

Transition Ministry Leadership Team

The Rev. Rick Armstrong – Executive Director of Lutheran Counseling Service in Orlando, serving both the ELCA Florida-Bahamas Synod and the LCMS Florida-Georgia District. Rick has worked in Disaster Relief and Crisis care since 2004 when he joined the staff of LCS. He is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, a Fellow with the American Association of Pastoral Counselors and a Florida Approved Supervisor for Marriage and Family and Mental Health Counseling. Rick focuses on Relationship Issues, Depression, Anxiety, Grief/Loss, Crisis Management and Spiritual Growth. He also does leadership coaching and organization/team consultation. Rick served as a Parish Pastor for 25 years before joining the staff of LCS in 2004.

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel has nearly 30 years experience working with congregations in transition. A graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago after a 15-year career in publications, Tom has worked as a church consultant in reorganizational efforts, situations of conflict, and assisting parishes and leaders in discerning God's leading for new direction. He has consulted with parishes and synods for mission renewal in Florida, the Bahamas, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota and in churches as large as 1,300 and as small as 30. Since 2011, he has been a part of the Leadership Team for Transition Ministry for the Florida-Bahamas Synod, and he trains and mentors pastors in this ministry.

The Rev. Richard W. Dow has been an interim pastor since 2010, now serving his fourth congregation, having guided the transition process in a variety of settings. He is a native of Iowa and graduated from Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, and Northwestern Seminary (Luther), St. Paul, Minnesota. Ordained in 1979, he has served in suburban and rural parishes in Illinois, Texas, and Florida and an inner city setting in Louisiana. With his seven years of interim ministry and an “unintentional interim” of 6 ½ years in one of his former calls, Richard has a real appreciation for what it means for congregations to be in transition.

Connie Schmucker, ELCA Deacon, serves as Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership throughout the Florida-Bahamas Synod, which includes responsibilities for congregations in transition, call process, and candidacy. Connie joined the Bishop's staff in 2012. Prior to this, she served under call at Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Deerfield Beach, St. John Lutheran Church in Winter Park, Peace Lutheran Church in Fort Myers, under contract at Faith Lutheran Church in Lehigh Acres and Redeemer Lutheran Church in Winter Park in positions related to Christian Education and Pastoral Assistance. Connie has served on the Synod Candidacy Committee for 17 years.

Jess Bunger, ELCA Deacon, serves at Gateway Trinity Lutheran Church in Fort Myers as the Minister of Discipleship and Connections, leading Christian Education ministries for adults and children. She also leads youth ministries and outreach. Jess received a Master of Arts in Youth, Culture & Mission from Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, IA in 2004. She has served in congregational and camping ministry settings in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Connecticut since 1998. Jess will serve as the camp and “down time” resource for this transition retreat. See her for some great ideas.

Michele Hilton serves as Assistant to the Bishop for Administration and regularly shares her administrative talents and insights with parishes and pastors. She is originally from Cape Cod, Mass. where she practiced law as a civil litigator and was actively involved in real estate and the hospitality industry before moving to Florida in 1995 and settling in Sarasota. There she became Sarasota's first parish administrator at St. Paul Lutheran, which led her to being in the Florida-Bahamas Synod's first Diakonia class and consecration as a parish deacon. Michele served as Mid Gulf Conference Chair, and in 2011 was elected Secretary of the synod.