

In 1965, Hal David and Burt Bacharach composed the song “**What the world needs now**” against the backdrop of a country divided by the Vietnam War. Jackie DeShannon and Dionne Warwick each recorded it to critical and popular acclaim. The lyrics are rather simple: What the world needs now, is love, sweet love, it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of; what the world needs now, is love, sweet love, no not just for some, but for everyone.

Now, 58 years later, these lyrics seem to be written for our time: what the world needs now, is love, sweet love, no not just for some, but for everyone.

We see the need in the studies that tell us teenagers are more lonely and socially isolated than any previous generation.

We see it in the rampant gun violence that plagues neighborhoods across the country.

We see the need for this love when political disagreement turns to fractured families and congregations.

We see it in places where anti-trans legislation tries to erase the very existence of God’s beloved children.

We see the need for this love, sweet love, in places where hate-filled language is accepted as the way we talk to one another.

What the world needs now is love, sweet love. I could go on and on – but you well know the reality in which we find ourselves.

Into this, we dare to gather in assembly with the theme and call to **Lead with Love**. Gathered in the loving embrace of our savior, we are bold to believe that we can and will Lead with Love. Empowered by the Spirit of the risen Christ, we can show the world God’s love for all creation – every person, every community, every part of the cosmos.

I have seen this church -- our congregations, our synod, and the churchwide expression experiencing and sharing this sweet love with each other and with the world around us. You have as well.

More than 550 of us gathered on a warm September Saturday at Six Flags Great Adventure for **Synod Day**, which included a ministry fair, worship, lunch, and riding rides. We experienced the sweet love of Jesus as we sang and danced and learned and gave witness to a God who delights in relationships. We hope to do it again in 2024.

Christ’s love is shared as we are connected to each other in ways we never would have imagined had it not been for the pandemic years – holding educational events online, welcoming worshipers from across the country or world into our digital sanctuaries, meeting as council, often with better attendance when we zoom.

We navigated these changes out of necessity and are continuing them because they work to connect us with each other and offer ways for strangers to peek in on our ministry. I’m still not convinced that offering the sacraments online is the right way to go, but we’re praying and studying and asking the questions.

I have prayed with and listened to you – lay leaders and pastors and deacons serving in congregations as we gathered online for a time of check-in and support. You have shared your

joys and your struggles with each other. Treasurers, chief lay officers, office administrators and our rostered leaders have responded throughout the year to my invitations to meet, and in those meetings, Jesus is present.

I have been with and seen your congregation in worship – where people of differing educational, economic, and ethnic backgrounds come together to hear the word, share the supper, and praise the Lord.

We take it for granted sometimes, that these intergenerational, diverse gatherings happen week in and week out – but these are glimpses of the love of God in action. Bringing us together with folks we might not ever know otherwise and making us one family.

One such gathering I was proud to be a part of was at Prince of Peace in Princeton Junction for their **Joyful Noise** worship service. Once a month on Sunday afternoon, Prince of Peace welcomes people with special needs and their families to lead a worship service where it's ok to get up and dance, sit on a bean bag instead of the pew, ask questions out loud, and where everyone holds the prayer rope while reciting the Lord's prayer.

I know there are a couple of other places that host similar services to welcome those who often feel unwelcome at more formal worship opportunities. Thank you for sharing the sweet love of Jesus in this tangible way.

Because worship is at the heart of what we do and who we are, you've invited me to be part of joyful celebrations for anniversaries, on ordinary Sundays, and for bittersweet services of holy closure. We've been together for ordinations and installations. Through music, dance, liturgy, and fellowship, we have been church together. In every place, the love of God in Christ gathers, feeds, and sends us back into the world.

I've been with you as you've said farewell to your pastor and then enter a time of transition, wondering and worrying when or if you'll get another pastor. I know it's an anxious time being in this kind of transition. We have more than 25 congregations looking for a pastor - either part-time or full-time and another 18 in transition but not yet looking for a pastor. Part of my role in loving you is telling the truth – whether we want to hear it or not.

Across the ELCA, there are not enough pastors to fill this need. In December, an analysis showed there were close to 400 available ministers of word and sacrament compared to more than 1700 congregations looking for a pastor. I don't know how those numbers have changed since December.

So what does this mean? (A good Lutheran question). For us, this has meant stewarding conversations about collaboration, cooperation, and closure. Regardless of whether you are in a transition or not, these are conversations you should be having with yourselves and neighboring communities – ELCA and full communion partners alike.

How best do we serve the community in which we are planted? What is gained or what is lost if congregations share staff? How might we strengthen our witness and increase capacity for service?

