

Florida-Bahamas Synod Bishop's Report  
October 12-14, 2017  
Kissimmee, Florida

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul writes, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." II Corinthians 4:5-7

It is a privilege to be asked to serve as your Interim Bishop. I offer my one and only Bishop's Report to you as a way of lifting up the treasure that is ours in the revelation of the "glory of God" made known in the "face of Jesus Christ" and our precious vocation as those who are called to be "servants for Jesus' sake." In lifting both this treasure of the Gospel and our vocation to be servants for Jesus' sake, I have chosen to shape this Report by using the four themes regularly accented by our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton. First: "We are Church." Second: "We are Lutheran." Third: "We are Church Together." Fourth: "We are Church for the sake of the world."

### We Are Church

Before the service began at St. Timothy, Tarpon Springs, Pastor Curt Snare made a number of announcements which concluded with something like this, "We are a church that believes in radical hospitality. So, I want to invite anyone here who has not been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, to talk with me about the gift of baptism." Later he shared that a homeless woman talked with him about the possibility of baptism. For all of us who know something about being homeless, baptism gives us our welcome home to God's embrace in Jesus Christ accompanied by the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit.

Over the past months I have had the joy of visiting about a fifth of the congregations of this synod, mostly on Sunday mornings and for ordinations and installations. In these places I am reminded of my identity as a beloved child of God, claimed, forgiven, washed and fed, in the blessed company of others who know these gifts and others who long for them. These places are richly diverse and distinctive--Our Savior, Freeport in the Bahamas; St. Stephen, Tallahassee; Hope, Port St. Lucie; St. Mark's by the Sea, Palm Coast; St. James, Coral Gables; St. Timothy, Miami; Hope, The Villages; Trinity, St. Petersburg—just to name a few.



When I am there, I am at home together with others who confess that the one to whom they belong is Jesus Christ. I like who I am when I am in such communities of faith. In a world of name-calling, bitterness, suspicion and division, here we get to



acknowledge the counter-cultural truth that we are beggars in need of forgiveness and God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus. And, if by the Spirit of God repentance takes place and we are attentive, that changes everything in terms of the way we see God, see ourselves, see one another, and see this world.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit and many call committees, deans, synod staff--including the Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership and Mobility, Connie Schmucker--during the past year, the bishops of this synod have ordained five Ministers of Word and Sacrament and will consecrate a Minister of Word and Service in November. Twenty-eight (28) pastors and deacons were installed and the synod council extended 12 calls to specialized ministry. Our Assistants to the Bishop have commissioned, and re-commissioned, 17 Synod Parish Deacons. On those occasions, those who have been installed,

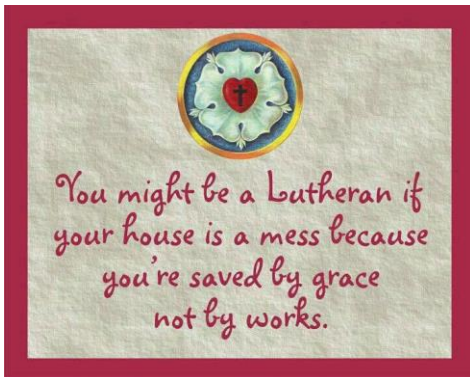


commissioned and consecrated have not done so with the promise that they will commit themselves to feather their own nests, or do everything possible to be liked. Rather in Jesus Christ, they will speak the truth "...giving no reason for false securities and illusory hope." They will seek in all things to manifest the love of God in Christ Jesus. And the community promises to receive them as stewards of the mysteries of God and servants of Christ.

We are the church, dear members of this gathering. And if the Word of God in Christ Jesus is being offered in the places related to this synod, know that the treasure of the Gospel is at work even now transforming us.

