

BISHOP'S REPORT – 2012 SYNOD ASSEMBLY

The time after World War II may have seemed remarkably placid, but the world was about to change. Dr. Andrew Burgess knew it. He saw sweeping irreversible changes coming to the old Lutheran stronghold in north Minneapolis and charged his students at Luther Seminary to do something about it. A handful of them, with few resources at their disposal and great passion for the Gospel, did just that. In the middle of seminary studies, in the midst of growing racial unrest, in the midst of once stable neighborhoods suddenly a wash in social change, Plymouth Lutheran youth center was born. The enterprising students managed to secure an old hotel in the heart of one of the most vulnerable neighborhoods. Ministry began, not simply as a social service, but as an extension of Biblical faith.

Plymouth Christian youth center is still vital today in the heart of north Minneapolis. Over the years it has experienced a move, a fire, a rebuilding, ongoing economic challenges, varying support from local congregations, the birth of new programs and the discontinuance of others. What has NOT changed is the simple clear vision to be “dedicated to the task of renewal.”

“What is your vision?” is perhaps the most frequent question put to me as the bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. My response is always, always to balk at the question itself. I believe that visions for a church do not initiate with individuals but that they are born, instead, in the heart of God. I believe that the great crisis in the church today is not due to the lack of vision. It is, instead, a problem of not living into the vision to which we are being called.

Our visions as individuals and as a church are mere reflections set forth by a God who is still in charge of the future.

For me, the vision begins with the words from Micah 6 which says “We are called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.” Thanks to a wonderful gift from the congregations of the Greater Milwaukee Synod at the time of my installation I am able to begin each day with those words displayed right in front of me.

That verse does not stand alone. It is a springboard for many other verses from scripture, like “we preach Christ crucified.” “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” “For God so loved the world...”

As we strive to live out these compelling visions, as we strive to be the people of God in this place, it is clear to me what the work of the Greater Milwaukee Synod is all about. Very simply, we must be about the task of building healthy leaders and healthy congregations.

HEALTHY LEADERS

Pastor Chuck Brummond carries with him the title of Director of Rostered Leadership because so much of our work in the synod office involves the support of rostered leaders. From the time people enter the candidacy process through seminary and first call, through subsequent transitions, all the way to retirement, our synod should be there as a support and resource for our leaders.

I've said many times that people like me were raised to be the chaplains of the church of our grandparents – all we had to do is show up, teach confirmation, visit the hospitals and shut-ins faithfully, preach and lead worship and the church seemed to go on in spite of our greatest gifts and most miserable failings.

Today's church is much different. Once again the world and communities seem to be in the midst of sweeping irreversible changes. Loyalty to institutions has waned, levels of stress have increased, chances of isolation have become much greater. Successful rostered leaders today not only need to be equipped with loving hearts. They must also be savvy enough to serve an ever-changing landscape with an almost entrepreneurial spirit.

Our goal as a synod staff is not only to walk with those leaders but also to be a part of their on-going development hopefully in helping remove barriers to effective ministry rather than setting up hoops to be jumped through. If I had one great wish for our church today it would be to help re-establish a sense of collegiality and trust between our leaders.

Lay leadership, while it often goes unrecognized, is equally important to the life of the church. Things like the congregational leaders event, the Going Past Safe event, the stewardship fair, the all-important Diakonia program are all ways in which we attempt to lift up and encourage our best leaders.

At each juncture we need to be willing not only to offer the skill sets needed for leadership in the church but also to be able to pause frequently asking the question "How is it with our soul?" After all, isn't that the great question that ultimately brings us to the community of faith?

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS

The second great vision of this synod is that we continue to work toward healthy congregations.

In the LIFT recommendations congregations are lifted up as the focal point of our life together in the church as the ELCA. (I would include important things like special ministries, military chaplaincy, campus ministry, as important extensions of congregational ministry). It is in those

settings that people are most often gathered to hear the Word, receive the sacrament of forgiveness and freedom, and from those places, we are sent out into the world to become little Christs.

When I talk about healthy congregations I think that size and resources are only two of many measuring sticks for congregational health. Many of our smaller congregations are wonderful congregations.

I think what are more important are some of the marks of health:

1. Are people engaged in the Bible as the focal point of the gathered community?
2. Does your congregation understand its purpose?
3. When others come into the community, are they met with welcome?
4. Is the congregation engaged in the neighborhood and world beyond itself?
5. Is there a compelling mission beyond its own care which ignites the fire of discipleship in people?
6. Is the ministry able to be sustained?
7. Are the facilities an asset or a deterrent to ministry?

