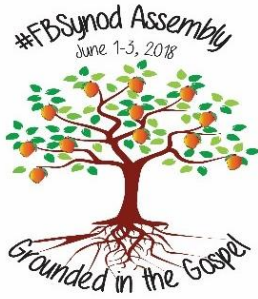


SYNOD ASSEMBLY BISHOP'S REPORT

June 1-3, 2018



GROUNDING IN THE GOSPEL

In speaking to his disciples with the analogy of being the good shepherd, Jesus said according to St. John, *"The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* - John 10:10

What do you think about that abundant life that Jesus talks about? Do you think it means that we may have lots of things, possessions, comfort, and money? He would have then said that he has come so that we may abundance in life. What is it then to live an abundant life? Can someone have abundant life even if they are very ill and seeing that their death might be imminent?

There are some people that have many possessions but barely live, barely enjoy life. Others may live with very little but have it all. How do we see ourselves? Are we better than others for what we possess? This type of thinking comes from the old Hebraic understanding that if you are blessed you have an abundance, and if not, you are not blessed.

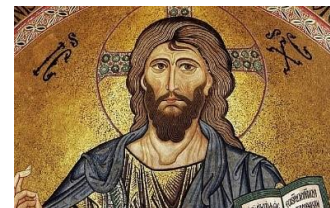
It seems like our current culture is trying to make distinctions more definable now more than ever. Whether it is the color of our skin, how we got here, where we were born, or who we are attracted to. For some, these might be factors that play a role in determining how abundant our life is. The worst part is that some take pleasure in name-calling and demeaning other human beings. The Scriptures say that we have been created in God's image. Not even our sin can undo that. Even declared criminals are not less humans--nor are they animals.

There is nothing wrong with having things; most of us have more than what we need. There is also truth in the Bible reference that says where our treasure is, there our heart is also. You can know what is important in your life by reviewing your expenses. There you will see where it is that you spend most of your money. That will tell you where your heart is.

As I have been going around listening to our people in the synod, I hear many things. I hear that the two strongest enemies of our congregations are fear and apathy. I also hear that there is an incredible joy when we share what God has done in our lives. I have shared some words from John Vest. He says,

"The why of evangelism is not to attract more people to our worship services and youth programs. It's not to increase our membership. It's not to keep struggling churches alive. It's not to save declining institutions. It's not to justify our jobs. It's not about saving souls from hell. It's not even serving others and working for social justice, as important as these things are. These are all whats and hows. The why of evangelism is something much deeper. The why of evangelism—the why of everything we do—is the gospel itself."

*Before we can ever say what evangelism is and how we ought to do it, we need to have clarity about what we think the gospel is. We have to understand what's at stake in the world and in our lives and how the gospel addresses these needs. **We need to be able to articulate why Jesus matters.***



That's why I believe we need to be Grounded in the Gospel. We have had our moments with Jesus, moments when we have felt him for real--his powerful love moving beyond anything we know or understand. That's our ground. That is reason enough to be joyful. We can articulate why Jesus is important to us.

Grounded in the Gospel of Jesus' love, we can then receive the antidotes for those enemies. We read in the first epistle of John, chapter 4, verses 18 and 19 that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us." That love is the ground of the gospel where we are rooted. Our mission is to share about that joy we have in experiencing the love of Jesus over and over again, sometimes more intense than others. Our role is not to convince our lure anyone. We just let the Spirit do the Spirit's job.

I heard you in the Lenten Visitations and in my regular visits, and I heard some of those stories, and I saw the faces of others also listening, and I could almost guess what they were thinking, "This is not so hard after all. I have had my moments with God too!" That's when apathy goes away, we know we can do it, and it's not so hard. It will make our life even more abundant! So, let's keep sharing it!

Another aspect of my report to you, besides inspiring and encouraging you in your spiritual journey, is to update you on the state of our synod. So, let me share with you the following:

A New Synodical Vision and Strategy in Development



Right after my election I was asked what my vision was for the synod. Because of my admiration and respect for my predecessor bishops, who all did a great job, I don't think a 180-degree change is what we need. There was vision, there was strategy, and we can build on that. Perhaps what we need to do now is adjust our aim.

I began to reflect on what happened at the previous assembly in October. What I heard was the continual need for ministries to be vital, representing the diversity of our communities even more intentionally, and with well-equipped leaders to carry on God's mission. Here I present the three elements I propose we develop in the next phase of our strategy and vision.

