

Section 4 - Reports of the Bishop, Vice Chair and Ministry Areas

Report of the Bishop

Rev. Dr. Michael J. Pryse

I have presented several of these reports to you over the course of my tenure of service as your bishop. And it's always a challenge to determine what it is that needs to be said; what would be most helpful for you, the delegates who constitute this Assembly, to hear from your bishop in this particular moment. So I will try and focus these remarks on a few key observations on where I think we are in the life of the synod and where I think we need to be headed.

Allow me to begin with a preface. I have a pretty unique perspective on our life. I interact with an amazingly wide variety of congregations and rostered leaders. I visit your churches. I worship with you. I share food and drink with you. I counsel with you. I celebrate your joys and mourn your losses.

Week in and week out I gather with you around Word and Sacrament. And whether the setting is rural or urban; the congregation large or small; I consistently hear the clarion call of the Gospel being proclaimed loud and clear with that wonderfully distinctive Lutheran grace note! "Salvation by grace, through faith." We share such a rich and inspiring faith tradition and perspective. I feel so blessed to be a Lutheran Christian. Our shared tradition is rich beyond measure!

I also get to meet with partners in the wider church and in civil society who express such deep appreciation for what our church, the ELCIC, its synods, congregations, rostered leaders and individual members contribute to the greater well-being of the world. As Bishop Susan reminds us, "We are not a small church; we are a medium-sized church." And we are a medium sized church that punches way above its weight; a church whose presence and participation is sought and welcomed at any number of tables, ecclesial and civic, both domestically and abroad. It makes me so proud of you and proud of the wonderful things we are able to do together.

I love our church. I'm so proud of what it is and what it does and I hope that you are too! That does not, however, mean that we don't face many significant challenges; challenges which also, I believe, contain great opportunities. I will address three such challenge/opportunities in my remarks today.

The first of these is accented by our Assembly theme, "Liberated by God's Grace ... to be Neighbour." In our worship, theme presentations and conversations throughout this gathering we will reflect on questions related to "neighbourliness." Who is my neighbour? What does it mean to be a neighbour? Who are the neighbours that God is calling us to encounter anew? Who are the neighbours we have avoided or harmed and why is that the case? What might we do to seek reconciliation with neighbours from whom we have been estranged?

We will hear the voices of some of those neighbours during this time together; indigenous neighbours, neighbours from other faith traditions, neighbours who live in poverty, neighbours whose skin colour is different from mine, different from most of us!

Some of those conversations may be difficult. But the intent is not to shame or belittle, but to challenge and motivate. The hope is that we will leave this assembly feeling more inspired and better equipped to engage our neighbours in the places we come from; to experience and express anew the liberating power of God's grace to grow and bless human community beyond the lines of kinship, ethnicity and class by which we have typically defined ourselves.

Jesus was a poor and often homeless, brown-skinned refugee; an indigenous man who lived under colonial occupation. Truthfully, there is not much about that profile that is represented in our typical neighbourly networks, much less in the composition of our worshipping assemblies. Why is that? Is it simply the result of a few accidents of history and dominant immigration patterns? That's certainly part of it. But that's not all of it, not by a long shot. I'm hoping we can unpack some of that during these days together.

The second challenge/opportunity that I see is likewise related to the theme of neighbourliness. We are not reaching out in ways that would inspire others to join us in our discipleship. We're not growing the church. I do, however, continue to believe that we have the capacity to do so.

The baptized membership of the ELCIC is approximately half of what it was in 1986. Funerals are by far outpacing baptisms. The trajectory is as clear as it is startling.

I understand when people say "it's not about bums in pews." And on one level I completely agree. But on another level it is about "bums in pews." In case you've not noticed, our "bum to pew ratio" is heading south fast!

A big part of our Christian vocation is about enlisting others to join us in supporting and engaging God's mission to love and save the world. We have been given the both the means and the mandate to heal the sick, free the captives and feed the hungry. We have also been given both the means and the mandate to invite others to join us in this work

In order to do that more effectively, we need to be able to articulate a more compelling rationale for our continued existence. It is not enough to invite people to become a part of the church if all that means is maintaining or preserving the status quo - about getting "bums", or more precisely, wallets, into pews. People are not interested in adding one more obligation to an already too long list much less in supporting a tottering institution whose purpose and mission seems unclear beyond its own continued existence or survival.

