

Synod Assembly Report 2013
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Fifty years ago I was sitting my desk in 7th grade geography class when the news of John F. Kennedy's death was announced. Not only do I remember exactly what I was doing that moment, I even remember the name of the textbook we were using. It was called "We Live in a Changing World".

Mr. Iwon was my teacher. He spoke almost daily about living in a changing world, not just about the development of new countries and the ever-changing borders and boundaries of the time but also about how change was a fundamental part of life. President Kennedy's death was a most powerful sign of that reality for many of us.

As I look at the church in the world today I am aware of the ongoing truth that we live in a changing world. John Denver once sang "What a friend we have in time . . . gives us children, makes us wine . . . tells us what to take and leave behind." In a world where the pace of change seems to be more accelerated than ever before, the pressing need for the church is to understand what we are to take and what we are to leave behind as we proceed into the future.

If you ask me, the leave behind part is fairly easy. We may be in the last days of Christendom as we know it. Like so many of the old institutions, the institution of the church, as we have known it, is melting like an iceberg in a sea of global warming.

Amid that reality I remain tremendously confident about the future of the church, even the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In this moment I do not want to talk about what we must leave behind but rather about the things our rich tradition invites us to take with us in an ever-changing world.

1. Gathering around scripture

One of the greatest privileges for me over the past year was to be able to teach a diakonia class. As I have said before, it was a chance for me to "see what all the fuss is about," what causes people to be so passionate about that program. I taught on Old Testament class. It was tremendously uplifting to gather each week around the Word with a group of dear people. I was struck by the hunger of people not only to learn about the Bible but to do it within the context of a caring community. We as Lutherans often undervalue our ability to embrace scripture through critical, thoughtful reflection and have it make a difference in our lives.

2. Accompaniment

I do not believe that any Bible-believing person can ignore the issue of poverty, nor can we resign ourselves to inaction when it comes to addressing the gap between the haves and the have-nots of this world.

One thing I've decided is that every bishop really needs to major in something. There are some involved in ecumenical relations, issues like immigration, global partnerships and a host of other

things. While all of those things are terribly important, for me, addressing hunger has been the best set of eyes through which to look at the church.

I've been particularly drawn to the people in our church who work in the ELCA World Hunger program. What I especially like is their commitment to be about accompaniment, being concerned not only about full stomachs but about recognizing and embracing the hunger for human dignity as well.

Accompaniment is to make the poor of this world not simply the objects of our condescending benevolence but also to work for the empowerment of others as the goal of addressing hunger globally and locally.

Walking with others is never a given – it is always a process of confessing to states of privilege and working to recognize dignity in others as the carrying out of God's work in the world. It is both a great gift and a great challenge as we in the ELCA have the will to become a great church in the future.

3. Advocacy

Advocacy is a big part of accompaniment and it has been a strong part of our Lutheran heritage, particularly in the past century. Part of the reason it's important to recognize some of the important 50th anniversary dates in the history of the civil rights movement is that we remember that the work of justice is always an important calling for people of faith.

I lament that advocacy becomes more difficult in a polarized political climate, because justice is everyone's work. I was particularly grateful to stand together with Senator Glenn Grothman (a conservative Republican) and Senator Lena Taylor (a liberal Democrat). As Senator Grothman called on the church to stand with him against the re-introduction of rent-to-own businesses in our state, businesses that do often exploit people living in poverty, it reminded me that the church does have a role in calling public leadership into greater accountability and in applauding them when they stand for justice.

4. Pastoral Care

Pastoral care is not simply the work of ordained pastors. It is the work of the whole church. At the same time it is important that our rostered leaders model care for others as one of the strengths of the church in any age. I am reminded that health care programs and hospitals have often been born in history through the work of the church. None of us are called simply to maintain institutions, we are always called to care for others, to value others, in a world in which the names and faces of people are often lost. In some ways the story of the incarnation of Jesus, Jesus finding a way into out-of-the-way places (Bethlehem), finding a way into the lives of sinners and outcasts, knitting together a community of faith dedicated to care for others, is still the greatest gift we have to offer within the church.

Amid the great necessity in this world to recognize and respect proper boundaries, perhaps the most important gift we offer to a changing world is the gift of connecting people to each other through meaningful, caring relationships. For most of us, this begins within the life of a congregation and expands through our communities to the ends of the earth.

5. Birthing

While I too often lament that we in the ELCA are an aging church, I too seldom marvel at the church which is being born in our midst. I would further say that being an aging church is an important ingredient in the birthing of a new church. As a person now over sixty, I fully expect that the years ahead are the most important ones of my call as a Christian disciple. Like many others I have little desire to reclaim the church of yesterday. I have a great desire to offer whatever wisdom and resources we have to the next generation.

I sincerely believe that there is a whole new day on the horizon. I'm deeply impressed at the young people today who have a profound sense of what it means to be a global community, who have less desire for wealth to be the standard for meaning in their lives, who have more hunger to know the truth through thoughtful biblical reflection than ever before. Most of all I'm convinced that the generations desperately need each other to birth a church that will be relevant for generations to come.

These are important gifts that we take into a constantly changing world where the future is not always clear, but where the promises of God's redemptive power in Jesus Christ are always present. I remain tremendously thankful to serve as bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. I am thankful for the hardworking staff who continue to bless my life as we seek to serve the ministries of the synod. I am especially thankful for the many expressions of faithful service and for the powerful witness to the Gospel that happens every day through the ministries of the synod.