



**Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM)
Report to the Alaska Synod Assembly, April 2021
Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel**

The director for evangelical mission (DEM) is an ELCA churchwide deployed position to the Alaska Synod. This half-time position works with stewardship, new starts and congregational mission planning/vitality. Partnerships and projects with the three expressions of ELCA – churchwide, synod and congregations – are highlighted in this report.

Churchwide

For **FY 2021, Alaska Synod congregations and ministries will receive a total of \$176,000 in Congregational Vitality grants** from our churchwide partners. These funds support ministry on the Seward Peninsula and the Alaska Synod's newer ministries: Synodically Authorized Worshipping Communities Trapper Creek Fellowship, Table of Grace-Bethel and Our Neighbors Children's Music and Theatre-Anchorage. This comes in addition to COVID-19 funds received from churchwide (mentioned in other reports.) As DEM, I provide ongoing consultation and connection with congregations receiving churchwide grant support.

Meredith Harber (Christ-Soldotna) attended ELCA coach training virtually in 2020. **This brings our number of trained synod coaches to 13 lay and rostered leaders.** Several coaches have additional training and specialization in discipleship and/or stewardship. This past year, Alaska Synod coaches began meeting quarterly for continuing education, support and resources. Coaching is a ministry that comes alongside to help anyone who is feeling stuck in ministry or life and/or wants to work toward a goal. Synod coaches are available for lay and rostered leaders!

Synod

2020 was all about the pivot, as **congregations did the fast and faithful work of moving online and engaging virtually in so many ways.** The Alaska Synod collaborated to support this work by conducting an every-congregation website review and offering several workshops, including two on stewardship in a pandemic in 2020 and two on storytelling in early 2021. In addition to resources from churchwide and synod, so many congregational leaders around the synod supported, encouraged and taught each other best practices for ministry during a pandemic. Thank you!

Synod writers from Prince of Wales Island to Shishmaref contributed to a **synod-wide Advent devotional in December.** The faith reflections were wonderful! Electronic copies were utilized across the state, and print editions were sent to communities with limited internet access. Several rural communities made the devotional available to those who weren't part of a congregation. The devotional helped us stay connected when we've been physically separated.

Congregations and Clusters

Table of Grace- Bethel and Trapper Creek Fellowship (Synodically Authorized Worshipping Communities) are led by Rev. Ron Rucker. During the early days of the pandemic, these two far-apart congregations began worshipping together by Zoom, an unexpected and joyful collaboration. While Trapper Creek has resumed careful in-person worship, members who wish can still join the Table of Grace Zoom. Both sites have been able to continue to-go style food ministry; both have a passion for alleviating hunger and are in areas of need.

Our Neighbors Children's Music and Theatre-Anchorage, is led by Sister Annette Janka, who began just months before the COVID pandemic. Our Neighbors, housed at Christ Our Savior-Anchorage, offers children's music and theatre programming as a ministry outreach. After initially offering a children's theatre show in person, Sister Annette ably pivoted to an online children's theatre production in fall 2020 and now gives children's music lessons on Zoom. She also supports worship at Christ our Savior through music and alternative worship, and teaches music at a local private school as a form of outreach.

Mesa Sagrada- Palmer, a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community that uses a dinner church model, has been on-hold during the pandemic and will determine next steps post-COVID.

Scheduling and Upcoming

As the director for evangelical mission, I am available to do **mission planning and visioning with your congregation,** as well as stewardship education, whether with the congregational council, such as council retreat, or with a small group of leaders. All collaborations are on Zoom or via conference call until otherwise indicated.

I am currently on maternity leave from April 1-July 16. I look forward to partnering with you upon my return.

Explorations and Experiments: Following the Spirit

At the end of 2020, the Alaska Synod closed a ministry exploration: The Prince of Wales Lutheran Ministry Exploration. We tried something new and it didn't work. Yet we celebrate the experience. Why? We took a risk, prayerfully tried something new, connected with wonderful people and learned a great deal in the process. There's an expression called "failing forward," and it's something our churchwide partners are encouraging us to try.

The Prince of Wales exploration began after a woman on the island in Southeast Alaska contacted the synod office asking for a Lutheran presence on the island. Over a three-year period, we sent three synod leaders to build relationships and lead worship in homes. Thank you to Rev. Keith Anderson and Rick Green (First-Ketchikan) and Randy Satak (Resurrection-Juneau) for your leadership. We also connected with First Presbyterian of Criag and Klawock. In the end, the limits of "distance ministry" plus a global pandemic showed there wasn't a path for a separate Lutheran ministry at this time.

When ministry is viewed as exploration and experimentation, nothing is lost. Every "failure" is an opportunity to learn something new for the sake of learning how to share the Good News of Jesus Christ the next time more effectively. And God shows up in the process! In our travels to Prince of Wales, we heard faith stories and received abundant generosity from those on the island. We led worship at the Presbyterian church during a pastoral vacancy and engaged in ecumenical dialogue and fellowship. We heard stories of the challenges of living on a remote island and prayed with and for each other. We stayed open to how God might be using our leaders on the island. We learned strategies to better prepare and train our leaders for the next time we sense God leading us into a new ministry exploration.

Explorations and experiments aren't just for synods. What about your congregation? We have seen incredible explorations and experiments as Alaska Synod congregations have pivoted to response to the COVID-19 pandemic, from online worship to "to-go" food ministries for those in need. Most of our congregations have done some form of exploration and experiment in the past year!

How else might God be calling your congregation to explore and experiment? Does someone in your congregation have a new idea? Is there a community partner that seems to align with your congregation's mission? Are there unreached groups of people in your area you could serve or learn from? There are so many places for exploration and experimentation.

The recent ELCA churchwide Future Church re-organization created a new working group at churchwide: the innovation team. These churchwide partners teach us to think about innovations (another word for explorations and experiments) and that a good idea can come from anywhere. The ideas may or may not work; failure is definitely an option! As Christians, we're called to be faithful, not successful. God can use it all. Churchwide director for new congregations Ruben Duran says, "Fail fast and fail forward!" It's okay to try new things. Being open to the Spirit can lead us into the life God intends.

To learn more about churchwide's emphasis on innovation, check out the ELCA innovation lab homepage: <https://blogs.elca.org/innovationlab/>

- Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel, director for evangelical mission