

From the bishop

Leadership

I have spent a lot of time in the last couple of years talking about “vitality” as it applies to local communities of faith. I’ve written and made presentations about the “marks of vitality” that are grounded in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Some of those “marks” bubble up naturally and organically among a gathered community. But more often than not, nurturing vitality and moving in the direction the church is called to move requires good leaders.

It’s tempting to think of church leadership too narrowly, as if the leaders who matter most are pastors or deacons. Too often people act as if there is a hierarchy of leaders, as if there is a ladder to climb or at least a better position to be had in one place than another. This has been true since some of the first misguided disciples argued about who among them was the greatest.

Leadership is not about power. It is about moving together toward a common goal. For us, the goal is a bold witness to the unambiguous love of God for the whole creation.

At its best, leadership among God’s people is shared and reaches deep into a reservoir of potential partners willing to work and move together. Such leadership is built on a few fundamentals that

characterize the sort of individuals who are most effective in helping us all to move. The most constructive leaders have:

- A living relationship with Jesus Christ.
- A consistent pattern of sharing the good news of Christ Jesus in ways that can be clearly understood and shared.
- The humility to ask for help and the courage to ask for forgiveness.
- The willingness and capacity to adapt (which means to “let go” of what no longer works).



Bishop Michael L. Burk

Not all leaders look alike or sound alike or have the same title or vocation. But every leader who serves best in a church that faces all sorts of challenges knows that this is always about Jesus. And people can tell which ones are still stuck on pondering who among us is the greatest.

Bishop Michael L. Burk

Getting lost to learn

By the Rev. Erika Uthe

“Given all of the challenges we face as a global community, it seems we are being issued a new call to adventure. We must chart an original path forward to a sustainable future. We don’t have any templates for getting us there. No one has figured this out yet. So, it’s up to us to get comfortable feeling lost while we find our way.” —the Rev. Cameron Trimble, executive director of the Center for Progressive Renewal

Getting lost may seem rather counterintuitive as the church continues to face what, from most metrics, looks like decline. Yet this is precisely one way to think about adaptive leadership—the ability to lead in uncharted territory for the sake of creating new cultures and new ways of being church and doing ministry.

For the last 12 months, 10 pastors from the Southeastern Iowa Synod not only learned what it is to be leaders in the midst of this massive upheaval, but excelled at finding a way in this uncharted territory. Thanks to a grant awarded by the ELCA congregational vitality team, these leaders started the year with a weeklong intensive in leadership training and spiritual formation. The learning continued through a year of leadership coaching and projects, and then a final weekend of mutual sharing and learning about how these leaders began to rethink their roles and leadership capacities in their contexts.

It’s becoming increasingly evident that congregational vitality and leadership are inextricably linked, and that congregations are only as vital as their leaders—both rostered ministers and lay leaders. You see, in this era of getting comfortable feeling lost while we find our way, the work of charting an original path can’t just fall to one individual: the pastor. There is a mutuality of

ministry, and charting an original path means that old patterns of being and doing must necessarily change. Congregational leaders are being called to step up, and reclaim the leadership and ministry of the baptized, support, and encourage the congregation when the inevitable conflict arises.

And conflict is inevitable because in any circumstance where change is present, some feel grief, loss, anger

“Change feels hard because it is hard. And it feels hopeful because it is hopeful.”

or hurt, while others feel excitement, expectation, impatience and anger that there are those who seem to be “holding up” the process.

In this atmosphere of conflict and deep polarization in society as a whole, it is even more key

that congregational leaders step up and model what it is to be faithful, to hold to the promise that united in the one bread of Jesus Christ, we remain one body as a church, bound not by our opinions of worship, programs or fellowship, but by the very Son of God, the Spirit poured out on Pentecost.

Congregational leadership certainly is facing a new day. And, as much as charting an original path is



Ten pastors from the Southeastern Iowa Synod participated in a yearlong congregational leadership and vitality program.

dependent upon lay leaders, it is also key that the called rostered minister—pastor or deacon—claim their own leadership. Someone has to go first—and this can be scary for anyone, yet this is the world in which we now live. Pastors and deacons face the daunting task of holding up the torch, peering into an unseen future and moving forward in spite of not knowing what exactly is ahead.

What we do know is that if congregations are going to engage in mission beyond simply “keeping the doors open” and reach the world with the good news of Jesus Christ, leadership at the congregational level must change. It is the role of pastor, deacon, council president, committee chair and those whose participation is to faithfully show up in worship to have the courage to go off course, trusting that God is there, too, expectantly waiting with open arms and maybe even asking, “What took you so long?”

In the words of the Rev. Amy Diller, a leadership school participant: “Change feels hard because it

is hard. And it feels hopeful because it *is* hopeful.” As you consider how leadership and vitality are connected in your own congregation, I leave you with the following questions to consider:

- What *new* mistakes are we making? How am I learning so as not to repeat old mistakes?
- How do we recognize destructive behaviors and patterns and seek out support to address them?
- How is God’s mercy and love central to all aspects of congregational life (even committee meetings!)?
- How is our mindset shaping the way we look at the future? Are we open and curious, or closed and judgmental? **✚**

The Rev. Erika Uthe is assistant to the bishop and director for evangelical mission.

2020 bishop election

The current bishop of the Southeastern Iowa Synod, Michael Burk, has announced that he will not be available for reelection at the end of his term in 2020. A new bishop will be elected at the synod assembly May 1-3, 2020, in Coralville.

The election of a new bishop is a process by which a “pastor of the synod” is called. It is similar to the process a congregation undertakes when calling a new pastor.

One of the first steps of this process was the formation of the synod’s ministry site profile, which is available online. It gives an overview of the landscape of this synod based on what survey participants have said about our life and ministry together.

As we continue this process together as the Southeastern Iowa Synod, we ask for your help by praying for the synod and its congregations as we undertake the process and praying for the people who are discerning the call to be bishop.

You can also help by learning more about this process, reading the synod ministry profile and staying informed. All information is located at seiasynod.org/bishop-election. [L](#)

