

## 2023 ELCA Synod Assembly – Journey with Jesus ... Formed in Faith Report from Michele Wilson

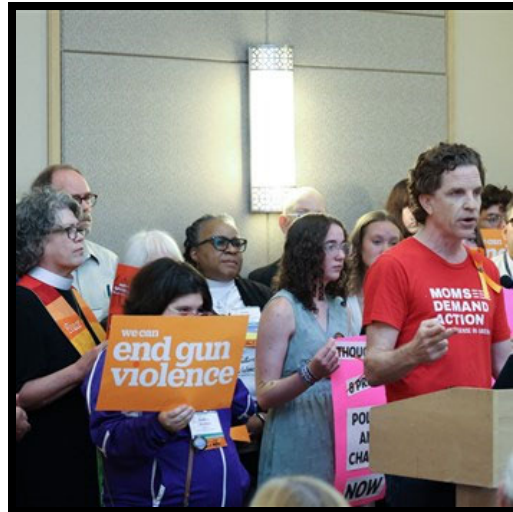
The 2023 ELCA Synod Assembly was held June 2-4, 2023 in Chattanooga, TN. It was an extraordinary event! The theme was 'Journey with Jesus – Formed in Faith'. This year, Messiah Lutheran has a larger group who attended – Pastor Susan, Pastor Steve, Angela Kronau, Susan Hamilton, Mike Driskill, Beth Ford and me! Just like last year, I experienced worship services that were spirit filled, inspiring keynote presentations, and workshops that takes ideas and shapes them into action for our church and community. In addition to all of these great things, we heard 'Walking Wet' stories of fellow members from the opening session to the closing service. I bet you're asking, 'what is walking wet'? They were moments when members gave testimony to the connection between their baptism and their callings in life.



Since I was just attending as a member of the synod and not a voting member, I was able to focus on all of the happenings in each plenary session – instead of being so fixated on the votes. I'm grateful to Angela and Susan for filling these very important roles!



Just prior to the first plenary session, early attendees including Pastor Susan, Pastor Steve, Bishop Strickland and many lay people, participated in a press conference to stand up again gun violence and advocate for sensible gun legislation in our country. I'm so proud to be part of a faith tradition where we are called to be active participants in making this world a better place for everyone – especially those who are most greatly impacted by gun violence.



During the opening plenary session, Bishop Kevin Strickland's report focused on how we are all a part of our journey with Jesus. We don't travel alone. Because of our baptismal promises our goal is to be more like Jesus. So, we can become a group of people who talk like Jesus, who live like Jesus and who love like Jesus. #

We heard a report from the Southeastern Synod Lutheran Youth Organization (aka SESLYO). The theme for this year is 'What is AGAPE?'. Everyone was encouraged to attend the Youth Ministry Silent Auction and Dessert Reception that was held on Saturday evening. They raised over \$6,000 to support youth scholarships!





On my way to the first worship service of the weekend, I had the opportunity to visit several booths. Folks really showed up to educate and inspire the participants! I picked up some cool stickers and lots of great information to share with the congregation (if interested).



We had a wonderful worship service on Friday afternoon that included communion. The wine was way too tart for my liking, so I switched to grape juice for the rest of the worship services that weekend.



After worship, the whole group was abuzz! Next up was a Friday evening workshop. I chose to attend **'Telling and Living the Story'**. It was an interactive workshop that was meant to equip us with practical tools and strategies to share our faith with others. The workshop engaged the biblical basis for evangelism and discipleship. The key theme of the workshop was the exploration of the challenges and opportunities of evangelism and Christian formation in a diverse and rapidly changing world. After participating, I feel empowered to share the gospel confidently and effectively with others as I grow in my own faith. It was led by the Rev. Linda Manson, who is the assistant to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission. She shared her PowerPoint presentation with me and I look forward to sharing it with our Invite committee.

Angela, Susan H. and I went to dinner and afterward, we attended the Bishop's Reception. There was live jazz playing and Bishop Strickland recognized the anniversaries of rostered ministers' congregational anniversaries.

Day two started with our second plenary session. There was quite a bit of business completed including – the approval of the 2024-2025 Ministry Funding Plan; a report from the Disaster Ministry Committee; greetings from the Southeastern Synod Women of the ELCA; a presentation by 1517 Media and a video greeting from La Crosse Area Synod. The highlight for me was the speech made by Beth Ford. Beth was nominated to run for the Vice President of the SE Synod Board. She was inspiring, clear and, at one point, had the whole hall laughing. I'm so proud that our church fosters the kind of leadership that Beth lives out.