They may, however, be interested in becoming part of a movement whose core mission has the capacity to be life-changing and world-changing. They may be interested in experiencing the blessings - the value-added - that discipleship in support of that kind of mission can bring to their lives.

We've got to turn the operational focus of this enterprise on its head. Our mission is not the business of supporting and maintaining the institutional church. The business of the institutional church, rather, is the service and support of God's mission. It's about the enlistment and support of disciples who aid and advance God's mission to love and save the world.

And as much as we might know that and believe that, our actions and public witness aren't demonstrating that truth anywhere near as effectively as they need to. To the extent that anyone beyond the church is paying attention to us, they are not seeing it. Our own kids aren't

seeing it. We've got to change the channel; change the defaults and make it absolutely clear that in everything we do; the use of resources, the deployment of personnel; the engagement of causes; the forging of partnerships - that it is all about the mission; about making a positive difference in the world. It's not about us. Full stop!

Tomorrow morning we're going to spend the better part of an hour hearing your stories of how you have been doing that work; initiating new ministries and engaging crossroad decisions. We want to hear from as many of you as possible, so we're looking for elevator speeches! Three minutes at most. How have you been changing the channel? How have you been encountering your neighbours? Where and how have you made challenging decisions in support of God's mission? A lot of you are doing these things and we want to hear from you. We need the encouragement and hope you can bring to these conversations! So start getting your thoughts together!

Many of those stories have been expressed in your efforts to engage the third challenge/opportunity I see; getting our economy in order. You've heard me say many times before that we are among the richest Christians who have ever lived on planet earth. This is true for most of us as individuals and it is most certainly true for us collectively. Our conservative estimate of the value of our cumulative real estate holdings in the Eastern Synod, for instance, is 250 million dollars. Regrettably, we are not using our accumulated resources as effectively or responsibly as we can. And therein lays an opportunity.

Several years ago, at a Lutheran Life lecture, Rev. Dr. George Regas reminded us to "never underestimate the power of dollars to heal human lives."

While our core business is not the "church business" that does not mean that there aren't matters of business that need attention. Many of us are recognizing that we are depending on an economic model that is no longer effectively serving our mission. The single pastor/single congregation economic system that served us so well in the latter half of the last century, is failing and failing fast.

Many congregations are struggling to find the resources needed to provide fair and reasonable compensation to their rostered leaders and other paid staff. Remedial actions typically lead to a common narrative where savings get depleted, property maintenance is deferred and church wide support offerings reduced. And then, once those scenarios have played themselves out, and often only then, comes the call to the bishop's office. "We couldn't pay our pastor this month and we don't know what to do."

However, at the same time, we've also witnessed a rapid escalation in the value of property and real estate that have revealed vast pools of accumulated wealth. Urban and suburban congregations, many of whom are increasingly income poor, have now become asset rich. We need to be much more creative and imaginative in putting those assets to work in ways that establish income streams that can support ministry in the 21st century. Tomorrow afternoon you will hear some of what your synod is doing to help you begin the process of engaging this opportunity.

We also need to redouble our efforts toward being the church in the places where God is calling us to be; not necessarily where we are most comfortable being. We need to take a good hard look at where our churches are physically located, how they are staffed and whether or not our current profile is still serving our shared mission. Our standard ministry model does and will continue to work in some settings, but is under increasing stress in many others, both urban and rural.

Does it really make sense to maintain and support three or more church buildings, each utilized at about 5%, that are located just a few miles, or even a few blocks, from one other? Doesn't it make sense to consolidate those assets? Does it really make sense to have most of our rostered ministers working alone and in single ministry settings independent of one another? Wouldn't it make more sense to build ministry teams where individual members could be given the opportunity to excel in leading different aspects of a fuller ministry profile within a particular region, town or municipal district?

In the Gospel of John we hear a story where Jesus tells the disciples to put out into the deep and fish on the other side of the boat after a long night of fishing to no avail. Wouldn't it be exciting to have resources and personnel that could help us do that, to experiment with new models, to gather communities of disciples in new places and new ways that look quite different from our standard template of what constitutes church?

