up?" As I wrote this report, I thought the same thing! So, I sympathize with you.

And yet I'm compelled by the Spirit to bring it up because this is the world each and every one of us in this room and beyond, are called to. These issues aren't less true or relevant to our ministries simply because we don't want to talk about them or because they make us profoundly uncomfortable. I know. These issues, personally make me ill, at times outraged, and sad beyond measure, but this is our messy, complicated, and beloved world.

Friends, I'm sharing this because each time this call leads me into a conversation about mission and vision, about leadership and church business, about discernment and call, I am compelled by the Spirit to remember this messy, complicated, beloved world. I remember it and discern next steps in ministry with you from a place of deep yearning that we intentionally show up as church for the sake of this relentless place we live in, even when it hurts or stings our pride, egos, understandings of self, legacy, and/or tradition.

From this place of call and commitment we have been intentional in whom we engage for call into our synod. Since coming into this role, we have made 47 calls into our synod: 6 deacons, 35 pastors, 12 calls to specialized ministry. Of these 47 calls, 14 were made since our last assembly: 1 deacon, 10 pastors, 3 calls to specialized ministry.

These rostered ministers, along with each rostered and lay leader of our synod, are encouraged and empowered to do ministry and look beyond their own ministries; to intentionally call out the gifts for ministry that are present in the child, youth, person oftentimes sitting right next to them. The world I keep mentioning; this messy, complicated, beautiful world we're all called to, is hungry, thirsty, and desperately aches for a word of grace and belonging. We have it! We have a feast to share and it needs to be shared with "hopeful recklessness," as Bishop Graham so elegantly insisted upon at Pr. John

Mbatta's ordination just a couple months ago. We need to share this good news as far and as wide as we can, not knowing where, or if it will land, but confident in God's ability to pierce a heart of stone with a sincere word that warms the soul. In the spirit of hopeful recklessness, the Candidacy Committee is committed to walking with candidates for ministry that are intrigued by Jesus and the warm word he embodies and invites us to share.

In the spirit of hopeful recklessness, we want everyone in this room to intentionally look around, name, and invite people who love Jesus as friend, teacher, and savior, who love people, as Bp. Graham taught us last year, "the way cat people love cats" the fun and the feral ones, and who love the church because it's ministry is for the sake of all God's beloved creation.

Since coming into this role, our work as synod together has resulted in 35 lay leaders entering our candidacy process: 15 have been entranced, 7 endorsed, and 17 were approved for rostered ministry. Of these 35 candidates, 5 candidates were entranced since our last assembly, 2 were endorsed, and 5 were approved for rostered ministry. This is reason to celebrate! Remember these candidates in your prayers, hold them near, and if you know any of them, send them a note or text of encouragement from time to time. It would make their day to know they're not forgotten during this intense time of study and self-discovery.

There are congregations in our synod who are also in a space of self-discovery and intentional discernment; they look to how God is calling them to show up in their particular context and place. At the moment, nine congregations in this space are in a study process, five are served by interims, and two are awaiting names. Remember them in your prayers as well.

As we discern with congregations and candidates, we also discern with our colleagues in ministry and respond to the needs of the world to the best of our ability. Last year I shared with you the unprecedented partnership that developed between our synod, the Delaware-Maryland Synod, and The Caribbean Synod.

As you may remember, in September, 2017 Hurricanes Irma and Maria hit the Caribbean Islands and left already depressed communities, due to the economic crisis, all the more devastated and desperate for relief. During the season of Epiphany we made an appeal to you and you responded with offering and pledges that amounted to \$12,836. The Delaware-Maryland Synod also made an appeal and received a total of \$87,000. You have continued to donate to this initiative and we have received a total of \$133,800.

We reached out to the Caribbean Synod and learned that many of the pastors, including the bishop, had experienced devastating losses. Even still, they remained present for their church members, but had yet to receive care themselves. Bishop Lozada, of the Caribbean Synod, understood that this initiative would be most helpful if we used the funds to support and care for the church leaders and caregivers to the community. In August of 2018, we were able to gather all the pastors of the Caribbean Synod, including the Virgin Islands, in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, for a weekend of worship, conversation, dreaming, and rest.

Bishop Gohl, Bishop Graham, Bishop Felipe Lozada, and the newly elected Bishop Idalia Negron joined us on this retreat and it became an experience we will not soon forget. We vented, we cried, we laughed, we ate, and we danced. It was truly a holy and sacred gathering for all those present.

As a result of this gathering, Bishop Graham gave us the green light to include elements of the Building Puentes Initiative in his last Bishop's Convocation. Together we designed one convocation with 2 parts under the title: "Forward together with Courage and Hope". Part 1 was held in October of 2018 where we invited Rev. Dr. Francisco Javier Goitia Padilla, the Program Director for Theological Formation, Seminaries and Lay Schools in the Domestic Mission Unit of the ELCA, and once Dean of El Seminario Evangelico de Puerto Rico. He spoke to us on how we might preach with courage and hope with the present context and future of our church in mind. His lecture is now published in the journal, Currents in Theology and Mission. Part 2 of the convocation was held in Puerto Rico in April of 2019.

Thirty-six rostered ministers of our synod and the Delaware-Maryland Synod, along with some family and friends, gathered in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where we met the rostered leaders of the Caribbean Synod over a meal and served as supply preachers the Sunday following the convocation. Eleven pastors remained in Puerto Rico, or went to the Virgin Islands, to give local pastors the Sunday off and serve as supply preachers.

I'm happy to report that beyond Good Shepherd in Gaithersburg, other churches in our synod have now formed relationships with churches in the Caribbean and are co-creating interesting and fruitful ways of being church together, even at a distance. Your generosity is very much welcome and encouraged as our three synods continue to accompany each other on this journey of struggle and faith.

These last 3 years of ministry have been simultaneously heavy with concern for this messy, complicated, beloved world and also filled with great joy. I want to thank the synod staff for helping make this such a rich and wonderful experience. I can talk for days about who these people are and how God has used them to give me life in my darkest days of ministry and in my personal life. We still have a couple months together, so I refuse to say goodbye just yet...

I do, however, want to also thank you, each pastor, deacon, candidate, council, and call committee. You welcomed me into your sacred spaces and trusted me to help you discern between what you wanted and what you actually needed to live out your call. Our work together wasn't always smooth or swift, but it was fruitful and oftentimes resulted in discovery and opportunities for transformational ministry. In the process, you taught me something about us as the church in time of difficulty, discomfort, and discernment. You taught me that we are indeed better together and when we respond to the Spirit's invitation to move with Her into new opportunities for ministry... even, and especially when, it hurts or stings our pride, egos, understandings of self, legacy, and/or tradition.

Thank you and may God continue to teach us how to show up as church with hopeful recklessness for the sake of our beloved world and in Jesus' name.