

## **Bishop's Report to UNYS June 10, 2017**

You no doubt read an article on page 59 of the Pre-Assembly booklet entitled “The Four G’s” This comes out of much thought and prayer in the past year and one half regarding where I believe we need to be focusing our attention. Those G’s give way to:

Grounded in Christ Jesus  
Growing in our Witness  
Giving from our Bounty and  
Graced for the sake of the world.

In the past year Norma Malfatti, our Director of Evangelical Mission, and I have visited each conference and been in conversation with a total of perhaps 150-175 folks who gathered with us to look at these tag lines. Thank you if you participated.

Our starting and our ending point is always ‘in Christ Jesus.’ In order to be there we need to continue to deepen our understanding and faith about this person we call our Savior, among other titles. We will focus on that in the coming year as we welcome a new part time staff member to the synod whose title of Director of Faith Formation will assist us in doing so. Once grounded we will move forward in our growth. You see how this works, right?

In the coming years we will focus on one of the G’s each year, tying in the Bishop’s Convocation to support that as well as some of our time at assembly and conference assemblies and other moments along the way. I will work with Norma and the Faith Formation Table and Director to assist us in growing together by being grounded in One who calls us from darkness into his marvelous light.

In another area, as many of you know too well there is much anxiety and concern in the church today as congregations shrink and are closed across this great church. This is taking place not only here and in the ELCA but in each state of this union and almost every denomination in existence. It is not only taking place in churches but in school districts and in the retail world as well. It’s simply a part of our culture. Since the first of this year we, as a synod, have closed four faith communities and their buildings and closed one other building; St. John’s in Albany moved to their Chapel and is selling the property.

Churches have life cycles, just as we do. They don’t exist forever as much as we’d like to believe otherwise. In these times we all need to ask hard questions of our communities of faith and then find the answers. We need to move from Congregations at Risk to Congregations Risking for Mission. Many of us still live in the 50’s and 60’s believing that our congregation will turn around if we only can find ways to get more children through the doors. Or, that our budget problems will be fixed if we can find a few new members who will contribute and help offset the deficit. I can honestly say that I have heard those two statements made with some repetition across this synod.

That would be wonderful, wouldn’t it? It is most likely also a pipe dream for most. I believe a part of that has to do with the fact that we have become so inwardly focused and concentrate on spending so much of our time and money inside the walls to keep them from falling that we can’t get out the doors into the community. The other reality is that fewer and fewer people find any need for the church and its offerings. The bottom line is that we fail at evangelism.

In a meeting the week after Easter with Region 7 Bishops and David Daubert, our facilitator, he suggested that he no longer uses the word Evangelism since it is such a loaded word. David has instead begun using Community Relations. How do we get out of ourselves and buildings and into the community to discover what the people who live there need? How do we share the Gospel more effectively beyond worship with those who are desperate to hear Good News? There are many who are. How does that happen? How can we reconfigure our space to make it useful for those outside our walls? These are not easy conversations, people of God, but they are necessary conversations, no matter the size of one's congregation or place in the community. We need to begin to talk honestly and openly and there are those who have been there and can assist us.

It is time, people of God, no, it is beyond time, to step out and take risks as the Church. Time to experiment with new ministries and opportunities for developing relationships. Time to reach out to our Full Communion partners and see how we might work better together as the holy catholic church. Time to focus on what is central and let go of what is secondary and peripheral, at best. Time to enter into those places and the lives of the people that are different than we are in order that we might more clearly recognize that not only do they see us in the same light but that we are all children of God despite the color of our skin, difference in our language or of a different sexual orientation. Time to really believe that the Spirit is working in our midst calling us out and forward. We need to be bold in our undertakings. And we need to learn how to fail magnificently.

In another direction, one of the other areas where we will invest some time and energy in the coming year is in the arena of lay presidency in the congregation. This has been an ongoing conversation and while we have protocols in place to make this happen we need to deepen our understanding of what it means to be the church, calling forth leadership from within. We also need to be fully aware of constitutional realities and agreements that bind us together as the ELCA and find our way forward.

