

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

### Report of the Bishop

Rev. Dr. Michael J. Pryse

It is a great pleasure for me to report to this biennial assembly of the Eastern Synod as we gather here in Toronto under the theme Liberated by God's Grace. In doing so, we are joining with our 73 million plus brothers and sisters in the Lutheran World Federation, and indeed, with partners in the wider global ecumenical community who are joining us in reflecting on this theme as we prepare to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

To be liberated means to be set free. And from what, one might well ask, do we need to be liberated? From what, do we need to be set free? These, of course, are important existential questions that the LWF invites us to consider in the context of three subthemes. Salvation; not for sale. Creation; not for sale. Human beings; not for sale.

For the church of Luther's day, the foremost existential crisis was explicitly theological. How is it that we come to be saved and brought into right relationship with a seemingly vengeful and angry God? Luther and his fellow reformers were claiming liberation from a twisted understanding of God's nature and from churchly practices that had commodified salvation to the point wherein right relationship with God could be achieved by prescribed actions, as something to be earned, and in some cases, even purchased! Luther and his contemporaries were inspired to challenge those corrupted understandings and to re-claim the gospel understanding that salvation and right relationship with God come to us freely and unbidden as a gift of divine grace. It is by grace that we are liberated from sin; salvation is not for sale!

In my view, Luther's articulation of "salvation, by grace, through faith" is the most revelatory and life-changing theological construct of the past millennium! I also believe that it is as much a word for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was for the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It stands in total opposition to the primary secular and sacred creeds that dominate our present age, creeds that deceive us by promising a counterfeit salvation based on personal merit or accomplishment; corrupted articulations of the gospel that are being promulgated from technological pulpits that touch every corner of the globe. Make no mistake! There is as much need for us, as for the church of Luther's day, to loudly proclaim that salvation is not for sale! We have been liberated by God's grace!

This 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration also invites us to reflect upon other existential questions. What is the nature of our relationship with creation? What is the nature of our relationship with our siblings within the human family? These relationships, too, have been commodified and are in dire need of liberation and transformation.

We are among the first generation of human beings who, by our actions, bear the potential to threaten the continued existence of life as we know it on planet earth. Creation, it seems, has quite literally been put up for sale! By our greed and seemingly unquenchable appetite for exponential economic growth and unbridled consumption we have attained a status once reserved for the mythic gods of old. We can and are, quite literally eating ourselves out of house and home. It's in the face of that terrible truth that Christian people need to say, "No! Creation is not for sale!"

Human beings have been similarly exploited and commodified. Indeed, there are more people in slavery today than at any time in human history. The best estimate, according to the U.S. State Department, is 27 million, and that does not include bonded labourers. We're talking about men lured with the promises of work and then unable to pay debt to traffickers. We're talking about children forced to work in horrific sweatshops. We're talking about women who are trafficked globally and within many of the communities in which you and I live, to satisfy a seemingly insatiable sex trade. To these dear souls, each created in the image of God, and to those who hold them in captivity, we must pronounce a clear and unequivocal word of liberation. "Human beings are not for sale!"

Through these few days together, in our worship, special presentations and resolutions, we will be invited to consider different facets of each of these themes. But I would also invite each of you to consider the ways in which this theme is directly applicable to our life as partners in this synod. Are there aspects of our life from which we also need to be liberated? Are there parts of our life where we are experiencing a type of bondage? Are there places where we have become stuck, perhaps to the point wherein our capacity to proclaim the Gospel is being significantly compromised?

I recently listened to a radio interview with an author named Chuck Klosterman who has written a book entitled "But What if We're Wrong: Thinking About the Present As If It Were the Past." He maintains that every generation unconsciously assumes that its particular view of reality will continue in perpetuity. But, of course, time passes and ideas shift. Opinions invert. "What once seemed reasonable eventually becomes absurd, replaced by modern perspectives that feel even more irrefutable and secure—until, of course, they don't." His book invites us to visualize the contemporary world as it might appear to those who will perceive it from the future, as being a part of the past.

So, how do you think our successors in the life of our synod will perceive us from the vantage point of, let's say, fifty years hence? My guess is that they would not simply look at this particular moment in isolation but would also take a look at the previous fifty or so years that preceded this point in time.