1. Ministerial Vitality

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are people seeking to be joyful in sharing what we have found as we live our lives connected to Christ. We live that in congregations, hospitals, the military, campus ministries, camps and retreat centers, retirement villages, in our communities and beyond. Therefore, I say that it is more than just “congregational” vitality, I think about all of our “ministries.” Although, in the ELCA we specifically refer to Congregational Vitality, and we have tools we will use! I believe our churchwide representative, Rev. Stephen Bouman will have a workshop on that.



II. Intentional Diversity



We are seeking to be *inviting* communities of faith where *anyone* can find a place to be valued, respected and accepted just as they are. We want to see cultural expressions celebrated and admired. Our inclusiveness must be broad-- going beyond race, sexual orientation, nationality, physical challenges, generational group, socio-economic status, religious expressions and more. In the way we contribute and receive contribution from one another, we strengthen and enrich ourselves and our ministries.

III. Healthy Leadership

As we live out our baptismal vocation, we must strive to have healthy and well-equipped leaders that will inspire others by being an example of holy living. We see lay people committing themselves in love for their communities. We see a future with more pastors caring for others and themselves and respecting their pastoral boundaries. We seek for more Bible and theology teachers sharing the divine truths in ways people can apply in their daily lives. All that with adequate processes are conducive to a practical spiritual formation.



Based on those three elements of vitality, diversity and leadership, we hope to elaborate a strategy that will enhance our ministries around our synod. We have begun by listening to you during our Lenten visits, congregational visits, retreats, and more. We also will continue this development by reflecting deeply among the staff, the synod council, the conference deans, and a bishop’s advisory team. Our goal is to have it ready to present it to our roster leaders at the Conference on Ministry in the Fall of this year.

Staff Configuration



Some of you have asked about staff configuration. Well, after a careful process filled with prayer, we finally have our Directors for Evangelical Mission and Assistants to the Bishop, the Rev. Rob Carlson for the northern territory of the synod, and the Rev. Khader El-Yateem for the southern territory. They will be installed at our opening worship, and I encourage you to welcome them among us.

I know the question of not having a Latino as a Director of Evangelical Mission will come up. As we learn more about diversity, we must remember that when we are ordained into the ELCA it means we are called to serve this whole church body, not just to one specific group. Anglo ministers can pastor Latino or any ethnic group and vice versa. I was elected as Bishop of the Synod not just to the Latinos. We have three Latinos on our staff already and Khader and Rob have been called to serve everyone in our synod. As you get to know them, you will see the quality of ministry they bring.

We are examining ways to configure other positions that will be key in the development of our strategy and further improve our communications, coaching, mobility process, stewardship, public advocacy, lay training and more. In the months ahead, you will receive news of some of these changes or additions.

Highlights of Duties

I was blessed by the opportunity to spend time with Bishop Marcus Lohrmann before he left. He has been an excellent consultant and another awesome mentor along with Bishop Julian Gordy, Bishop Michael Rinehart and many others. My wife, Aura, has been a tremendous assistant (asset?) as she is able to go with me to most of my visits and helps me drive and provides the companionship that only your spouse can give you. Ileana and the rest of the synod staff have been extremely helpful. I feel fortunate to have such a strong support base.

This past six or seven months as your bishop have turned my life around. What a privilege it has been to represent you at the Reformation 500 Ecumenical Prayer Services in Miami and Venice, as well as the Ecumenical Vespers in Jacksonville last year.



I joyfully presided at the installations of:

- Pr. Ashley Nicolls at St. Paul, Sarasota
- Pr. John David Bryant at Joy, Palm Bay
- Deacon Kim Heindl at St. Armands Key and
- Pr. Terry Courter at Living Lord, Bradenton

As I visit around the synod and get to know you, I have dedicated buildings for God's work, participated in baptisms and confirmations, celebrated anniversaries and more.

I have to say that besides hearing the stories of your faith in action, we Lutherans know how to do music well. Everywhere I go, the people that play and sing are outstanding. I see life abundant everywhere, and I am encouraged.

Region 9 Council

As a member of the Region 9 Council, I join other bishops in discussions of matters that affect our synods and on which we can collaborate.

The council spent some time specifically discussing the impact of the fall storms. According to the number of children being enrolled in schools and amount of people applying for financial aid, the amount of Puerto Ricans coming to Florida is more than 50 thousand. Therefore, we have a challenge to serve those arriving our synod. I will be going as a representative of the Region 9 Bishops to the Caribbean Synod Assembly in Puerto Rico in a couple of weeks as they elect their new bishop. Hopefully, we will find ways to be good neighbors as we intentionally accompany each other.