### We Are Lutheran

As we approach the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, there is no little commentary about what it means to be Lutheran. During my weekend at Our Savior Lutheran in Vero



Beach, retired pastor Jack Diehl handed me a decal that read, "Proud to be a Humble Lutheran." You can buy socks that declare, "Here I Stand" and a beer that is called, Katie Luther's Brew. You might want to check with our folks from the Castle Church Brewing Community. I've seen pictures that declare, "You might be Lutheran if your house is a mess because you're saved by grace and not by works." Or, "You know you're Lutheran when you have the urge to sit in the back of the church" or, "You know you're Lutheran when you hear something really funny during the

sermon and smile as loudly as you can."

Humor can be a way of laughing at ourselves and our own tradition. But if we stop there, we run the risk of making the Lutheran tradition a club to which we belong and in which

others will never feel comfortable. That was not Martin Luther's intention. He sought reformation and not a new church body. In the first of the 95 Theses, he pointed the way to reformation when he wrote, "When our Lord Jesus said, 'Repent,' he meant that all of life should be one of repentance." One is freed for repentance when by the Holy Spirit, one trusts oneself to the treasure of the Gospel, namely the grace and glory of God made known in a crucified and risen Jesus Christ. God gives us Christ with all of Christ's benefits in order that we might give ourselves to our neighbor with all that is ours. The Lutheran Confessions insist that is what is at the heart of our worship, our theology our teaching and our life. That is our contribution to the whole of the church catholic. So, it was a source of great joy when in 1999 the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation agreed to sign the document, The Joint Declaration on Justification.



Last October, Pope Francis and leaders of the Lutheran World Federation met for a service of Common Prayer in Lund, Sweden. Bishop Schaefer and leaders of this synod advocated with their Roman Catholic colleagues to join in Common Prayer throughout this anniversary year. It was a joy for me to participate with Roman Catholic Bishops Noonan and Estevez in such a service in Orlando on June 6. I'm mindful of other services scheduled in Fort Myers on October 29, with the Archdiocese of Miami at the Cathedral of St. Mary also on October 29 and a number of local celebrations between Lutheran and Roman Catholic congregations. Because of our common bond in Christ Jesus, it is a great delight to be able to welcome Bishop Noonan of the Orlando Diocese to bring greetings to this Assembly. God-willing, this synod's bishop-elect will be installed at St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church in New Tampa on January 20, 2018.

To be a Lutheran Christian is to be freed to receive the gifts and to treasure our relationships with all those who share in the baptism of Christ Jesus. Our full-communication relationships with the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Moravians, the Presbyterian Church, USA, and the Reformed Church in America enable us to maximize these shared gifts in collaborative worship and ministries including Vacation Bible Schools, Food Pantries and disaster response. We thank God for the shared ministries experienced through the ministry of Episcopalian Priest Chris Todd and Lord of the Seas in Key West, Fr James Reho at Lamb of God, Ft Myers, and Pastor Faye Golding at Redeemer, Lauderdale Lakes. (Other examples). This synod knows that to be Lutheran is to know our place within the whole of the church catholic.

More can be explored regarding how being Lutheran can shape our response to an environment that is more pluralistic and increasingly diverse. During one of my visits this year, a woman shared that when she first came to one of our congregations, she soon sensed that most of the food and humor came out of the Scandinavian Lutheran tradition. Being a German Lutheran, she quickly wondered whether or not she would fit in this congregation. Happily, she soon discovered that she did.

Most of you are familiar with statistics that indicate that on Sunday morning, we most likely will worship with those who look like us, talk like us, come from a similar socio-economic background. Yet this state is blessedly diverse. Our congregations exist in the midst of this diversity. St. Paul writes that in Christ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, male and female, slave or free..." Galatians 3:27,28. What might we need to give up in terms of our "tradition" in order to nurture the treasure of the Gospel and receive the gifts of those who may be very different from ourselves but who share our common need for Christ? People quickly sense whether or not they are welcomed in our congregations. How might we risk extending an authentic welcome to all whom the Holy Spirit places into our midst? How might we better communicate that welcome within the communities that we serve? Can we share examples of where that is happening? And what we might learn from those examples? I thank God for the leadership of Aaron Schmalzle and Pastor Jared Witt with the support of the former Atonement congregation, this synod and the ELCA in developing the Castle Church Brewing Community in order to create space for conversation and ministry to and with those whom might not otherwise enter a church building. Which leads to the truth that...