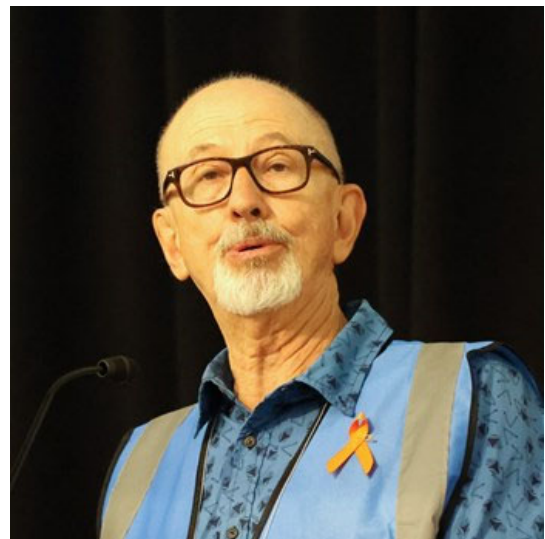


We heard the keynote address of The Rev. Dr. Guy Erwin, President of the United Lutheran Seminary.



He shared that he has Osage and European ancestry and that he is registered as and identifies as a member of the Osage Nation. His keynote address focused on our journey with Jesus through art.

The second workshop I attended was called “Stories of Faith Formation”. I thought I was opting to receive more inspiration about evangelism, but in fact, this workshop was focused on hearing out experiences in the midst of disaster can have faith-forming impacts. It was led by John Boettner who was the past Chair of the Disaster Ministry Committee and The Rev. Dr. Mogan Gordy, who is an assistant to the Bishop for Disaster Ministry. About 15 different people who have served in this kind of ministry stood up and shared their stories of how this work impacted their lives and the lives of those who were survivors.



Next, Angela and I went to a lunch and learn to hear about how Inspiritus (formerly Lutheran Services of Georgia) partners with our synod to help vulnerable people in Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee. One of the outreach services they provide is a lot like Bridge Refugee Services (in Knoxville & Chattanooga).

Then, back to business! During the third plenary session we enjoyed more from Rev. Dr. Guy Erwin. Voting representatives also approved the 2024 Compensation Guidelines. We heard the report of the Churchwide Representative, The Rev. Kimberly Vaughn- Sr. Director, Christian Community & Leadership Mission for the ELCA. She wears many hats! She leads the team that is responsible for children’s ministry, youth ministry, the ELCA youth gathering, young adult ministry, Lutheran Campus Ministry Network, deaf & disability ministry and more. She embodies the church’s goal to truly engage new, young and diverse people with the good news of Jesus Christ! We also received reports from NovusWay ministry and The Rev. Michael Jannett on Formation and Communication.



Resolutions and Memorials was brought up by Reference and Counsel Committee. The hot button issue was a resolution called “Caring for our Trans Community”. ( I’ve attached the resolution to this report.) There were enough people that expressed concern over the topic that the plenary session was going long. Bishop Strickland made a suggestion that the topic be tabled until the final plenary session so that conversations could be had. This was approved. Finally, Deacon Michelle Angalet, the COO of Inspiritus, gave the whole assembly an update about the work they are doing.

The second Assembly worship on Saturday evening was filled with amazing, spiritual music.



After worship, the entire Messiah group went out to dinner.

Sunday morning began with a beautiful worship service. The Rev. Linda Manson gave the sermon. It was Trinity Sunday and so she spoke about the mystery of the trinity. She also spoke about being a member of a very large family and how we are a family of God. The main idea of the sermon was for us to walk in faith and trust that what we have experienced through Christ is for everyone.

Then we had plenary session number four. We heard from Bishop Strickland about AFFIRM (a youth camp experience) and the 2024 ELCA Youth Gathering. Starting in September, there will be an application for folks to apply for scholarships to attend the Youth Gathering and the next AFFIRM experience.

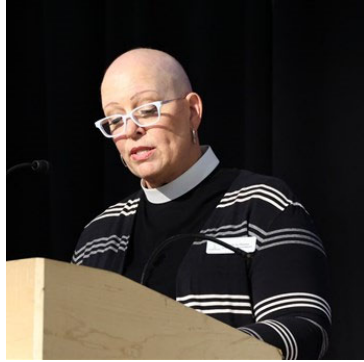


Next, the vote was announced on who won the Vice President position. While Beth didn't win the vote for the Vice President position, she will serve as a lay person on the synod council.



Pastor Jill Henning, who is an assistant to the Bishop for Leadership and Administration shared information about a Ministry Endowment Fund. Grants can be applied for ministries that support property enhancements, ministries to people and ministry programs that support and of the Southeastern Synod Strategic Priorities around Diversity and Justice, Evangelism, Formation and Advocacy by congregations, individual members and ministry partners.





The “Caring for our Trans Community” debate started again. There were church representatives that were concerned that this resolution would require their church go through the same “pain” as in years past with the vote to welcome LGBTQIA pastors into ministry as well as marry folks from this community. Comments ranged from “Why can’t we just identify as people instead of ‘pronouns’? The members of SESLYO were passionate about the resolution. Several adults stood in support of these young people – one saying, “We ask ourselves, why don’t young people participate or attend church? This is why. We need to listen to the young people because they are the future of the church. If we don’t listen and respond we will lose this generation.” At the end of the debate, the resolution passed with a few ‘nays’. I hope that our Council will resolve to review the resolution and take action.