We currently have three pairs of congregations who discerned that consolidating or joining together would result in stronger and more vital ministries than staying as stand-alone ministries.

When I call your name, please stand so folks can see who you are and perhaps ask you questions about the process when they see you throughout the day.

First, we have Nativity in East Brunswick and Christ the King in Kendall Park – they are combining to become **Abiding Love Lutheran Church in Kendall Park**.

Christ Our Savior and Redeemer, both in southern Jersey City have become **Christ Our Redeemer** and will use the Redeemer buildings on Warner Ave.

And third, St. Mark in Morristown and Good Shepherd in Florham Park are consolidating and have become **Amazing Grace Lutheran Church in Florham Park**.

These new congregations have spent long hours praying, asking questions, getting to know each other, and looking at their resources to determine how best to serve Christ's mission in the world. They will need our prayers and our accompaniment as they step out in faith to become these new communities of God's love.

I can say with confidence, these will not be the last consolidations or mergers that we will have. What would happen if you joined with a neighboring congregation and offered Bible study, youth ministry, service projects, and worship together? Would sharing a pastor mean that one congregation worshiped on Sunday morning and another on Sunday evening or Wednesday evening? Where is God leading you today?

A second way we are addressing the needs of leadership in congregations is by raising up rostered leaders in different ways. In this past year, we have had two congregations identify a member to become their pastor. And both people have entered candidacy to become pastors through the alternate route known as TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries). **Phil Sherzer** at Prince of Peace in Denville and **Vincent Piekarski** at Holy Spirit in Villas are now enrolled in seminary while serving the pastoral needs of their respective congregations.

Perhaps there is someone in your congregation whom God is calling to serve – if so, speak it out loud and invite them to consider candidacy.

Pastors, deacons (who can provide pastoral care, Christian education, lead social ministries, and preach), council leaders, Sunday school teachers, altar guild members, church musicians, food pantry volunteers, etc – this church needs all of us to Lead with Love for the sake of the world.

Now here's the other reality – **we have what we need** to be church today. Maybe not the structures or people that were needed to be the church of our parents and grandparents, but we have what we need to be the church Christ needs today.

We have the love of God in Christ pouring gifts abundantly into our lives – raising up leaders in new ways, giving us courage to experiment with how and where we gather, empowering us to engage our neighbors with the good news of Jesus. We have holy imaginations unleashed to ask “what if...”

What if we really believed we have what we need? What if God leads us in love so we actually try new ways of telling the timeless Gospel? What if our witness leads new people to hear and believe our message of grace? What if we dared to follow where the risen Christ is calling us so that holy chaos reigns?

As I've said before, when a military chaplain is with their troops on the battlefield, they open the back of the truck which becomes an altar and with the Bible, bread and wine, they have what it takes to be church. We have no less.

Part of my call as bishop means that I have responsibilities across the whole church. For the past four years I have served as **chair of the Conference of Bishops** – which means I also serve as a voting member of the ELCA Church Council. While this mostly means extra meetings, it also means I get a close-up view of what this church looks like across the country and around the world. And it is a beautiful, if at times flawed, picture of how we are loving God and neighbor. We are a church that Leads with Love!

As you know, we had an ELCA churchwide assembly last August which, among other things, called for a **Commission for A Renewed Lutheran Church** to look at our governing documents, especially the statement of purpose and principles of organization for churchwide, synod, and congregations, through the lens of antiracism.

35 people were appointed by the church council to staff this commission – out of over 400 nominations, our own **Alexandra Mack** from Holy Trinity, Red Bank, was chosen as one of the 35 to serve on this commission.

Please pray for her and the commission as they begin their work this summer. The churchwide assembly gave the mandate that this commission will report to the 2025 churchwide assembly in preparation for a possible re-constituting convention. Our structure needs to serve our mission – not the other way around, so after 37 years of being the ELCA, it's time to see if that's still the way it is.

As we embrace our theme of Lead with Love, I cannot help but note that this could be the mantra of our synod leaders. Our synod council meets to conduct the business between assemblies – always with an eye toward taking the most loving action. Our officers, while volunteers, take their work seriously and offer their time graciously.

Last year I mentioned that our treasurer, Jim Harris would not serve another term. Well as you saw in Jersey Jottings, he had a change of heart and the synod council joyfully appointed him to another 4-year term which began with our fiscal year February 1, 2023. (*Vice president Arundel Clarke and Secretary Blake Scalet have both been elected to serve another term*).

With a grateful heart, I say thank you to **Jim Harris, secretary Blake Scalet, and vice president Arundel Clarke**.