As a synod staff much of our work is with congregations at a time of transition. More and more we try to look at a particular congregation's needs on an individual basis rather than trying to employ a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to working through an interim time. We are lucky to have some very capable interim ministers in the synod. The goal is always to help a congregation tell its story as clearly as possible and help find the best possible pool of candidates to fill a pastoral vacancy.

More and more we understand our responsibility to walk with congregations not in transition, both by offering events to "equip the saints" and also to be a presence in worship and in special congregational events. We have a policy to "turn down no gigs" if at all possible as we seek to support the life and ministry of the congregations of the Greater Milwaukee Synod.

In order to do that we rely heavily on a support staff which I announced last year was beginning a time of transition. During 2011 we welcomed three new staff people. Tracy Apps began right at the 2011 synod assembly as our new Director of Communications. She has worked hard to birth a great new website and to re-establish a regular newsletter. Mary Romskog and Kate Mattson came on board in the fall as our new Communications and Administrative Associate and Director of Youth and Family Ministry respectively.

This synod assembly marks the retirement of Mary Meyer who has been the wonderful synod administrator for 36 years, four bishops, the birth of a new church and countless other changes. As we began last fall in conjunction with Else Thompson, the ELCA's Human Resources person,

to move through this time of transition, it became clear that both Mary Romskog and Kate Mattson possess the gifts to assume many of Mary Meyer's responsibilities. With her mentorship (and with her blessing) we are already moving into a new day under their leadership.

We will outline their specific responsibilities in the near future and we will be looking for a new receptionist. Realizing that we will be in a time of transition and that there will be some surprises along the way as we replace someone of Mary's stature, I feel very comfortable that this provides the most seamless way of transition possible. Mary Romskog will move into Mary's old office. Kate Mattson will retain her youth and family responsibilities while increasing her hours and assuming some of the important responsibilities of Mary Meyer's job.

As we attempt to care for leaders and congregations, I would be remiss if I didn't report a couple of things which keep me awake at night.

BENEVOLENCE AND SYNOD BUDGET

I continue to be thankful for the generosity of people in this synod. I'm not only aware of but am supportive of the fact that not all of our congregational benevolence flows through the synod budget. I applaud the efforts of our people to support ministries locally and globally which may not be directly connected to the synod. As we in this country become more and more congregational in our giving, part of my job is to recognize and support what it means to be sent into the world.

Amid that change, however, there are a couple of things that do keep me awake at night. First of all, in regard to our over-all stewardship, it is important for us, especially in a time of economic uncertainty, to remember to live as blessed people and not as people of scarcity. Thus as a synod, we will continue to work to raise the level of overall stewardship, beginning with the notion that it really does "all belong to God" anyway.

Second, I do worry about the continual decline in congregational giving through the synod budget and in support of the larger church. Each year we seem to have about \$100,000 less to work with than we did the year before. Last year we were forced to adjust our budget and cut the percentage of ELCA benevolence from 60.1% to 55%. While I am happy to report that we were able to send in an extra 2% to the ELCA at the end of the year, I worry about the impact of continual diminished funds and our ability to support vital ministries. Especially when we make commitments to support things like campus ministry and youth and family ministry through the synod budget, it is important to follow through on those commitments with real financial support.

A POLARIZED SOCIETY

Probably nothing has been more stressful for any of us than the current polarized political landscape, not only in Wisconsin, but in the whole country. That strife has certainly had an impact on the lives of our congregations.

One of the things I have always loved about the ELCA is that we have been able to span the political spectrum and still gathering around the same table of grace as family and friends.

At the same time, we as a church body can never remain silent in the midst of things that affect the daily lives of people. In a world where there is genocide, human trafficking and the suffering of children, the church needs to retain a public voice.

The call is to be public but not partisan as we both pray for and challenge government leaders to be faithful and just.

I have joined other judicatory leaders through the Wisconsin Council of Churches to call for a season of civility as we encourage people of faith to be respectful of each other amid political differences.

I have also chosen to enthusiastically endorse what is called the 11 X 15 campaign in the state of Wisconsin. That is an effort spearheaded by WISDOM in our state aimed at cutting the prison population in half (from 22,000 to 11,000) by the year 2015. I feel strongly that it can be an issue which unites rather than divides people in our state. I would encourage all of us to learn more about this campaign.

Finally, amid many challenges, ongoing transitions, political and economic uncertainties, and a few sleepless nights, I remain terribly humbled and grateful to serve the people of the Greater Milwaukee Synod.

