



2016 Report of the Bishop to the Florida-Bahamas Synod

Recently, on Pentecost Sunday many congregations around this synod and across the ELCA celebrated the rite of Affirmation of Baptism as part of a process of faith formation for our youth. I had the remarkable privilege of presiding at confirmation at Our Savior in Freeport, Grand Bahama.

Whether confirmation is taking place in Freeport, Fernandina Beach or Fort Myers, the presiding minister asks those affirming their baptism:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

- to live among God's faithful people,
- to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,
- to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
- to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
- and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

Simply put, those five promises are the vocation of every baptized Christian. As a synod, 180 congregations in Florida and the Bahamas walking together, we describe our common baptismal purpose this way:

- Boldly Sharing Christ
- Passionately Making Disciples
- Faithfully Doing Justice

This year the theme of our Assembly is "Let Justice Roll down like Waters" (Amos 5:24). We are intentionally reflecting on how, as the water of baptism rolls down, God calls us to participate in the work of reconciling the world by faithfully doing justice. The politics of baptism is that all are equal in the eyes of God, and all means ALL. God shows no partiality. Every human being shares in the image of God and therefore shares the same dignity without regard to racial or ethnic distinction, family status, age, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, or differing abilities. The water of baptism declares Christ's message, the Gospel, is for everyone equally.

The economy of Holy Communion is that regardless of any human distinction, all are fed the very same food. It is this common food, shared equally by all, that sends us to live that which we have experienced at the Table.

Martin Luther put it this way:

When you have partaken of this sacrament [of the Lord's Supper], therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn also share the misfortunes of the fellowship ... Here your heart must go out in love and devotion and learn that this sacrament is a sacrament of love, and that love and service are given you and you again must render love and service to Christ and His needy ones. You must feel with sorrow ... all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is

everywhere filled to overflowing: you must fight, work, pray, and, if you cannot do more, have heartfelt sympathy. ..Here the saying of Paul applies in Gal. 6:2 "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

Since the last synod assembly I made the commitment to meet with rostered leaders and key lay leaders in each of our 15 conferences to listen to what God is doing in our congregations and to ask the question: To what is God calling you and how can we as a bishop's office serve that going forward?

We have all read the statistics about the decline of mainline churches and the state of Christianity in the west. I've heard people say the church is dying. My visits each weekend in congregations of this synod—your congregations—as well as my 15 conference visits over the past 9 months leads me to believe just the opposite. The church of Jesus Christ is not dying at all. Lives and communities are being transformed by the work happening in even the smallest of our congregations...but...but...beloved, the church is most certainly changing. The church of the future is not going to look like the church of the last century. Change is hard, but change we must if we are going to continue to be part of God's mission through the changeless Word, Jesus Christ. Christ is the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. However, in a rapidly changing culture and world the way we share and live that message must always be made new for an evolving and shifting context. I wish you all could travel with me around this synod because I get to see the big picture. I am so proud of our congregations, you are making a difference in our communities in so many ways.

Since our assembly is reflecting on the theme, "Let justice roll down like waters" I will reflect on our common purpose, sharing some snapshots of our life together, framed by the five parts of the baptismal covenant working up from that last promise:

5. to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

Following the tragedy at Mother Emmanuel church in Charleston just one year ago, Presiding Bishop Eaton wrote:

It has been a long season of disquiet in our country. From Ferguson to Baltimore, simmering racial tensions have boiled over into violence. But this ... the fatal shooting of nine African Americans in a church is a stark, raw manifestation of the sin that is racism. The church was desecrated. The people of that congregation were desecrated. The aspiration voiced in the Pledge of Allegiance that we are "one nation under God" was desecrated.

In light of the events in Charleston and many other cities over the past year, we dedicated our discipleship time at the four Bishop's Lenten Visitations this spring to ponder how we as Christians can begin the important conversation about race and privilege in our own communities. I am deeply grateful to Prs. Vicki and Ham Hamilton of St. John's in Jacksonville for so powerfully and honestly opening for us this conversation about racism which is a mix of power, privilege and prejudice, and can only be named for what it is: a grave and destructive sin. Over 500 of you from around the synod participated in one of these conversations in Pompano Beach, Palm Coast, Sun City Center, and Ocala.