Please indulge me as I introduce and thank our synod staff, starting with those with whom we contract to serve specific tasks on a part time basis:

Pastor **Marc Stutzel** coordinates our candidacy work while also serving full time as pastor of Christ, Woodcliff Lake;

Pastor **Becky Resch** coordinates our first call theological education for those in their first 3 years of ordination while she also serves full time as the region 7 & 8 ELCA candidacy and leadership manager;

Pastor **Fred Becker** coordinates our EMU initiative while serving as full time pastor at Trinity, Dover;

Beth Peroni coordinates supply preaching coverage for our congregations without a regularly serving pastor – a challenging task as our available supply preachers is far less than the need;

Matt McDevitt and **Bob Poole** serve as our property managers – though Bob Poole has been out since mid-Dec following surgery and rehab;

Tom Kull serves as our real estate coordinator in selling buildings that have been turned over to us when a congregation closes – Tom works with realtors, attorneys, and congregation councils to coordinate a sale. Tom is stepping down from this position as he transitions full time to living in Florida.

The Sapon family – **Nicolas and Eugenia** - care for our synod office and grounds with love and diligence;

the **Cross Roads staff** coordinate our youth ministry with input from the Youth Ministry Mission Team. Please join me in saying thank you to these part time contracted staff people.

Lead with Love – when we do that, it means we can enter spaces unafraid to voice our opinions knowing we will be respected and heard. When we put these words into actions it means we treat each other with dignity and follow Martin Luther's explanation to the 8th commandment – interpret each other's actions in the best possible light. When we lead with love it means we will put the needs of others before our own.

This, my friends, is what it means to be a part of the NJ Synod staff. We lead with love in our daily interactions with each other and in our interactions with you –the congregations and leaders in the synod. While the number of people on staff full time has decreased over the years, the spirit of serving and joy in our work has not diminished.

Pastor **Maristela Freiberg** is actually an ELCA employee deployed to our synod to serve as Director of Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop. You may have worked with her in evangelism efforts, in a cohort of mission innovation, with our new starts and strategic ministries, or walking with you in a call process.

Pastor **Dean Brown** serves as an Assistant to the Bishop and Stewardship Specialist. You may have worked with him in any number of acronyms having to do with money and generosity – CGC, BCG, ECRF, EMU, with 6 weeks on money or walking with you in a call process.

Pastor **Sara Lilja** serves as director for our advocacy ministry LEAMNJ (Lutherans Engaging in Advocacy Ministry) and as an Assistant to the Bishop. In addition, she has been serving as interim pastor part time at Holy Communion in Berlin. You may have worked with her through one of the justice groups, in building healthy congregation relationships, on an action alert, or walking with you in a call process.

Dawn Roberts serves as Administrator for Mission and Ministry. You may have encountered Dawn as you registered for a synod event, submitted something for Jersey Jottings, or called the office on a Monday. The Assistants to the Bishop count on Dawn daily to help them get their work done.

Lois Parrett serves as Accountant and Director of Operations. You may have encountered Lois in setting up a synod event, with questions about congregational finances and practices, or when

calling the office on a Tuesday. Lois keeps our office running smoothly and supports the work we all do.

LuAnn Barnes is my Executive Administrative Assistant. You may have encountered LuAnn when scheduling a personal appointment or congregation visit with me, with questions about parochial reports or roster status, while serving on synod council, or when calling the office on a Thursday. LuAnn is the person who enables me to do my work, keeps me pointed in the right direction, and reminds me every day that this is holy work we are called to do.

Please join me in thanking our full-time synod staff.

I've clearly gone over my time but cannot end with at least showing pictures of my family. Last July, our son, **Ethan** Whitener married **Kate** Jewson in Vashon, Washington. They now live in Tacoma. Our daughter, **Olivia** Whitener and our son-in-law, **Kurt** Houwen moved to Fort Collins, Colorado – so you know how our vacation time will be spent.

In January, **Dan** Whitener and I joined bishops and spouses from the Northeast, along with a few people from United Lutheran Seminary, for a trip to Palestine and Israel. I had not been since Dan served his pastoral internship there in 1986-87. The situation for Palestinians is increasingly difficult even as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land continues to provide hope and healing for its people. We are planning to sponsor a trip in late January 2025.

I show these pictures because without my family to keep me grounded, I couldn't serve in this role. They help me laugh at myself as they surround me with love.

Finally – I give thanks to God for this synod. You are witnesses to the myriad ways God's love is poured out into the world. A world hurting and broken in many ways. A world of wonder and joy. A world in need of love, sweet love. A world made better when we Lead with Love.