### We Are Church Together

The inclination to go it alone is an ever-present temptation. St. Paul's reference to the church as the "body of Christ" is a vital corrective and speaks the truth about our life together in Christ Jesus. At the end of such a corrective, Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (I Corinthians 12) Within congregational life, leadership prayerfully needs to ask continually, "Are we valuing all the gifts that are present among the baptized of this congregation? How might we increasingly share leadership in a manner which empowers us and yet fosters a sense of mutual accountability?"

Healthy congregations are vital. Yet it needs to be said: the congregation is the church. But, it is not the whole of the church. When I visit a congregation, read the bulletin or newsletter or visit the website, or look at the bulletin board, I look for signs that the congregation is mindful of the church beyond itself. Are prayers included for the church beyond the congregation (e.g. for neighboring congregations, for a shared ministry, for global companion, for the local and ELCA bishops, synod staff and leadership, for hunger or disaster response ministries, for our camping ministries, etc.)? The chances are that when congregations are mindful of their connectedness with the church beyond the congregation, there will be a corresponding connectedness within the congregation. That is what it means to be the body of Christ.



Ministries in the congregation, synod and ELCA takes place because we are church together. The redevelopment of such ministries as St. Stephen, Pompano Beach, St. James, Coral Ridge or University Lutheran in Gainesville could not take place apart from the support of this synod and the ELCA, including the coaching of Pastor Jaime Dubón and Pastor Jim Graeser. The rostered deacon who has been consecrated, the pastor that has recently been ordained or that your congregation recently installed would not take place apart from a church that nurtures such gifts

for leadership through individuals and congregations that nurtured a sense of call. The Candidacy Process assists in mutual discernment while seminary training, supervisors and mentors help to hone gifts for ministry. That is "being church together."



On June 10, I had the joy of participating in the graduation service for 26 who were graduating from the diakonia program. Many graduates of diakonia have also become parish deacons, serving congregations in vital ways which strengthen and renew congregational ministry, while others have gone on to seminary or found life-giving ways of living out their faith in their workplaces. Those ministries exist because people from this synod are willing to provide leadership, training, and mentoring for those who have been identified as having gifts for this

service. That is being church together.

This synod, as did I, learned a bit more about what it means to be "church together", after Bishop Schaefer's resignation. Pastor Walter May, representing Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, sat with synod leadership is processing what this change meant for the synod. Pastor May contacted me about my openness to this ministry and facilitated the Synod Council leadership in its conversations with me that led to my invitation to service. After Pastor Graeser and Pastor Dubón, accepted calls to other ministries, churchwide leadership and synodical leadership worked with me to determine interim solutions so that ministry within this synod could continue to thrive. Such processes are not unlike what your congregation experiences when it experiences transition and seeks new leadership in Word and Service or Word and Sacrament ministry.

It's also good to be church together in times of crisis. During Hurricane Harvey, I experienced a number of days when I could not contact my recently widowed brother who lived in Dickinson, Texas--an area southeast of Houston particularly devastated. Bishop Reinhart put me in contact with a local pastor who contacted me and offered to be a



resource. Shortly, after I learned my brother was fine. But I learned the gift and comfort of being church together. This synod has learned the blessing of that as members, deacons and pastors respond to places of need. To cite one of many examples, Pastor Steven Winsor and Pastor Frank Wagner have shared stories and photos of the work of Holy Spirit in Juno together with Pastor Andy Hagan and members of Advent in Boca Raton related to Hurricane Irma Relief Efforts and collaborative work with

Immanuel Lutheran in Tavernier, Martin Luther Chapel (LC-MS) in Marathon, and Lord of the Seas in Big Pine Key. I am confident that you have many more such stories to tell.