This is the cover of April 7, 1958 edition of Time Magazine. The Rev. Dr. Franklin Clark Fry was the president of the United Lutheran Church in America; a predecessor body to our church. The news then was about the amazing growth that Lutheran churches were experiencing in North America; two million new members in the past 10 years.

I'd like to tell you that the reason for this growth was due to the compelling nature of the church's evangelism efforts. But I don't think that was really the case. The number one source of this growth was the high level of post WWII immigration from Northern Europe that delivered a lot of Christian, Protestant, Lutherans to North America. The second source was an incredibly high birth rate. In 1959 the average child-bearing age woman gave birth to almost 4 children. Now the average is 1.5. That's a lot of kids; a lot of Sunday schools.

And the churches were incredibly resourceful and adaptive in responding to those realities. In 1957 Lutherans in North America were beginning one new mission congregation every week! We committed great creativity and vast financial resources to this effort. And when the immigrants and babies came, we had churches and Sunday Schools for them to attend. We built institutions, colleges, seminaries, camps and a whole host of specialized ministries. We trained pastors and deaconesses. We generously staffed our church wide offices and sent missionaries to every corner of the globe.

And then, lo and behold; the world changed. Immigration patterns shifted. We were no longer receiving card-carrying Lutherans to our shores. The 60's happened. Birth rates plummeted. Most of us became more affluent and adjusted our lifestyles accordingly. In time we experienced the development of an all-encompassing media culture. Participation levels in every social organization in society started to witness the same rates of decline. You know the litany of change as well as I do. And it all happened as a result of societal forces that were largely beyond our capacity to control or change.

Everything changed; everything that is, except us and the way we go about doing the things we do! That didn't change. And so we return to the present and consider it as viewed fifty years hence by our imaginary observer. What does she see?

She will see what many of us are seeing. She will see that membership levels, worship attendance and volunteer participation rates are all down. Sunday school and confirmation classes are a fraction of the size they used to be. Congregations are struggling to fairly compensate their paid staff and making cuts. Buildings are deteriorating due to deferred or overdue maintenance. She will see a church where fewer financial resources are being shared with regional and national expressions of the church that, in turn, are reducing staff and programs at about the same rate that the pleas for help from the grass roots are increasing!

She will see an institution that is still organized on pretty much the same model that it developed 60 years ago to respond to a particular set of massive social changes in post-war North America. She will see an institution that somehow got stuck and failed to effectively adapt to the changes that came in rapid succession through the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup>.

What she will see, and what many of us are seeing, is a church that needs to be liberated and set free from a slavish bondage to a world view that is no longer working for us. She would see a church that continues to do the things in pretty much the same way as we've always done them, and yet expects to have different results.

This, of course, is the classic, albeit clichéd, definition of insanity. The consequences of continuing on this course are perilous and may, in fact, be preventing us from fulfilling the big picture ministry agenda that we feel called to embrace and engage in this 2016 context. The LWF Reformation themes call us to boldly engage God's overarching mission to love, save and reconcile the world! They call us to climb aboard for the voyage of a lifetime. But we don't have a lot of time and energy to engage and support that kind of a mission, that kind of a voyage, when all of our time and energy are directed toward patching leaks and mending holes in a ship whose hull is long past the need for overhaul.

We need to stop consuming our accumulated assets by maintaining institutions, church buildings and individual ministries that have become redundant in their present form. We're maintaining and propping up too many structures in support of too few ministries. And while I understand desire to honour and preserve the gifts that have been entrusted to us by our forbearers; we actually end up doing quite the opposite when we become the sole recipients of their benefit or squander them. That's not faithful stewardship and it's no way to experience joy in ministry.

Could this be why we have such a hard time finding people to take positions of leadership in our congregations; why council seats sit vacant and quorums unmet? Could this be one of the reasons that our own children and grandchildren seemed to have abandoned the life of our churches? Could it be that we have become spiritually distracted by our well-meaning but

slavish devotion to the maintenance of structures and forms that were never intended to be more than temporal?

The same is true in how we deploy our human resources, particularly our rostered leaders. The single congregation, single pastor model is already unsustainable in many settings and is threatened in many others. For some of us, it's still viable and effective, but for fewer and fewer. And part-time calls are not the answer. I don't know many people who are looking for part-time work and I don't know anybody who is going to invest six or more years seeking an advanced education in pursuit of a part time job. If we want bright, talented and committed people to aspire to church vocations we need to be able to provide them with jobs that are economically viable and vocationally engaging. At present we're not doing either of those things particularly well.

