

## Ponder anew

By Bishop Shelley Wickstrom



**Shelley Wickstrom**, bishop of the Alaska Synod.

In the next six years, one-third of the pastors currently serving in the Alaska Synod will be old enough to retire. Some have already announced a date for retirement. Those congregations that have experienced a vacancy lately know that the process of calling a new pastor takes time. Often there are delays while the congregation completes the ministry site profile and awaits candidate availability. Some congregations are being

served by lay leaders or interns rather than bear the expense of calling an ordained pastor.

To help, this synod and our entire church are looking at changes in how we provide for pastoral leadership as well as a change in pastors.

Over the past decades seminary costs have soared, churchwide support has decreased, and some new pastors have graduated with debt loads that impact which congregations they can even consider serving. Our partner, the Eastern North Dakota Synod, developed an endowment 15 years ago that today provides significant scholarships and seminary debt payment assistance. It has become a synod of choice for new graduates because of its proactive approach to the financial challenges new pastors with debt face.

Our synod council has established our own funds that will assist our congregations in calling new pastors. A “Seminary Scholarship Fund” will assist Alaskans preparing for ministry in the ELCA. A “Pastor’s Student Loan Repayment Program” will assist first-call pastors in Alaska with payment of seminary debt.

River of Life Lutheran Church, Chugiak, donated the offering from the Rev. William Ottum’s installation service to the Pastor’s Student Loan Repayment Program. Resurrection Lutheran Church, Seward, just held a fundraiser to support this fund as well. Both will invite new pastors to their congregations in the next few years. They can see how this program will benefit any new pastor in Alaska.

See [www.elcaalaska.net](http://www.elcaalaska.net) for more information on how you can participate in shaping pastoral leadership in this synod.

The challenge of preparing leaders for this church is also being met in creative ways. Our seminaries have developed distance learning programs with intensive courses on campus twice a year. Another option allows students to begin with online courses before moving to campus. Also, switching internships to the fourth year of seminary has reduced the disruption of moving for school-age children. Our seminaries still welcome students and families to move to campus.

Laypeople should have access to theological and biblical education without a string attached for how that education will be used. The Alaska Synod is in conversation with our PLUME Partners (Presbytery of the Yukon, Alaska Conference of the United Methodist Church, Episcopal Diocese of Alaska). Anchorage-based classes work well for those who can drive to them but don’t serve well in a state with distances equal to the mileage between Montana and Texas. We recognize the need for various ways of delivering resources for people who want to deepen their knowledge. A bank of basic courses is being planned that we can all share across our denominational lines.

Another innovation was provided by the Southeast Cluster when it began offering synodically authorized minister training by Skype last fall. A different pastor is teaching each course. □

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didn’t survive due to a lack of lay leadership. Thus, leadership development is a key component of missional communities.

Trapper Creek Fellowship, a missional community that is also a synodically authorized worshipping community, relies heavily on lay leaders for preaching, worship leadership and outreach events like their monthly community meal, which draws up to 50 people.

Hicks envisions a future where more missional communities are launched across Alaska, grown organically instead of imposed from the top down. He stresses that missional communities aren’t meant to replace Sunday morning worship at traditional settings. Ideally, the communities would be connected to a mainline anchor church, which would offer stability and accountability for the missional community as well as enliven the missional imagination of the anchor church.

Missional communities are an “incarnational model,” Hicks said, as disciples of Christ learn to see Christ in the neighbor and be Christ with and for each other. □

# The surprising gift of aging

By Bishop Brian Kirby Unti

One would think after having lived for 62 years that the coming of a new season would be without surprise. Yet I must confess that every year I absolutely cling to the last days of summer and gird up my strength to face another cold wet winter. What I forget are the glorious days of fall.

October is my favorite forgotten month. There are still October days when one can feel the heat of the sun. Even my lawn knows there are a few weeks of green life left. Then there is the flood of bright colors.

I remember taking my mother out for a ride during her last fall on earth. She, too, was like a child seeing the colors as if for the first time. “Kirby, look at those brilliant red leaves,” she said as she pointed out a row of trees not far from her assisted living facility.

I wonder if the surprise of fall is anchored in the reality that this season is the great collision of life and death. It is that time when the vibrant life of a Northwest summer finds itself giving way to the dropping of the leaves and their decay upon the ground. It is an amazing season of the intermingling of cold, crisp, life-giving morning air and the beginning of a season where barrenness gains the upper hand. This point of intersection is so life-giving.

One of my most sacred moments took place in October. I was standing beside a mother who was desperately trying to come to grips with the truth that her son wasn’t going to come out of the coma he had been lying in for months.

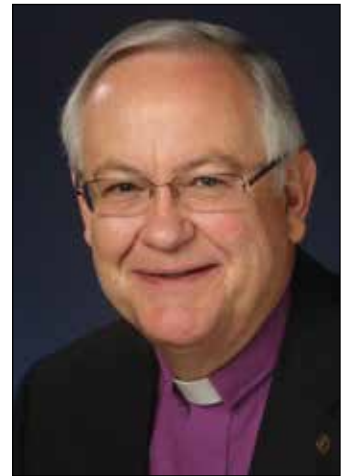
**I wonder if the surprise of fall is anchored in the reality that this season is the great collision of life and death.**

He was the victim of a gas station robbery and a bullet between his eyes. She had hoped against hope for months, believing with all her might that Dennis would recover.

Staring out the hospital window she spotted a barren tree with its leaves gathered on the ground around its trunk. She said to me, “Look, Kirby, even the leaves are allowed to die.”

It proved to be the breakthrough she needed to let Dennis go.