Other examples of being church together include this synod's close affiliation with NovusWay Camping Ministry including Luther Springs. Key leadership has been provided through its Executive Officer Keith Johnson, whose retirement has been announced, and Sue Mendenhall who serves a position which enables her to provide leadership both for Luther Springs and youth ministry within the synod. Many of us can tell stories about how our lives, the lives of our loved ones



and members of our congregations have been impacted by Lutheran camping ministries. Christian faith is nurtured together with a cherishing of God's creation. In past months I have experienced the beauty and hospitality of Luther Springs through a Respite Retreat and a Deans' Retreat. On both occasions I had the marvelous opportunity to watch Mission Builders hard at work creating new facilities for

expanded ministry. The Mission Possible Campaign has been vital in terms of providing financial resources for this expanded ministry. We will be hearing more about this campaign later this weekend. It is good to be church together!

### Church for the Sake of the World

To be Church, to be Lutheran, and to be Church Together is also to be Church for the sake of the World. The Church is Christ's mission to the Church. Within the Church we experience the presence of Christ that gives us our identity and that binds us together through the Holy Spirit at work as God's word is proclaimed, Baptism administered, sins forgiven, and the Lord's Supper received. But having received such gifts, the Holy Spirit leads us back into the world where we get to embody Christ in the places we live, in the relationships we have and in the community and world in which we work and serve. To

forget that we are called to be Church for the sake of the world would be to suggest that our hearts have been hardened to the presence of Christ within the community.

It's clear that within the past 10 years many of our congregations have taken seriously the calling to be Church for the sake of the World. Earlier I referenced the work and ministry of Pastor Snare and St. Timothy in Tarpon Springs. This congregation and pastor take seriously (and with joy!) the call to be in ministry with those who lack food and sometimes shelter. Frequently, those who come for such need also come for the Bread of Life. Such a ministry can have its challenges-including the possibility that some who come to visit might not be comfortable in the presence of those who have such need. But this pastor and congregation will not give us this ministry to which they know they have been called.



Several weeks ago, Pastor Lindner of Atonement, Wesley Chapel, invited me to join them for the Wednesday food distributions. Lines were long. Among those who served were members of Atonement, others from area Christian congregations, and those who had once been served. As I carried bags to cars, I was struck by the stories that could be told by those who served and were served. I found myself longing that our political leadership could eavesdrop on these conversations as I recalled the response of the woman who said to Jesus, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's Table". And how Jesus affirmed her faith!

(Matthew 15:27-28)

I thank God that such stories are multiplying throughout the congregations of this synod. Can we increasingly link these stories with prayer, deep listening and a sharing of the hope that is ours in Christ? The ELCA World Hunger Appeal is a national and global extension of that assistance we can personally offer through our presence and labor. I thank God for the generosity of this synod that led to contributions of over \$2.5 Million, 2.1 Million of which was Mission Support from congregations throughout the ELCA. This synod alone has collected and sent on \$147,000 to ELCA World Hunger in the last 12 months.

During the recent months we have learned and experienced the blessing of serving our synod disaster response fund, which is made possible by the generosity of individuals and congregations throughout the church. A few years ago, after suffering a major tornado that devastated a farm in Ohio, I was able to give the family a significant check



because of the generosity of those in the synod who responded to the need. "I can't take this." The farmer declared. "I've done nothing to deserve this? Why are you doing this?" My response: "because we are the church. And the church cares." With tears, he accepted the gift. Some years later he met me at a funeral home and re-introduced himself to me. He told me that he and his wife and gone through the counseling and so

were able to reclaim his vocation as farmer and that he used the remaining gift for a tool chest that he carries in the back of his truck. "Whenever I see it, I remember what the church did for me. Thank you." Similar stories are now being told as people care for and are cared for in the name of Christ. Within the context of Hurricane Irma, we have worked with synodical leadership, congregations and rostered leadership and Lutheran Counseling Service of Florida to respond to the physical, emotional, spiritual and material needs of those who suffered loss. Though LDR and Lutheran Services of Florida, we seek to respond to those who have suffered the greatest loss and who lack resources throughout Florida and the Bahamas. LDR and the ELCA Synods impacted by disaster continue to respond to other places of significant loss including Texas, Puerto Rico and other locations in the Caribbean. We continue to invite your prayers and generosity. I have been so grateful for the leadership of Michele Hilton in shaping this synod's response.

