

Rev. Robert O. Smith, PhD

Director, Briarwood Leadership Center

Associate to the Bishop, NT-NL Synod

Bridge Pastor, Central Lutheran Church (Dallas)



NT-NL Synod Assembly Report

April 2022

Briarwood Leadership faced tremendously difficult years in 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, Briarwood continues to move forward, seeking to continue the success of online programming, welcoming modestly sized groups back onsite, and exploring opportunities for overnight camping experiences in Summer 2022. We are grateful for the continued support of board members, Bishop Gronberg, the NT-NL Synod Council, and the congregations of our synod as we seek to rebuild and grow.

In 2020, Covid-19 made it impossible for Briarwood to continue in its established, long-standing mission of gathering people together for camping and retreat ministries. As 2021 began, we were ramping up operations, hoping to return to a semblance of 'normal' onsite operations. Then, in February 2021, Briarwood faced massive damages from the winter storm. While the storm itself presented several challenges, we have suffered even more acutely under the poor service received through our insurance company, Church Mutual. It felt at times that our assigned adjustor was seeking to put us out of business altogether. These delays have meant that only now, in April 2022, can I report that our construction company has completed all repairs at Briarwood facilities. It has been a long and difficult road, and we are thankful for your accompaniment during this time.

These dynamics combined to create a very difficult financial situation for Briarwood. Briarwood is fortunate to have the support of many congregational and individual donors. We also benefit tremendously from institutional support from the NT-NL Synod. We have also benefited from major grants and good-faith loans made by groups such as the King of Glory Foundation and the NT-NL Mission Endowment Fund. Briarwood also received a gift from the sale of Christ the King, Haltom City, that has helped us consider new possibilities. This church-based financial support, in concert with PPP funds made available by the US Government, has allowed Briarwood to maintain minimal maintenance and staffing levels while addressing facility repairs beyond major

storm damage. These include ongoing issues caused by three decades of deferred maintenance. Briarwood is a resource entrusted to the Synod, a gift of God for our NT-NL community.

In addition to these external contributions to Briarwood cashflow, we have engaged in several cost-cutting measures. These include my own service to several NT-NL congregations on an interim basis. This arrangement has provided necessary services to these congregations while effectively removing my salary from Briarwood's budget.


Throughout 2021 and thus far in 2022, Briarwood was able to host several onsite groups and events, including the NT-NL Regathering event in September 2021, a gathering of ELCA Region 4 Directors of Evangelical Mission, and multiple non-ELCA church and secular groups. We also developed and hosted major online events and series, including "White Supremacy & Racism: Facing Reality, Taking Responsibility," a study group co-sponsored by Briarwood and the NT-NL Public Witness Team. These study group sessions featured several noted external scholars and regularly had over 40 participants, representing congregations throughout the synod and beyond. The success of this series indicates a strong level of interest in socially relevant adult education throughout NT-NL. These efforts could provide models of education for the ELCA.

As we look forward to Summer 2022, we are thrilled to partner in service to NT-NL congregations for youth retreat and camp-style events. These are especially important given the cancellation of the ELCA National Youth Gathering. In 2022 we have already hosted groups organized by Conferencia Latina and Umoja congregations and look forward to the MYJ2 multi-cultural youth gathering in July. In addition to these congregational and conference events, Briarwood surveyed congregations and prospective families to determine 1) how many young people are active in our congregations, and 2) how many young people would be interested in overnight camping. Responses to both efforts were minimal both in number of responses and levels of interest. Despite this lack of feedback Briarwood is determined to discern the best possible ways to invest our limited resources to fulfill our mission of serving NT-NL congregations.

Because of you, Briarwood has been able to maintain a focus on our core mission, even as we continue to branch out in other directions.

Briarwood thanks God for our many partners throughout the NT-NL Synod. We look forward to a time when we can more freely host you onsite. May God bless you as you press forward in God's mission.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert O. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

The Rev. Robert O. Smith, PhD
Director, Briarwood Leadership Center
Associate to the Bishop, NT-NL Synod
Bridge Pastor, Central Lutheran Church (Dallas)