I will be inviting the leadership of Learning at the Crossroads, Hartwick Seminary and the Deacon Committee of the synod, among others, to begin a conversation around this topic. Having said that my concern rests not only in the issue of lay presidency but how we continue to support those that are leading preaching in our midst, both clergy and lay who bring the Word of God to life and light in our midst.

This is a part of being grounded in Christ Jesus, understanding clearly and preaching profoundly the Theology of the Cross and becoming bold in our proclamation week after week after week. We will look at models from other synods, see what might work, create from within and move this ministry forward. We need to create the spaces where people come to hear the Word and leave, eager to return the following week for more!

On another front I am going to be in conversation with the Synod Council and Synod Assembly Planning Team in the coming year to discern new possibilities and ways that we might meet as a synod. Constitutionally the Synod Assembly has to meet annually. Having said that it doesn't mean that it needs to look like this one every time. I am hopeful that we can recreate what an assembly looks like that might bring people together for worship, fellowship and much more learning and conversation. That might take place in one part of the synod or multiple parts. I have heard with some repetition that folks like to come to assembly to be with others, get a sense of the larger church, worship in ways that they can't worship at home and learn and grow in the faith. If we target those areas and reduce some of the other pieces of this assembly puzzle

we can become better equipped to be the Church of Jesus Christ in this ever-changing world. For some it is becoming too expensive. For others, it has already moved beyond that mark.

We will continue to work on what it means to be healthy as leaders, congregations and pastors so we can react in ministry from a position of health and confidence as opposed to conflict. We need to give our leaders the tools to understand systems and how they work and are beginning to get at that with the work that Greg Tennermann is doing with the ELCA's Natural Systems Academy as well as the people across this synod who have begun working with him to understand and move toward healthier systems and congregations.

One of the areas where we are really struggling as a synod is in the area of youth. As congregations shrink so does the critical mass of youth in any given congregation. How do we work better together to create spaces where our young people can gather for fellowship and growth? Where do we find those places where they can experience the larger sense of the church and its ministry? Surely camp ministry accomplishes that but that only covers a smaller percentage of our young people. We need to find ways to include them more intentionally in the larger church and help to equip them for ministry and leadership.

Finally, we have to come to a clear understanding of what is most important to us as the church. Where should we focus our attention? What demands our action? Who requires our gifts and abilities now, both here and the world around? Maybe most simply put, how do we live out the call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God? We have begun that with our ingathering of offerings at this assembly to give food and support to refugees the world around. These are our brothers and sisters that fill refugee camps to overflowing, risk life and limb to find freedom, give up their lives for the lives of their children and will go to any lengths to escape the tyranny that drives them from their countries to places unknown. Welcoming the stranger is not a cute catch phrase recently made up, it is a biblical imperative. We need to understand that and also understand that at times, welcoming the stranger, the refugee, may in fact cost us. We have no other choice.

Each of the items listed above as well as others that I don't have time to mention, is about the theme of this assembly, building bridges; building bridges to connect and create and converse about what it means to be the church. Building bridges to get to the other side, the unknown, in order to know. Building bridges to connect the world with hope and love and promise. That is our calling in baptism as children of God, plain and simple. Recall these words as part of the charge to parents at Holy Baptism as well as commitment made at the time of Confirmation or Affirmation of Faith: ***“As you bring your child to receive the gift of Baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities so that your child may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made and (here they are) work for justice and peace in all the world.”***

If you leave this assembly with nothing else, please leave with this: As Baptized Children of God we are called to build bridges, not walls. Called to welcome the stranger, not live in fear of her. Called to create safe places, not put up fences to keep others out and to reach across the divide, whatever it may be, to take the hand of the one in need in order to lead him to the One who makes all things new. This Jesus breaks down barriers that divide and, strangely enough, uses us to do so. Together, may we join hands with one another and the world and not 'cross that bridge when we come to it', rather build that bridge so that we may go to them and welcome them with words of hope, accompaniment and new life. May it be so among us.

Thank you.