The chief gift that we have to offer is the good news of Jesus Christ. Recently a veteran pastor expressed deep sadness at the significant loss of membership in so many of the congregations of this synod. "What commitments can be made to reverse that pattern?", he asked. He is not alone in asking the question. Some of the loss is related to a growing secularism and the sense that the "institutional church" is primarily interested in its own survival. Others experience the church as a place of pain and conflict. "If that is what it means to be the church...", a man once told me after observing the behavior of a member of a Lutheran congregation, "I want nothing to do with it." Some of the loss might be linked to the lack of deep faith formation in the lives of the baptized, including the lives of our children. Within Florida, some of the loss is linked to a growing immigrant population whose culture is significantly different than the Northern European culture that played such a formidable role in Lutheranism. I also wonder about our ability to authentically welcome the stranger and our willingness to share the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. Kevin Jacobson from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services is here this weekend and has a table in the Connections Café. He would be a great partner in conversation about this reality.

What might it mean for us to be Church for the sake of the World? It means a commitment to deeply our own prayer and devotional life with a view towards the "other." I think it means a deep reexamination of our welcoming of the other. While visiting, Trinity, St. Petersburg, a member of the congregation observed how the congregation has given so much attention to being a welcoming place for the LGBTQ population. In the process, she observed, others in addition to those who are LGBTQ are finding the congregation to be a welcoming place. In other words, she pointed out, "A focus on hospitality and welcoming becomes an authentic invitation to anyone who might, for one reason or another, check out a given congregation." That is a provocative invitation!

I wonder about how welcoming we are for children and families with children. In my home parish, the "traditional" service was one in which children were typically pointed to the nursery and were generally absent from the service. In recent months, the pastors have begun a children's message after which the children gather with hands on the altar to pray. The pastors clearly have indicated delight at the presence of children, even taking



a restless one in arms during a homily. It has made a difference. When I was home during a recent Sunday, over 15 children swarmed up to the altar for prayer. I am so grateful for the work of Sue Mendenhall and children and youth leaders throughout this synod who continue to seek ways to embrace and engage children and youth more fully in ministry. I am grateful for this assembly that has committed to inviting youth to participate fully in the work we do together in this space. But let us not stop asking this question: What does it mean for us authentically to welcome young people?



Many of our congregations are affiliated with schools with largely non-European descent children. Do we have examples of congregations that are beginning to make deep connections with these schools? How might we be resources to the parents? Could we offer parenting courses or marriage enrichment opportunities? In other words, is God giving us an opportunity for ministry within, quite literally, our own back yards? Can we listen to a gathering of those parents and invite them to tell their story and then ask, how might we help you in your holy calling of being a mom or dad? I know many of you are doing this, and I urge you to continue.

Sent for the Sake of the World-For just this Moment

These are anxious times in many of our congregations, in our communities and in our nations. Some of us are deeply concerned about the course of this nation while others are convinced that we are taking an important corrective from the path of recent years. I have two daughters and daughter-in-law who are social workers- one a school social worker, another works primarily with young families that are in trouble while yet another is a clinical therapist. They observe the tension they are experiencing in the practice of their vocations and are at times concerned for their own emotional and spiritual well-being.

As your interim bishop, I dare to offer some counsel. First, deepen your own life of faith, prayer, reading of Scripture, and attentive listening to the other. Second, ask yourself, what does Scripture and Jesus' ministry teach me about such things as caring for creation, caring for the poor, welcoming the stranger, and caring for those whom others would send away empty? Third, it is so easy to criticize the other. To what repentance is God calling me? In what way is Jesus calling me to "die to myself" so that the life of Christ might be manifest in me? Fourth, listen attentively to those whose opinions differ from yours. Thank them for sharing their perspective. If given the opportunity, share yours. Pray for those with whom you have been in conversation that together you might have "the mind of Christ" (Philippians 2) Fifth, pray for leaders on all levels that they may authentically be attentive to matters of justice, peace, and the welfare of all. Sixth, as you are able, involve yourself with informed voting and fulfilling your responsibility as a citizen. Seventh, find solace in Martin Luther's counsel, "Sin boldly, but accept God's grace more boldly still." Luther recognizes that there may be situations when after prayer and