Global Companions

We received the reports from the visit of our delegation to Suriname and Guyana a few weeks ago and are excited about the possibilities of accompaniment with our sister congregations in Guyana in relation to their Lay Academy. And we rejoice with our brothers and sisters in Suriname as they are articulating their strategy using Lutheran World Federation tools and a Caribbean consultation. You will note that the offering for our closing worship is designated to a ministry project in Guyana. The details on this are in guidebook in the worship section.



Our Missional Journey

It has been a pleasure to work alongside with two of my former peers, the Rev. John Mocko and the Rev. Terrance Jacob as our interim DEM's, and in Pr. Mocko's case Assistant to the Bishop as well. The Rev. Wally Meyer was the other Assistant to the Bishop in the north for some time. They not only kept things going but initiated good new ministry among us. Thank you so much!

Some of the ministries that are new in the past 6 months include,

1. Misión Luterana Sagrado Corazón which is a new start in Miami in the facilities where Messiah Lutheran Church has been located. Messiah has assigned their property to the the new Latino ministry. Moises Carrasquillo, who soon will be ordained, is a first- call pastor and their new mission developer. One of the exciting parts of Sagrado Corazón is the partnership that is emerging with Christ the King, Miami. We are looking for Mission Partners for Sagrado Corazón, so contact Pastor Khader El-Yateem if your congregation is interested.
2. A brand-new Stewardship Table has been formed and will be chaired by Mr. Tom O'Rielly. This Stewardship Table is overseeing ten congregations using the very effective Stewardship for All

Seasons program. The Table will help First-Call Rostered Ministers to be healthy stewardship leaders using Financial Peace University and financial counselors.

3. The Congregational Vitality Survey is a tool used throughout the ELCA to help congregations discover their strengths in connecting with God, each other, and their neighborhood. Seven congregations have used the survey in the last six months with very positive results and helpful guidance for congregations that want to grow in vitality. Your new DEM's) can provide you with more information if you are interested about this tool for your congregation.



4. Babcock Ranch is a new community springing up North of Fort Myers. We are exploring the possibility of developing a new ministry there in partnership with the Presbyterian Church PCUSA.
5. Emmanuel Academies, a ministry of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Naples, is implementing a brand-new program called the 5-Year Pastoral Leadership Degree Program. This Program has been developed to raise up students called to Pastoral ministry to pursue a bachelor's degree and a Master of Divinity over a consecutive five-year period. Please see their booth in the Connection Café.
6. A series of monthly meetings were begun for mission developers and redevelopers including one face to face meeting in Tampa with the Bishop. These meetings serve as vital support for our missional leaders.
7. St. John's, Summerfield, had reached the point of using up their reserves even though they had gone to a part-time interim pastor. Their members are ageing and participants dwindling so they requested to be considered for redevelopment. However, the DEM, on assessing their monetary and people resources as well at their mission potential, led them through a process that has resulted in a merger with Hope in the Villages. St. John's, Summerfield, after a season of prayer and discernment, and after a lot of heavy and important conversation with several partners, is moving towards a partnership with Hope in the Villages. This has resulted in Hope having a second site to do ministry and St. John's continuing to worship and function with full pastoral support. This is just one example of the creative ways we will need to continue to do ministry going forward.
8. St. Matthew's, Jacksonville had requested consideration for redevelopment. Upon assessment, they are being led on a different, healthier path. They are in now in the process of downsizing and have decided to sell their huge facility to buy a smaller, more suitable facility. Depending on their new location, they would be considered for mission vitality in future.
9. Churches in Ocala continue to listen to what God may be calling them to do. Various models for collaboration are being explored in order to ensure a vital ELCA presence there. In Gainesville, our two churches have had very active collaboration with pulpit exchanges and various joint services and public witness for justice, as reported on National Public Radio (NPR.)

Once again, I thank our wonderful staff who in so many ways make the work of the Bishop bearable and enjoyable. I thank our rostered ministers who day by day carry on the ministry of the synod. I thank the lay leaders who volunteer their time, talent and money in love so that the work of Christ may keep making a difference in our lives and in the lives of others. I thank you for your constant prayers for my wife and me. And my prayer is that we may be inspired by this Assembly and that God may do God's will among us!

Yours in Christ service,

Bishop Pedro M. Suarez
Florida-Bahamas Synod, ELCA

*Thank
you* 