The time to have those conversations is now, before the economic storms that some of us are facing becomes an economic tsunami that's going to swamp us all. We need to urgently engage in serious conversations about reconfiguring and right-sizing our ministries. If you're waiting until the day you're not sure if you can meet payroll you have waited way too long. Your capacity to make smart and mission focussed decisions will be heavily compromised. All of us; every congregation and ministry, every expression of the church needs to take a critical look at how we fund this enterprise. All of us need to feel an increased sense of urgency to help establish conditions wherein we, and the generations following us, can engage God's mission in the most faithful way possible.

Yes, the generations following us.

I am a very different man than the one who you first elected to serve as your bishop. I'm 58 years old now. And, with the passage of time and the experience of numerous life lessons, I have begun to think more and more about those who are coming behind us. I know firsthand how much the church of my generation has benefited and been generously blessed by the gifts carefully stewarded and transmitted to us by the generations that served before us. Their legacy and generosity have positioned us to be faithful in our time and I am determined that the choices we make today will create the most favourable conditions possible for those disciples who will be working to serve and support God's mission, 20, 50 and a hundred years hence. They too are our neighbours and will be profoundly impacted by the decisions we are making today. We must never lose sight of them.

Like the generations of the faithful who preceded us, we have numerous challenges in this day; but we have an even greater abundance of opportunities. We have options available to us that could not have been imagined even fifty years ago. But options need to be chosen and acted upon and the time to do so is now! Dear people, we have been liberated by God's grace! We have

nothing to fear and everything to gain. Do we dare to believe it and act upon it? I think we can. I think we will.

Please allow me to conclude with some words of thanks to key members of our synod's leadership team. I would like to acknowledge the very talented and committed team of colleagues who have served with me in our synod office during this biennium. Assistants to the Bishop Riitta Hepomaki and Douglas Reble are incredibly gifted and committed servants of our synod. I feel so richly blessed to be able to work with each of you.

Heartfelt thanks also go out to our outstanding support staff of Cathy Caron, Liz Zehr, Stephanie Clayton, Sue Heimpel and Karen Cross. Thank-you for everything you do to help advance God's mission through the life of our synod. Thank-you for your hard work, your good humour and faithful partnership!

Thanks also to our Ministry Directors Joel Crouse, Christie Morrow-Wolfe, Debbie Lou Ludolph, Katherine Altenburg, Jeff Pym and Cathy Calvin. You extend our vision and breadth of ministry in so many wonderful ways. I also extend my heartfelt appreciation to those who have served as Area Ministry Deans; Bonnie Schelter-Brown, Jeff Laustsen, Elina Salonen, David Malina, Martin Malina, Joanne Lam, John Polacok, Christian Ceconi, Glenda Morrisette, Brad Mittleholtz, Laura Sauder, Steve Johnston, Thomas Mertz, Jim Koellner, Steve Weber, Thomas Arth, Pamela Korman, Nadine Nicholds, Sue Neville, Paul Roellchen Pfohl, Jim Slack, Steve Hoffard, Anne Krueger and Martin Giebel. Each of you has served so faithfully and generously!

I would also like to thank those countless persons who provide leadership in the life of our synod through their membership on Area Leadership Teams, boards, committees and working committees that guide and administer the ministries of candidacy and worship, advocacy, mission and service, women, youth and young adults, professional leadership, camping and campus ministry. Thank-you to Mark Harris and the gifted team at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. You have all given so much to our church, to our synod and to the communities within which you serve! Thank-you so very, very much!

Thanks to the members of the Synod Council for the wonderful work they have done during this biennium. Thank you for providing clarity and direction to our work. And deepest thanks to my fellow officers, Laurie Knott, Keith Myra and Wendell Grahlman for your faithful and committed leadership. Your wisdom, kindness and devotion are a great blessing to me and to the entire synod.

I wish to thank my family, Lois, our daughters, sons-in-law and grandkids for supporting me and giving me the space, time and latitude to do this work. You challenge, inspire and bless me in more ways than you will ever know.

Lastly, and in closing, let me thank all of you, the rostered ministers and congregation leaders, for the honour and privilege of serving as your bishop. Most days I like you; but every day, I love you. May our forthcoming days together serve to strengthen the bonds that unite us and better equip and inspire us to follow our God in mission and ministry for the love of our neighbours and the love of the world!