

Vice President's Report
2025 Synod Assembly
April 25, 2025

Thank you to the Panhandle Conference for your planning and work in making this assembly happen.

The Committee on Discipline and the Consultation Committee now have nominees to fill these positions and will stand for election in this assembly. Hopefully, these committees are never used, but they need to be in place if the need arises.

This year's theme for our assembly addresses the need to find common ground and to remind ourselves that at the foot of the cross, we are all equal. Unfortunately, our country is at a place where finding common ground is tough. Some of our members may now question their safety in this country. It is imperative for us to listen to their stories without judgment. Those concerns and stories should shape how we see all as being created in the image of God.

This past October, seven of us traveled to Sierra Leone to renew old connections and create new ones with our companion church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sierra Leone. We spent hours on the road. We saw Lutherans in rural areas as they are learning how to produce livestock to improve their source of protein. In another remote rural area, the NTNL, the ELCA, and the Lutheran World Federation worked together to build a rural health clinic. This clinic is primitive according to our standards. Despite the lack of modern medical equipment, the clinic will improve their quality of life because now the government will help supply the people to provide medical services to them.

In Freetown, a city of about 1.4 million people, we participated in the dedication services for St. Mark's church. The members had remodeled some rooms and newly constructed other parts of their building. The Jubilee Center, which is finally a functioning church and church headquarters, was also another site with dedication services in which we participated. At the River Number 2 Beach we found not only a pristine beach with white sand but also a Lutheran church that was in the process of expanding its building to accommodate their growing membership.

We saw different Lutheran schools teaching and training the youth regardless of their faith tradition. They work in primitive conditions, yet they have hope. The ELCSL is attempting to start a college and a seminary. Those are lofty hopes and dreams, but lofty hopes and dreams must happen so that progress can occur. If they can form and train their own pastors in Sierra Leone, more of their people can answer the call to be a pastor. Currently, people travel to other countries, making the cost of a seminary education prohibitively expensive. Currently the ELCSL has fifteen pastors who with a group of Evangelists (think Parish Lay Ministers) serve 34 parishes.

The ELCSL has about 5,000 members in a nation of over 8 million. Lutherans are not a large part of the total population; however, the Lutheran faith was not present until the late 1980s. Dr. Jeremiah Sinnah-Yvonne, a native of Sierra Leone found this expression of faith while completing his studies at the University of Iowa. He then took the Lutheran faith home with him. Since this expression of Christian faith was introduced by a native person, it has an authentic voice. As a companion synod, this authenticity frees us to walk alongside them as they find their way in being a church in their country.

Many times, I found that even though the people have such a different background, we could talk and relate to each other. They have similar dreams as we do. They want their families to be safe and to grow in faith. Education is vital to them. The need for community is strong. We made connections and found common ground. Walking in mission with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sierra Leone is part of how we, as a synod, answer the call to love our neighbors.

As we work together as a synod of ELCA churches in our part of creation, may we answer the call to be part of the solution to the division that is currently present in our country. In the shadow of the cross we are all the same. We are all on common ground. Remember we are all created in the image of the same Creator and are named, "Precious Child of God". Rather than give into the loud voices of anger and division, may we as a synod, be people who authentically live out an alternative voice, the voice of God, the voice of love.