

Grace and Peace to you...

For those of you who do not know me, I am Pr. Leila Ortiz and I serve as assistant to the bishop with special focus on mobility and candidacy.

Before I begin sharing what I've been working on in our synod, I'd like to thank Dr. Reggie Williams for joining us this weekend and bringing us a word of wisdom and challenge as we live into the next 500 years as participants in the Protestant Reformation. Thank you.

I'd also like to thank our Bishop Eaton, for choosing to be with us and sharing with us how it is that we, as the Metro DC Synod, fit into the vision and mission that God has placed before us as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Thank you, Bishop. We are honored to have you with us.

In my time of ministry as a member of the synod staff, I've had the pleasure of working alongside candidates that are discerning their call to ministry and candidates that are seeking a call within our synod. As I've done this work, I can't help but remember Bishop Graham coming into my office my first day on the job, standing before me, and sharing as a matter of fact, "The decisions you make in this office will affect and shape the next 20-25 years of this synod." No pressure. He followed that by saying, "the leaders that come into our synod will likely stay here for that amount of time, if not longer." And so I quickly learned that my role was to work with him, and Pr. Phil Hirsch, with the vision and mission of this church at the forefront of my mind. Vision and mission. Present and future.

And so with this in mind and in working with candidates, we seek passion and love for Jesus Christ. We seek people of prayer who are not intimidated by our identity as *Evangelical* disciples of Jesus; people who care to walk alongside hurt people, different people, eager people. We seek, as Bishop Graham noted so eloquently in a letter to our rostered ministers in April, "leaders who love people the way a cat person loves cats. A cat person loves fancy cats that look down on humans, and average cats that like having their ears scratched, and bad cats that mess up the furniture, and feral cats that would tear off your finger if you tried to pet them. A cat person just loves cats. We look for rostered ministers who love all kinds of people, not just the people who need you or love you back or come to your churches. We are seeking people people." And so, if anyone in this room identifies as a people person who loves Jesus and is inspired to share the gospel story in word and in deed, give me a call. I'd love to explore the myriad possibilities of ministry in this church and for us to shape the next 20-25 years of ministry in our synod together.

As of today, with the help of an excellent candidacy committee and its chair, Dr. and Deacon Erin Swenson-Reinhold, we have 17 candidates in the candidacy process and since I began on synod staff in August of 2016, 5 of them were entranced into the process, 3 were endorsed and 4 of them were approved for rostered ministry.

Again, if any of your hearts are burning within or you know of someone in your congregation you believe may have a call to rostered ministry in this church, give me a call.

We're in need of inspired, passionate, and transformative leaders to join the 17 candidates that have bravely answered the call to serve the church.

With vision and mission in mind, I've also worked with congregations, call committees and councils as they discern who they truly are as a faith community in context, who God is calling them to be as they move forward in ministry, and who should be called to lead them. Since August, these conversations have led to 19 calls across our synod: 4 deacons and 15 pastors, 4 of which have come to us from other synods. At the moment, we have 8 congregations open for call, 4 of which are interviewing potential candidates and 4 are in ministry with an intentional interim. It's an exciting time in our synod involving much discernment and many Spirit-led conversations.

Much of this work is engaging in dialogue and in meaningful discussions that provoke deep thought and holy inquiry. I've had the honor of being part of such conversations, and at times I have been pressed to highlight issues of race and gender politics in church dynamics. I've had the responsibility of noting what it truly means to be a welcoming church that not only claims to welcome new members of diverse backgrounds, but that actually does indeed open its space to difference and newness, especially when considering who is to be called to lead them in mission. At times, these conversations are not easy, but are surely inspired and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

As some of you may remember, the last time we gathered in this very space for synod assembly we were pressed to engage issues of race in our church as a response to the shooting of 9 of our sisters and brothers at Mother Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina. We were pressed to engage the topic, not only because it was a tremendous tragedy, but because this hate filled act was no longer something that happened somewhere over there. This particular evil hit home; it was enacted by one of our own. Unhealthy as he may be, the reality is that Dylan Roof was a member of one of our ELCA congregations. This caused us, as an assembly, to pause and respond to the pain and frustration with conversation and in prayer.

Pr. Karen Brau and I led an open discussion where we discovered a great desire for safe and sacred space that was not devoid of difficult truths, serious critique, and necessary challenge. We opened the space for lament, shared our stories, and left knowing it would only serve as the beginning of this journey of confession, repentance, healing and new life. Since then the Racial Equity team was formed and has begun leading racial equity trainings for rostered and lay leaders within our synod. The hope is that the tools gathered at the trainings will then be shared and explored in context and in each of our congregations.

In conjunction with racial equity training, our synod has partnered with the Delaware Maryland Synod to have courageous conversations and provide trainings *for* immigrants and refugees and for any, and all, leaders and congregations within our synods who have claimed the call to serve and accompany immigrant and refugee communities. Here now a word from Bishop Bill Gohl of the Delaware- Maryland Synod and from our Bishop, Richard Graham: VIDEO

And so as a church, in this particular part of the country, Washington DC/Virginia/Delaware-Maryland, we've understood, as synods, that we are not simply called to watch and see what happens as would any bystander to any socio-political event or reality.

Instead, we understand that we are being drawn out of our comfort zones into the role of accomplice, collaborator, and true advocate for justice in word and in deed. As such we want to encourage all of you to become more acquainted with the work done by ELCA Advocacy, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and by Lutheran Social Services. We want you to explore their websites, invite their representatives to your congregations, and use the tools that have been created to support your ministry alongside the neighbor in context, all the while knowing that you have the support of your local and presiding bishop.

If your congregation is already involved in ministries that give special attention to dismantling racism and accompanying immigrant and refugee communities, we want to know about it and learn from what you've learned in the process. If you're curious or eager to learn more about what is happening and how you can join in the mission, let us know of your interest and we will point you in the right direction.

Lastly, I just want to say that our beloved Amy Thompson Sevimli: the pastor who held this position, brought me into this synod 4 years ago, and handed this position over to my care 10 ½ months ago, could not have prepared me for the weight, depth, and richness of this work. Literally. She couldn't. The transition happened so quickly we only had several hours for her to share all the wisdom she had accumulated in her 8 years of ministry in the synod office, before she would be taking flight to Tbilisi, Georgia. The good news is that while the demands and tasks vary, and often surprise me from day to day, the call remains the same: Love God, learn Christ, trust the Holy Spirit, live the Gospel message, and love your neighbor. This is the call we live into as ministers of the gospel who serve the parish, the community, the world and even, as synod staff.

I'm thankful for the opportunity and eager to continue on this journey of faith with all of you and in Jesus' name.