Recap: This is the second year I’ve attended the assembly and I can feel God working in my life through participating in these types of organized sessions. Last year, I came back to Knoxville on cloud 9, feeling so overwhelmingly grateful for grace. This year I return committed to give my VERY BEST to God. I’ve been a member of Messiah now for 3 years and it’s time for me to focus in on what God is calling me to. This means that I’ll need to step away from some of the activities that I’ve been involved with so I can serve in a more impactful way. I’ll keep praying, listening, and responding to the holy spirit.

The 2024 South Eastern Synod Assembly will be held in at the Columbus Georgia Convention and Trade Center in Columbus, Georgia May 31 – June 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Here are a few more pictures my camera captured over the weekend:



Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church Group w/Bishop Strickland



The Rev. Kimberly Vaughn, Michele & The Rev. Linda Manson



Beth Ford and friend



Susan and Michele



Michele, Beth, Angela & Susan



Michele & Angela





## Caring for our Trans Community

**WHEREAS**, according to <https://www.lgbtmap.org/> in 2020, roughly 894000 individuals who live in the Southeastern Synod self-identify as LGBTQIA+; and

**WHEREAS**, according to the Trevor Project, LGBTQIA+ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers; and

**WHEREAS**, according to the Trevor Project, LGBTQIA+ youth who felt high social support from their family reported attempting suicide at less than half the rate of those who felt low or moderate social support; and

**WHEREAS**, the gender spectrum recognizes that gender is not limited to just male and female categories but rather exists on a continuum with a range of identities and expressions in between; and

**WHEREAS**, the gender spectrum promotes inclusivity and acceptance of diverse gender identities, challenging traditional views of gender (Male and Female); and

**WHEREAS**, we are all made in God's image, including those in the LGBTQIA+ community, as spelled out in the Psalms, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." (Psalm 139:13-14); and

**WHEREAS**, All people have been intentionally created by God, including LGBTQIA+ people, as stated in Isaiah 43:1b, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine"; and

**WHEREAS**, the Southeastern Synod is a Reconciling in Christ Synod, which declares our support of the LGBTQIA+ community; and

**WHEREAS**, Bishop Strickland has shared support of the LGBTQIA+ community by speaking out against anti-trans legislation in GA, AL, MS, and TN; and

**WHEREAS**, we are called to ensure the gracious welcome of all LGBTQIA+ individuals in all spaces, especially by using one's preferred pronouns, and names and providing safe housing at Synod-sponsored events; and

**WHEREAS**, those in the LGBTQIA+ community suffer from greater discrimination than most of their peers, which negatively affects one's mental and emotional health and, therefore;



## Caring for our Trans Community

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that the use of an individual's preferred pronouns be made available on name tags for all Southeastern Synod-sponsored events; and also

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that we encourage all individuals to share their preferred pronouns when addressing the community; and also

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that the coordinators of every Southeastern Synod-sponsored event make every effort possible to provide safe housing accommodations for all LGBTQIA+ participants; and also

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that all congregations are encouraged to create and share welcome statements that include a welcome to those in the LGBTQIA+ community, and to share these statements at certain times of the year, such as Pride month (June and October); and also

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that the Synod Council send the Southeastern Synod Lutheran Youth Organization (SESLYO) "Caring For Our Trans Community Letter," which is at the end of this resolution statement, to each and every congregation of this Synod by way of congregational council presidents, pastors, and youth directors; and also

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that these letters be encouraged to be posted in a public place; and also

**LET IT BE RESOLVED**, that the SESLYO board encourages all congregations to reach out to groups that help churches develop outreach and welcome statements to all LGBTQIA+ individuals, like Reconciling Works (<https://www.reconcilingworks.org/>).

### Caring For Our Trans Community

The Southeastern Synod Lutheran Youth Organization (SESLYO) believes all LGBTQIA+ individuals deserve to feel loved, safe, and cared for in our churches and communities.

Since 2000 we have been a Reconciling in Christ synod. This means that we are called to welcome and support all LGBTQIA+ individuals. As the LGBTQIA+ community grows, and in following Jesus' command to love one another, we are to reach out to and welcome these individuals to our churches and communities.

Therefore, the SESLYO board asks all congregations and ministries of the Southeastern Synod to use preferred pronouns, to accommodate all LGBTQIA+ individuals with safe housing for events, and to reach out to the LGBTQIA+ community.

## **Caring for our Trans Community**

We encourage all congregations to use resources like *Reconciling in Christ Ministries* to further develop welcome statements and a supportive community.

- [Reconciling in Christ Ministries \(elca-ses.org\)](https://elca-ses.org)
- [LGBTQIA+ Inclusion \(elca-ses.org\)](https://elca-ses.org)

SESLYO Signatures:

Chris Mutshipayi, Chair  
Ella Dunn, Chair-Elect  
Izumi Hall, Synod Council Representative  
AJ Jannett, Secretary  
E Martin, Director of Communications  
Daniel Reed, Chaplain  
Hollyn Kershner, Disabled Rep  
F. N. Ferdinand, Person of Color Rep  
Tim Reed, Conference 4 Rep  
Evvvy Fuller, Conference 9 Rep