Many of our congregations need to give very serious consideration to transitioning into a new life through mergers while they yet have the capacity to bring something with them to a new partnership.

Some of our Ministry Areas are ideally positioned to establish broader partnerships with shared ministry programmes and shared staffing. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our rostered leaders, most who work in relative isolation, could be partnered in ministry teams? Think of the potential for increased creativity, expanded breadth of skill and mutual support!

Others of our congregations would benefit from getting out of the aging church structures that claim too much of our time, energy and financial resources. Could you imagine the possibilities of how those gifts might be liberated and deployed once the congregation is freed from the property management business?

And yes, some of our congregations need to bring their ministries to a gracious and faith inspired conclusion while they yet have the opportunity to entrust a legacy to the care of their wider church family. There is no shame in this. For heaven's sake! We are in the dying and rising business! Why are we so averse to experiencing such necessary transitions in our institutional life together?

But here's the good news! We have options in how we engage this work. We don't have to keep doing things the way we think we've always done them. Church history and the contemporary witness of the global church show us that there is no limit to the ways in which we can organize ourselves to do the work of ministry. We have the capacity to envision and live into an alternate future and we have an abundance of resources with which to do it. We are the richest Christians ever to live on planet earth and yet we strangely persist in seeing the life of church through the lens of scarcity? Could it be that the lens needs to be replaced?

I am gratified and encouraged to witness the deepened partnerships that are developing in most of our Ministry Areas. I am grateful for the efforts of our Deans and Leadership Teams for the ways in which they are working to draw us out from our congregational silos and to share more fully in the abundance with which our synod has been blessed. I am grateful for a Synod Council and for colleagues who are willing to be self-critical and for inviting all of you into a broader conversation about our life together here at this assembly.

I am inspired by witness of our congregations who are faithfully and imaginatively working to serve and engage their communities. I'm deeply moved by the witness of congregations and institutions who are going way beyond their comfort zones and working to be agents of blessing and reconciliation. I am encouraged and challenged by courageous ministry colleagues who are willing to try new approaches and take risks for the sake of the gospel! There are

plenty of examples. I see many signs of hope. But the pace needs to accelerate. A great many of us are running out of runway!

Jesus once said that, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." We need to look after the little things if we are to have any hope of ever getting to the big things! And right now, our seeming inability or unwillingness to deal with the little things of our life together is tying us up and preventing us from experiencing the freedom and fullness that God intends for us to experience as a church. It's impeding our capacity to present the kind of witness that can actually engage and draw new partners from our communities. It's muting and blunting our proclamation of God's salvific word of eternal justice, peace and mercy; that word which our hurting and broken world is so desperately in need of hearing and seeing and touching.

Brothers and sisters, we have been liberated by God's grace! We have been set free by God's perfect and all-encompassing love; a love that casts out all fear! We have nothing to be afraid of. We have both the freedom and the security of the Gospel and our greatest enemy is our own fearfulness and timidity.

As we begin the work of this synod, I invite your prayers that our time together would be an experience of the liberation and freedom we experience by God's grace. May we be inspired with a deepened resolve to act boldly and decisively in support of the larger mission to which we have been called. To God be the glory!

## Report of the Vice-Chair

Linda Grainger

In the past 2 years, I have had the privilege and honour to serve as Vice-Chair of the Eastern Synod. As you know, I was elected as Secretary of ELCIC in July 2015. As a result, I have submitted my resignation as Vice-Chair.

I have attended Synod Council meetings, Officers' meetings, Deans' /Ministry Directors' meetings, National Convention, lay spiritual retreat, ordination services and meetings with Ministry Areas. I am thankful for these opportunities.

**"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." (1 Peter 4:10)**

In this verse, we are reminded that all of us have received gifts. These gifts are talents we are given for the good of the whole church. I would ask for your ongoing prayers and support as I use my gifts to support the work of our church, the ELCIC.

A heartfelt thanks to my fellow officers, Bishop Michael Pryse, Rev. Wendell Grahlman and Keith Myra for your support, encouragement and friendship over the years. Many thanks as well to you, the members of the Eastern Synod, for giving me the opportunity to serve as your Vice-Chair for the past 6 years. God Bless!