Now that I am in my 60s, I am in the October days of my life. There is still so much that brings me joy and a real sense of exhilaration. And yet, it is also a season in my life where I am more keenly aware of my limitations, knowing that I am closer to my death than my birth. Perhaps the tension of this truth is what makes me ever so grateful that fall continues to take me by surprise. One more gift for those of us who have anchored our lives in the death and resurrection of Jesus. □



**Brian Kirby Unti**, bishop of the Northwest Washington Synod.



CHRISTIE PARK/HOLY TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, MERCER ISLAND

## Good gifts

The Sunday school of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Mercer Island, took home barn banks on March 16. The banks were also situated throughout the church. The goal was to collect enough change during Lent to purchase animals through the ELCA Good Gifts catalog and to change lives. The challenge was discussed in Sunday school and in worship.

One student, Charlotte Park (shown at left), decided on an unseasonably warm spring day to have a lemonade stand in her neighborhood, with all the proceeds going into her bank.

On Easter Sunday, the banks were collected—appropriately—in a trough at the altar.

When all that change was counted the children had raised \$572! Our East King County Chapter of Thrivent Financial matched with \$500 more.

On May 4 the Sunday school children discussed the impact their gifts will make on families and voted on what animals they would buy from the catalog ([www.elca.org/goodgifts](http://www.elca.org/goodgifts)). Their \$1,072 will purchase 30 chicks; five honeybee hives; one sheep; two goats; three pigs; and a family farm that provides a cow, a couple of goats, a dozen chicks, two pigs, farming tools, agricultural training and marketing support.

When the results were announced at the end of worship, a cheer of joy was raised. Good gifts, indeed. □

*Submitted by Kathy Fisher, director of intergenerational ministry programs at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Mercer Island.*

## ELCA worship grant provides support for education event

In fall 2013, the ELCA announced an opportunity for synods to receive a grant of up to \$1,000 to offer an event or sponsor a project that would provide refreshment, renewal, education or formation in the area of worship (including music and the arts) for synod congregations, pastors and/or laypeople. In December, we were notified that our synod had received a grant of \$1,000.

Planning began in earnest with Darren Hochstedler and the Revs. Julie Hutson, Bob Lewis and Deanna Wildermuth sharing conversation, passion and creative energy around worship. The event, “Worship Matters: This is the Feast,” will be held Oct. 25 at Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, Seattle. The presenters will be the Rev. Jana Childers (San Francisco

Theological Seminary), the Rev. Paul Hoffman and Dr. Stephen Marshall-Ward (Trinity Lutheran College).

This event focuses specifically on the experience of worship both in the people and the space. But it’s hoped that additional events may be held to focus on the use of art and music within the worship life of a congregation, with particular attention given to community

participation and diversity of practice.

Additional support for “Worship Matters: This is the Feast” is being provided by a grant from the endowment fund of Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church and funds from the Northwest Washington Synod. □

*Submitted by the Rev. Deanna Wildermuth, NWWA Synod secretary.*

# PLUME missional communities

By the Rev. Lisa Smith Fiegel

At first glance, the gathering at Primrose Retirement Community looks like any other Bible study. The chairs are set in a circle. Someone reads from Mark. People share what resonates with their experience. But this group is a missional community, part of PLUME ministry in the Mat-Su Valley, a growing population center about an hour's drive north of Alaska's largest city, Anchorage.

A missional community is an ancient-future way to be the church. Generally these small groups don't gather in church buildings. They pray, study Scripture and share the eucharist. But they also have a specific mission tied directly into the needs of the community or neighborhood where they find themselves.

The mission of Primrose group is to be attentive to each other, to practice intentional community and to support each other in this phase of life.

"We check up on each other," said Lila Fergus, 89, who moved into Primrose's independent living apartments a year ago with her husband of 70 years. "It's really building community among the people who want to partake in Bible study. It's a place where you can be yourself, not be judged by other standards."

This missional community is one of several forming under PLUME, a joint ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), ELCA, United Methodist Church, and Episcopal Church in Alaska's Mat-Su Valley. Formed in 2011, PLUME's mission is to establish and nurture small mainline groups dedicated to spiritual practice and service in the Mat-Su. PLUME missional communities provide mainline presence, worship and service in the dispersed areas.

## Shaped by the Trinity

The organizers of PLUME are tapping into conversations about mission across the wider mainline church, said the Rev. Robert Hicks, the ministry's executive director. "We are forming community that is shaped by the Trinity," he said. "That's where missional comes from. The Father sends the Son. The Father and the Son send the Spirit. The Spirit, according to the Great Commission, sends the church into diverse fields in order to participate in the mission of Jesus Christ."

For Hicks and other PLUME leaders it's all about the



The Primrose Retirement Community in the Mat-Su Valley is part of the PLUME missional community.

field—the communities where people live. "God is already working in the field. We are not bringing God to the field," Hicks said. "We are discovering what God is already doing. We offer ourselves to that process. It's a different way to see your neighbor, as someone who is already loved by God. The field has to be honored and respected. The field forms the ministry, as opposed to imposing a specific model. The field will teach us."

The field is teaching the Sutton PLUME Fellowship about a need for children's activities. The fellowship meets at the Sutton library for Bible study and has tried several things, including offering vacation Bible school. This year, the fellowship is partnering with Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Wasilla, to offer a monthly family night.

Missional communities continually discern their mission and must learn to redefine failure. "Failure becomes 'We're going to test something.

We've learned something,' " Hicks said, noting that PLUME has had failures, such as a Taizé worship that



### Author bio:

Fiegel is director for evangelical mission for the Alaska Synod.

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