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Roster changes from the 2011 synod assembly:

The Rev. Harvard Stephens, from Dean/Chapel at Carthage College to Frederick LC,
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands

The Rev. Joy McDonald Coltvet, from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to
On Leave From Call

The Rev. Suellen Myers, from Mt. Olive, Mukwonago to Synod Interim Ministry

The Rev. Charles Fredrickson, transferred to Southwest Texas Synod
The Rev. Larry Harpster, from Spirit Alive, Kenosha to Dr. Martin Luther, Oconomowoc
The Rev. Marcia Carrier, from retirement to Redeemer, Hartford
The Rev. Scot Ruffatto, from St. John, Brookfield to On Leave From Call
The Rev. Kris Ruffatto, from St. John, Brookfield to asst. professor, LTS, Saskatoon, Canada
The Rev. Jane Fryda, from St. Andrew, Waukesha to On Leave From Call
St. Andrew LC, Waukesha, dissolving August, 2011.
The Rev. Phil Nybrotten, resigned from Calvary, Brookfield and resigned from ELCA roster
The Rev. Mark Ziemann, from Calvary, Brookfield to On Leave From Call
The Rev. Glenn Miller, transferred to Lower Susquehanna Synod
The Rev. Raymond Korry, retired, transferred to No. Great Lakes Synod
The Rev. Oscar Kraft, from On Leave From Call to retirement
The Rev. Diane Tetrault, from St. Paul, Racine to retirement
The Rev. Brian Alberti, from St. Mary's, Kenosha to On Leave From Call
The Rev. Laura Gerstl, ordained July 10, 2011 to Calvary, Lansing, MI
The Rev. Tim Singleton, from Colorado to Adoration, Greenfield
Shepherd of the Hills LC, Hubertus voted to leave ELCA June 5, 2011.
The Rev. Amy Current, transferred to LaCrosse Area Synod
The Rev. Samuel Giere, transferred to LaCrosse Area Synod
The Rev. Susan Ruehle, from Adoration, Greenfield to retirement
The Rev. Gary Erickson, from St. Matthew, Wauwatosa to retirement
Ms. Susan Giese, AIM, from Christ our Savior, Sussex to retirement
The Rev. Dawn Lindberg, from Cross, Ixonia to English, Ellsworth, WI
The Rev. Jim Holmberg, from On Leave From Call to Lutheran Social Services of WI,
Church and Community Relations/Advancement Coordinator
The Rev. Rachel Young Binter, from Lutheran Campus Ministry to open ended call there
The Rev. Jessica Short, from Lutheran Campus Ministry to open ended call there
The Rev. Clifford Hanus, from On Leave From Call to St. Mark, Cudahy
The Rev. Pamela Lange, from Bethania, Racine to Mount Carmel, Milwaukee
The Rev. Rob Zahn, ordained Dec. 17, 2011 to Spirit Alive, Kenosha
The Rev. Larry Smith, from On Leave From Call to Synod Interim Ministry
The Rev. James Ahlquist, from Messiah, No. Mankato, MN to Christ/King, Brookfield
The Rev. Michael McAllister, renewed call to Living Hope, Saukville
The Rev. Victoria Brundage, retired, transferred to Central States Synod
The Rev. Tracy Polzin, from Our Savior, Racine to Fortune Lake Camp, Crystal Falls, MI
The Rev. Richard Engen, from On Leave From Call Disability to retirement
The Rev. Ari Mattson, from Christ/Savior, Sussex to Martin Luther, Milwaukee
The Rev. Maren Hooper, from Mount Carmel, Milwaukee to On Leave From Call
The Rev. Nancy Toensing, transferred to SE MN Synod as Chaplain
The Rev. Kristine Totzke, from On Leave From Call to Synod Interim Ministry

The Rev. Mark Thompson, from Good Shepherd, Milwaukee to Memorial, Milwaukee
The Rev. Elias Kitoi Nasari, from Galilee, Pewaukee to LC of Redeemer, Racine
The Rev. Jack Trethewey, from retirement to resigning from ELCA roster
The Rev. Jay Ford, from Half Moon Bay, CA to Galilee, Pewaukee
The Rev. Dana O'Brien, from Atonement, Racine/Atonement West, Racine to open ended call
The Rev. Marilyn Miller, ordained June 10, 2012 to Reformation, Milwaukee
The Rev. Charles Brummond, from synod staff, Director of Rostered Leaders to another
one year term call, same position

NECROLOGY REPORT

The Rev. Harley Meyer, died June 28, 2011