

Dear friends in Christ:

I want to express my sincere gratitude for offering me the opportunity and the funding (through a generous grant from Lord of Life, Austin) to take a sabbatical; my last one was 10 years ago, before I moved to Texas, and working in the office of the Bishop is exciting AND exhausting.

Thank you to my amazing staff who juggled multiple balls/put out fires on my behalf in my absence, particularly Deacon Darcy and Pastor Chris, who stood in for me. Thank you also to the Synod Council, who had to convene for an unscheduled meeting during my absence.

This sabbatical, which I named “moving to the margins”, was a combination of learning, travel, rest, self-care and reflection. In part 1, which began in January 2023, I took a 2 ½ week class at the Mexican American Catholic College in San Antonio, entitled “Hispanic Ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It included daily classes and an immersion trip in the valley. I was the lone Lutheran with a group of 24 Catholic seminarians (some of whom were monks). I shared dorm life and meals with them in addition to our classes and travel. That alone was a cross-cultural experience! We worshipped together twice a day and had great conversations; there was a lot of mutual learning. I have [class notes](#) for anyone who would like a deeper dive into this topic.

The border immersion was the most impactful part. We learned about the great work of [ARISE](#) and the [Texas Civil Rights Project](#) in some of the colonias in the valley. We met with Sister Norma at the large shelter in McAllen. I reconnected with the Catholic Bishop in the Valley as well as the Archbishop of San Antonio, both of whom are also passionate about the care of migrants, and I look forward to perhaps working on some joint project.

In Part 2A (technically not part of my sabbatical, but part of my learnings!), the deans, several staff members and I did a mini-immersion in Eagle Pass in early February. We were hosted by Pastor Julio and Emma Vasquez and the Eagle Pass Frontera Ministries board. We learned more about the critical work they are doing there, and we met with the congregation to invite them to dream about their future. We prayed at the border wall and several of us went over to Piedras Negras to meet some of the migrants and hear their stories. Emma has a strong partnership and brings food and other supplies regularly. At that time, with the migration restrictions of Title 41 in place, there were very few migrants crossing over to Eagle Pass. We also welcomed Mary Campbell and MarieAnn Sliwinski from the churchwide organization to see the work we’re doing and to build a strong partnership.

In Part 2B a group of us traveled to El Paso ([Cristo Rey](#)) and Las Cruces ([Border Servant Corp](#)) to connect with our ELCA border ministries there and to learn how they did border immersions. The group included members of our migration ministries team, Emma Espino Vasquez, and staff members Pr. Edwin Ortiz and Hilda Santiago. We learned more about the history of border movements and also met with border patrol. We saw the amazing work that both of these border ministries are doing as part of an ecumenical shelter network and began to build good relationships with their leaders.

Out of these two trips as well as others, we were able to write a grant for and secure funding from the ELCA for a six synod learning project entitled “Sembrando en los Margenes”. It is designed to strengthen and sustain our word and sacrament and word and service ministries on the border and to create a broader network across the ELCA and beyond to offer the long welcome to our migrant neighbors.

In Part 3 I traveled to Mexico City after Easter with a group of bishops/bishops’ staff members to experience the work of [Amextra](#), a non-profit funded in part by the ELCA. They work with some of the most impoverished communities in and around the city, to assist them in growing leaders and building sustainable communities. Several of those I traveled with are now part of our joint “Sembrando en Los Margenes” project so it was good to continue to expand our network. Amextra can also help give us models of working with some of our border communities.

Part 4 of my sabbatical was the longest, lasting just over 7 weeks. A seminary classmate and I flew to Scotland, spending a few days in Glasgow sightseeing before going on to the Island of Iona, to spend a week living in community in an ancient monastery. The [Iona Community](#) is an international, ecumenical Christian movement working for radical inclusivity, justice and peace, the rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship. They host pilgrims every week of the year. We worshipped, prayed, ate and worked, learned and walked together throughout the week. We had programming about the environment, the Iona Community, and various spiritual practices. Iona is called a “thin place”; a place where encounters with the Divine are frequent and often life changing.

Our pilgrim group included people from Australia, the UK, Spain and the US from all different generations. There were 9 clergywomen among us, including some of the staff and volunteers. I shared the work we are doing here in Texas toward radical inclusivity and the long welcome, and I heard so much encouragement to persist in this vital work. We had many rich conversations over meals and into the evening, and it was some of the most important part of the time there for me.

After our week in Iona we traveled back to the mainland via [Staffa](#), an island inhabited exclusively by Puffins and other wildlife. We enjoyed a weekend in a port city, Oban, and then spent our last few days in the very historic Edinburg. My family traces its roots back to Scotland, so this felt like a kind of homecoming for me.

Upon my return, I took advantage of the time off to catch up on a lot of things around the house and yard that had been neglected because of my schedule. I worked on my financial and estate plans, caught up on reading and podcasts. I was able to get back into a practice of yoga; a new studio opened a mile from my house, so I had the opportunity to go almost daily; this is a practice I plan to continue even as I return to work as it is good not only for my body, but also my mind and spirit.

I also continued my lessons with my Spanish tutor as well as daily Duolingo and Spanish podcasts. I spent time with family and friends, locally and via zoom. I went to movies, the theater and did some TV binge watching. I caught up on some of my reading and favorite podcasts and spent time

with my spiritual director and in prayer and journaling During the last month, I also had the opportunity to co-lead the Emmanuel 9 memorial service with our AME siblings, and to participate in the consecration of the new Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of West Texas, the Rt. Rev. David Read. I spent 4 days in the valley enjoying the hospitality of Edwin and Maribel Ortiz, and meeting with our roving reporter Jamie Stark, as well as local pastors – reconnecting especially with a couple of our pastors of color there who have felt marginalized/cut off by the church.

A couple of trips fell by the wayside as I recognized that I needed more time at home rather than cramming in any more away time. I'm grateful I made that extra much needed space for myself.

I will continue to reflect on what I have learned and am discerning through this sabbatical and how it will enrich my life and work. I'm ready to return. I miss the people and the work, and I feel refreshed and renewed. I am also more committed than ever to living into our vision to be/become a network of spirit-empowered communities of disciples, called and sent to live out the radically inclusive gospel of Jesus. We have much work to do, and I look forward to continuing it together!

In Christ,

Bp. Sue

#### **A Smattering of the Books/Podcasts that have been impactful:**

- *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life*, by Dwight L. Dubois
- *Becoming Church: A Trail Guide for Starting Fresh Expressions* by Luke S. Edwards
- *Us: The Resurrection of American Terror* by Rev. Kenneth W. Wheeler
- *Everything Happens* by Kate Bowler (podcast)
- *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs* by Steve Cuss (podcast)
- *Pivot – Faith+Lead* by Luther Seminary – this season about Mixed Ecology/Fresh Expressions (podcast)