conversation with brothers and sisters in Christ, we still might not know what to do. In those cases, decide and act. Then, rely not on your rightness, but on God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Eighth, in moments of stress, take a deep breath and recall Paul's admonition to give attention to those things that are "good and beautiful and true" (Philippians 4) Finally, in moments of fear and anxiety, recall the words of our crucified and risen Lord, "Peace be with you. Even as the Father has sent me, so I send you." And he breathed upon them the Holy Spirit and made them alive again. (John 20)

### A Concluding Word

About 6 1/2 months ago I began serving as your Interim Bishop. I will continue until your newly elected bishop is prepared to receive the mantle of this office, which will be no later than January 1 and perhaps earlier. I came into this office knowing little about Florida or the Bahamas and little about the ministry of this synod, its congregations and its rostered leadership, affiliated ministries and synodical leadership. That has changed. To



paraphrase St. Paul, during these months I have come to know you, but, admittedly, only in part. Yet I have come to love you, this territory, this people, this leadership, this dear, gifted and precious staff-including Jaime and Jim who are leaving us and Wally, John, Pedro, and Terrance who are helping us in an interim capacity. Vice-President Cheryl, the Executive Committee and Synod Council have been wonderful partners. During transition, committees like the Global Mission Committee and

the Candidacy Committee have not missed a beat. I have treasured the opportunity to meet Sam Sipes, Chief Executive Office for Florida Services, and to learn about that ministry.

I thank God for Rick Armstrong and his leadership for Florida Counseling Services and to know the support that agency provides for so many including rostered leaders and their families. I'm grateful for the leadership of Keith Johnson and the ministry of NovusWay. The deans have provided remarkable leadership in this time of storm and transition and we thank God for them and for their leadership.

You are about to elect a bishop. I know you have some anxiety about that. You should! It is a daunting vocation. I have counseled many who might have the gifts for this office, "Be open to the possibility of serving as bishop but do not covet it." The challenges are many. To name a few-the number of congregations that are at risk because of diminishment in attendance and financial resources; a number of congregations that are at risk because of conflict, apathy, and or loss of mission; the probability that you may need to deal with misconduct given the fact that those leading us are vulnerable to the same temptations as those whom we are leading; the many demands for your presence;

the increasing numbers of relationships but a diminishment in the quality of relationships; your own vulnerabilities, some of which you are willing to acknowledge others not so much or of which you are not yet aware; the relentlessness of email and the need to respond; the temptation to let the commitment to this calling outweigh your commitment to primary relationships including our spouse, family and your own well-being.



But the gifts are many: They include-the privilege of being in worship on Sunday with people of faith, most of whom love the Lord and the church and who want to be faithful; meeting and working with wonderful colleagues, pastors, deacons, lay leadership; shaping and working with a beloved staff; meeting colleague bishops who know what you are going through; learning and working with significant ministries and helping to shape them; developing a larger sense of the church in this territory, in this nation and around the world; experience privilege-to have access to others in positions of leadership and authority; a broadening awareness of the gift and richness of diversity in this synod, in the church, and around the world; the knowledge that every day, people are praying for you, and chiefly, the knowledge that God has called you and our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

There is great consolation and hope in the passage with which I began this presentation. We have come to know the glory of God through the incarnation, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit we have been connected to that glory and it is ours. It is the treasure of the Gospel that has been entrusted to us, cracked pots though we are. When we have failed--and we have and will--it manifests even more that we are indeed cracked pots, sustained by the treasure that holds us together. When we get it right, when people see Christ in us, well then, that demonstrates the transforming power of the Gospel. So, no matter what, the glory of God will be known in the face of Christ. But for this time and for this place we are the earthen vessels. May God grant us faithfulness and joy that the treasure be manifest in our life and witness.

Submitted by:  
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Florida-Bahamas Synod, ELCA  
October 12, 2017