African-American Outreach Team (AAOT): Assessing Our Past

In 2003, the VA Synod drafted a plan in alignment with a Church-wide initiative to attempt to become more diverse by reaching out to the African-American community. This document, named *Lighting the Way, and Sharing the Love: Communities of Invitation and Hospitality*, defined the Synod’s mission statement and strategy for executing this initiative, and chartered the African American Outreach Team to assist with carrying it out.

Upon review of this document 12 years later, the team has recognized that its leadership has evolved, and its mission has radically changed. Only one of the appointed staff development team members from 2003 is on the existing team membership (Janice Bunting). In addition, the understanding and expression of issues of diversity have drastically expanded and changed. The challenges of diversity and inclusion that the ELCA and the Virginia Synod face are no longer limited to one racial demographic. Instead, diversity exists in multiple ways: racial/ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, gender, age, ability, and religious belief. Within these categories, there are layers of diversity as well, making the issues all the more complex. No longer is the challenge simply a matter of outreach. Understanding of context matters for missional engagement and evangelism in the 21st century.

All-Inclusive Outreach Team (AIOT): Naming Our Present

In 2014, the team decided that in light of such realizations, a change in name was necessary. Team members desired to focus more on the real need for conversation around issues of diversity and inclusion through the lens of God’s desire for justice in the world, and our role as the church in participating in God’s reconciling work. Desiring to hold fast to the Synod’s mission statement, we wondered, “What does it mean to be an Ambassador for Christ, who calls us to recognize, speak, and act on behalf of those diverse peoples who have no agency or voice? How is God making God's appeal for justice and healing through us?”

On September 26, 2015, the All-Inclusive Outreach Team met to reflect on the rising racial tensions around events in Ferguson, MO; Baltimore, MD; and Charleston, SC, and related impressions from Synod Assembly. Bishop Mauney – who deserves applause for sticking with us the whole duration of our 3-hour meeting - joined us via video stream; we promise you, this is not typical for us! Yet, the time was well spent, because the Holy Spirit pulled us in new directions that we believe clarify our work for the Synod, and communicate the commitment we made as a Synod a few years ago.

“Education is important.” We Lutherans value education. We understand that those who grow in faith do so through a life-long process of learning about God who gives the gift of Grace in Jesus Christ and calls us into a cross-shaped ministry in the world. Education is also an opportunity for diverse groups, of diverse perspectives, to come together and learn from each other – becoming the Body of Christ. We believe that education is important to addressing diversity and the issues that accompany it. We see this education in three ways:
1. Advocacy work/Storytelling.

This team is committed to providing ideas and opportunities for education around issues of diversity – particularly where our Lutheran perspective speaks to that reality. Yet we also believe there are many congregations and individuals across this Synod that are doing such work and we ask, “How do we highlight those efforts and share best practices with each other? How are we resources for education of one another?”

Yet, this new direction seemed cumbersome and complex to communicate to the congregations in the Synod. Our very name, “All-Inclusive Outreach Team” was considered by one Synod Council member to be “a mouthful.” A clearer, more concise message was needed!

**Tapestry: Weaving a New Future.** A tapestry is a composition in which many threads are woven together to make up one beautiful work of art. A tapestry is often rich with many different colors, combined to create images that can speak powerfully to the soul. Yet, if even one strand of a tapestry is missing, it is noticeable to all. And these missing threads, whether omitted or pulled from it, will cause the tapestry to unravel.

We are a tapestry – our congregations, our Synod, and the communities in which we exist and minister. We are a tapestry made up of diverse and colorful threads: young and old; rich and poor; urban and rural; and diverse in race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and religious belief. What does our tapestry look like as we survey our Synod, congregations, and wider community? When we look at that tapestry, what threads are not here, and why are they missing?

It is the decision of this group to recommend to the Synod Council the following changes for the AIOT:

**Name change:** Tapestry: Steering Team for Diversity & Inclusion in the Virginia Synod (Short Form: “Tapestry”)

**Scriptural Focus:** “See then, the home of God is among mortals, God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s peoples, and God godself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ~ Revelation 21:3b-4

**Mission Statement:** To empower congregations in the Virginia Synod to be Ambassadors for Christ in matters of diversity and inclusion, walking with God, and guided by the Holy Spirit to bring healing, reconciliation, and justice.

**Charter:** The Tapestry Team seeks to carry out this mission in three distinct areas:
1. **Education.** Congregations and the pastors that serve them are in need of resources to help them in the process of being life-long learners to address issues of diversity and inclusion within their contexts. The Tapestry Team seeks to address this by providing learning opportunities in the three broad, yet distinct categories addressed earlier (Advocacy work/Storytelling, “Traditional” Education – theology and Scripture, and Service/Experiential Learning).

Such resources will assist in examining the present tapestry of our local communities, congregations, synod – and that of the Commonwealth of Virginia – to see what threads are missing.

2. **Networks for Support & Conversation.** This team is committed to creating and maintaining a network of distinct Ambassadors for Christ at the conference level, made up of rostered and lay leaders, who will be available as a source of knowledge and mutual learning, who will advocate for issues of diversity and inclusion, and who will foster and encourage distinct conversations within the Virginia Synod.

3. **Emphasis on Contextual Theological Reflection.** As the “Priesthood of all believers” Lutherans need to be contextual theologians.

“Being contextual” means engaging in conversation on realities such as political, social, economic, and gender issues, and being concerned about justice, abuse of power, and ethics.

“Doing theology” means reflecting on realities that affect all God’s children and crush their humanity, and considering what God has to say about them.

The world is becoming increasingly more complex; issues such as these affect even rural contexts where the smallest of our congregations serve. The Tapestry Team is committed to being the “community within the community” of the Virginia Synod that is focused on issues that affect all of humanity, and to being the voice that speaks prophetically to and on behalf of the Synod on these matters. And we seek to do this through the task of theological reflection – a normalizing lens through which Christians see the world. We believe that all members of the Virginia Synod, lay and rostered, have the ability to be contextual theologians alongside our neighbors, practicing the ELCA’s missional model of accompaniment as we wonder what God is up to in our midst.