Responses to Written Questions, July 6, 2020

Pastor Naomi Garber

1. Tell of a time when you failed at some aspect of ministry. How did you respond to that failure?

Throughout my life in ministry (and life), I have many experiences where dreams and expectations were not the reality of what happened. I tend not to use the descriptor of “failure” but rather reframe the assessment in the context of “learning experience” or “teachable moment.”

With the lens of learning experience or teachable moment, I think of the time when I had heard of a congregation having a summer worship experience entitled “Worship Express” which was children and family focused. I was so enamored with the possibilities for the continuity of family and children worship throughout the summer, I simply jumped in and said it will happen. I did not involve the staff and volunteers who were involved in children and family ministry. I simply set a date, a time, and began the worship experience. Actually, for the first couple of weeks gathering on the lawn, it was greeted with guarded welcome. By week #4 or so, it had become a private worship for one family. I had a true learning experience!!! There were a number of mis-steps. The first and foremost was not involving the key stakeholders in the planning. Now, I attempt to not exclude those from the conversation who should be there for any idea---mine or others.

2. If chosen as bishop, what is your first priority?

For many years, I have been an avid student of leadership. I read a wide variety of leadership books and articles. I listen to podcasts and interviews. I readily engage in conversations about leadership. One of my recent reads was Doris Kearns Godwin’s book “Leadership in Turbulent Times” which is the contrast of four United States Presidents; Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt (FDR), and Lyndon Johnson (LBJ). Each of the presidents came into office in differing manners during very difficult times in the history of this country. Both FDR and LBJ, came into the office with a 100-day plan.

My first priority is to develop a 100-day plan with the Executive Committee and Synod Council. My initial thoughts on a 100-day plan would include:
* one-on-one conversations with every rostered leader
* conversations with every congregation in the call process
* complete a staffing assessment with the development of job descriptions and recruitment of staff
* establishment of a calendar to schedule Sundays throughout the Synod
* other priorities determined by the Executive Committee and Synod Council
* and my favorite, other duties as assigned.

This is not the time to be cautious or shy about getting to the work God’s Spirit is calling us to here in the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin.

3. Black Lives Matter/All Lives Matter. How do you explain the difference?

Yes, Black Lives Matter.

Yes, All Lives Matter.
The difference between the two, as I understand both to be true is this. Every Sunday, as a component of public worship, we have the Prayers of the People. During those prayers, we pray for our entire community of faith...AND...we pray for some people, in particular, by name, both known and unknown to us. We do so because they are in special need of our lifting them before our God in thanksgiving, for healing, for God’s presence with them, for placing them into God’s care and keeping.

Today we pray for the whole of humanity as a part of God’s very good creation (All Lives Matter). Today we also pray in particular for our Black Brothers and Sisters in Christ, named or unnamed, as they are special need of our prayers (Black Lives Matter). We pray for forgiveness for those things we have done or failed to do, for the decisions we have made or failed to make, the words we have said or failed to say. We pray for healing and wholeness as we continue to strive for justice and mercy. We pray that we may be transformed to be communities of faith and disciples of Jesus who welcome and embrace all. We are better for all we let into our hearts and minds and lives.

4. Is there a particular emphasis that you believe interim ministry can provide to better prepare congregations for ministry in the 21st century in this synod?

I am not sure who asked this question...but thank you!!

I have learned so much in the last four years as an Intentional Interim Pastor. The Number One priority for an interim pastor is to prepare a community of faith for their next pastoral leader. This means being a very quick study on organizational systems---who does what, when, and with whom, being some of the first answers to seek.

The understanding of the leadership, both formal and informal, is key. The review of the history of the congregation, historically, longitudinally, and very recent past, is one piece of critical information. The listening to the congregation express how God has called them into mission in God’s work and then correlating that call with actual presence and action is essential. Sometimes there are some “details” which need to be cleaned up and clarified before the congregation can move on; i.e. financial practices, congregational rosters, staff evaluations, etc. Sometimes there is a need for healing following a deep wound in the congregation; i.e. pastoral misconduct, a significant conflict among members, a community tragedy.

Once a “sense” of the congregation is outlined---sometimes only in the mind of the interim pastor, sometimes in written word, sometimes in proclamation...

...then the “intentional” period of interim ministry begins.

The interim period is the time to try new things, to explore ideas and dreams, to enter into a time of deep discernment and prayer. The interim period is the time to ask questions, to wonder, to notice. The interim period is the time to discover who God is calling the congregation to be and to do.

All this is to say, every congregation should take an interim period to do all these things. There is a sense of excitement. There is a sense of anticipation. There is a sense of recognition that God is at work now and always. A congregation becomes more nimble in and responsive to God’s mission in the world called the church.

The South-Central Synod of Wisconsin has been in an “interim” period for a number of years. It is now time for an “intentional interim” period where we all engage in the
activities outlined above. The South-Central Synod of Wisconsin is called to be excited about the Gospel as we enter a new way of being. The South-Central Synod of Wisconsin is called to a time of deep discernment about how the Holy Spirit is calling us forward into God’s ministry and mission called the church. The South-Central Synod of Wisconsin is being called to become more nimble in and responsive to God’s mission. The South-Central Synod is called to be and to do in God’s world.

5. **What is your hope for our synod’s relationship with our companion and partner synods?**

I love this question!!!

My hope for our partner synod is to continue to foster congregation-to-congregation partnerships in the Gospel of Jesus. We learn from congregations in Puerto Rico and they learn from us. I know there are some partnerships between congregations which are beginning to be shaped and formed. The opportunity is before us for more ‘n more ‘n more partnerships to be established and develop.

My hope for our companion synod is a re-establishment of relationship and partnership in the Gospel of Jesus. I believe this relationship has been difficult in the past few years due to the political situation in India and the instability of synodical leadership in this Synod. We are a global people and world. I believe we will all be more who God created us to be when we walk the journey of discipleship when we do this side-by-side with our Brothers and Sisters in Christ in India.

6. **What is the role of the bishop in the midst of a public trauma such as we have experienced in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing?**

I am a relatively calm person…most of the time. I can honestly say in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, I became as upset and exercised as I have been for a while. The event felt very personal being a native Minnesotan. I recall an interview with a woman in Minneapolis following the killing and the protests and riots which ensued. She said, “This is not who we are in Minnesota!” I know I said out loud, “Amen!!” But…the truth is, it is who we are as a people no matter what state we call home. I have thought a lot about how we respond individually and as the people of God.

I recently read Joan Chittister’s book “The Time is Now; A Call to Uncommon Courage” in which she outlines what it means to be a prophet today. There are many thought provoking statements throughout the book. Here is one which caught my attention, “The call to discern the difference between what is holy and what is simply popular, between what is and what should be, is of the essence of the good life. The work of God is in our hands. To ignore that is to ignore the very fullness of life. Every prophet contemplated the price of the risk and went on regardless—calling to the world to become its best self—and so must we.” (pg. 31)

The bishop is one of the key public and prophetic voices. The bishop is the one who sets the tone for the conversation following traumatic, public, societal, and systemic situations. The bishop is not the one who has a definitive answer as to how to respond for each and every person; the bishop is a source of beginning the conversation and healing.

It is incumbent upon the bishop to name what has happened for what it is. The bishop seeks out those people throughout the Synod for whom this situation is most directly
affecting and listens to what they need, what they need to say, and what they need for others to know. The bishop convenes the synodical conversation by gathering people around a table (literal or Zoom) to be able to support each other and call each other to account. The bishop (and/or staff) provide resources for rostered and lay leaders to access either for individual or congregational reflection.

7. **What do you see the role of Ministers of Word and Sacrament are in congregations? How will you help congregations discern where the gifts of a Minister of Word and Service (Deacon) may fit a congregation considering calling a pastor, or other staff?**

The priesthood of all believers is a basic tenet of our Lutheran faith. In the ELCA, we have two ordained roles; Minister of Word and Sacrament and Minister of Word and Service. Individuals are specifically called to these roles to serve God and God’s people. “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” Romans 12:4-8

The role of Minister of Word and Sacrament is to extend an open invitation to encounter this God in the presence of God the Father (creator), God the Son (savior), and God the Spirit (sustainer). The invitation is extended through the presenting of the Word through written scriptures, proclamation of the Gospel through sermons, and prayer. The invitation is extended through ordinary water and bread and wine through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. The role of Minister of Word and Sacrament is not be a stumbling block but rather a steppingstone of faith for those around them.

The role of Minister of Word and Service has often been given dis-service or been out ‘n out dismissed throughout the whole ELCA. I am not happy about the situation nor am I proud of how Deacons have been treated. The role of Minister of Word and Service is a true gift to us. An individual who has sought out education and training, wandered through the candidacy process, and has said “yes” to God’s call will serve all of us, God’s people, well. We often limit our Deacon brothers and sisters who are called to Word and Service. Within the congregation there are a variety of ways to live out the call to Word and Service through preaching, music, pastoral care, education of children and adults, administration, general ministry assistance, and so much more. Deacons are called and sent out in service. Therefore, outside the congregation constructs, Deacons may be called to chaplaincy, community development, social justice, health services, and so much more. We have limited our creativity. As we continue to engage in the redefinition of what it means to be church, Deacons will be key in the conversations as called and sent out by God. Now is the time to begin to think anew of how Deacons will serve God and God’s people going from this time. The role of Minister of Word and Service is not be a stumbling block but rather a steppingstone of faith for those around them.

8. **Burnout is a real issue for many rostered leaders, and probably has increased during the pandemic. As bishop, how would you address this issue with clergy, deacons, and lay leaders?**
Relationship with the rostered leaders is a prime priority and responsibility as bishop. Yes, it will take a lot to have contact with each on personally, to be sure. However, in the highly demanding and stressed time we are living into now and into the foreseeable future, the personal contact from the bishop means everything!! So, having contact over time allows the bishop the ability to assess when someone is entering into a time and place where the stress has shifted and the leader is heading into a burnout situation. Truly this is the actual situation for some leaders in the Synod right now.

I am aware of some Restricted Funds in the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin which could be creatively utilized for the body, mind, and spiritual health and well-being of leaders. For example, a spa retreat weekend, a family camping excursion, a family membership at the YMCA, a spiritual director, a personal trainer, etc. Whatever feeds the mind, body, and soul of the leader (within reason) would be an option for financial support. I would seek to work with the Executive Committee and Synod Council to encourage congregations to match these funds for these leaders. Sometimes just knowing there is something ahead allows one to face the challenges of the days/weeks/months with renewed hope.

9. What is your favorite bible verse or story, and why do you connect with it so much?

Hmmmm.....which is my favorite today?

I have a number of favorites, to be sure!

However, I most often return to these two.

First, I go to the story of the healing the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus’ daughter, I like the Mark 5 version. I love this story because I believe it is how we encounter Jesus for healing. There are times when all we have left is to touch the back of Jesus’ cloak. And then there are times when we stand right in front of Jesus and demand he come and heal someone we love. Both the woman and Jairus knew of Jesus’ power to heal. They both believe something would happen when they encountered Jesus. And they both experienced healing.

I juxtapose this story of healing with Isaiah 43. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior, I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you.”

The woman with the hemorrhage, Jairus and his daughter, you, me, and all creation are all precious in God’s sight. We are assured we are not alone and we do not need to be afraid.

What more beautiful words of promise and hope do we need? Named, claimed, redeemed, and God’s presence always!!