Some congregations, like Hope in Daytona have developed a continuing dialog on race and will be part of our anti-racism table in the display area. In April, about 60 members from various congregations in Winter Park, led by St. John, gathered for a discussion about race. Throughout Lent, the Synod Resource Center posted weekly quotes and discussion questions from the book *Waking Up White*.

I urge members of all our congregations to find ways to engage in this conversation about race, privilege, and power in your local communities particularly with neighboring African-American congregations. We cannot ignore this destructive sin any longer.

I am thankful that a growing number of our congregations and pastors are getting involved in local community justice organizations. Members of our congregations are joining other Christians and people of good will to address issues such as civil citations for juveniles, the private for-profit prison system, and affordable housing.

This year the synod council is recommending increased partnership support with the Florida-Council of Churches in order to assist in the common advocacy work that is done by the council for racial equality, immigration reform, the plight of farm workers in Florida, and the care of creation in a state in which climate change stands out for both its endangerment and its indifference to those dangers.

4. to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,

I could spend all afternoon talking about the innovative ways congregations are serving all people following the example of Jesus. I actually hesitate to give a few examples for fear that you'll rush up to me later and ask why I didn't mention yours. But with that disclaimer, here a just a few:

In Homestead, at St Andrew's the congregation leveraged their location and proximity to the Keys to turn space on the property into a retreat center for people to come, serve, and enjoy God's creation. In Palm Springs, Pr. Bresznen explained to me how this small congregation he serves, Holy Cross, has become a haven for a number of multi-cultural congregations looking for a place to worship. Often as they grow and leave, space is made for new fledgling Christian communities. Similarly, in Lake City, Spirit of Christ congregation is home to a Pentecostal church, a prison ministry and a yoga group. It's not quite yoga but, at Trinity, Bradenton—free Zumba classes for the community are offered each Thursday evening in their parking lot.

The Together in Mission Fund of the Florida-Bahamas Synod invites the people and congregations of the synod to exercise their evangelical imagination and to raise funding to incentivize new and creative ministries within the synod and the Lutheran Church in Haiti:

Because of TiM, Children and youth from Redeemer in Lauderdale Lakes spend Friday evenings hearing God's Word, enjoying a hot meal, and learning liturgical dance and instrumental music.

Hope in Port St. Lucie has their "Growing Healthy Kids" program. By organizing community gardens, they sow seeds of God's love in children's hearts while equipping families to grow sustainable, healthy foods.

St Philip's in Mount Dora can partner with Lutheran Counseling Services with a local office, and Reformation Orlando will have a community garden.

Places like Good Shepherd Hernando, along with ecumenical partners, house a community food pantry that serves those in need.

And congregations are finding ways to serve in changing communities. Abiding Savior in Fort Lauderdale partners with and houses El Centro de Todos Los Santos, under the leadership of one of our candidates for ministry, Diana Fajardo. El Centro is changing the lives of Hispanic children and families in Broward County through education, social services and fine arts. Their goal is to expand programming and services in Broward County through an ecumenical partnership that will serve all Hispanic children and families, neighborhood by neighborhood.

We are serving our own rostered leaders through the work of my Pastoral Care Task Force who have been working on plans to make known prayer needs for rostered leaders around this large synod, pastoral care for retired and specialized ministry leaders through the appointment of Bishop's Chaplains, and planning for responding to critical incidents in the life of our congregations.

3. to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,

In the past two years, to help us proclaim the good news of God in Christ, well over half of Florida-Bahamas Synod congregations have in some way used the guide titled *Planning for Mission in God's World* that was put together by our Directors of Evangelical Mission and myself and is still available on our website. I continue to hear wonderful stories of how congregations are finding ways to engage and connect with needs in their communities as they attend to the three great listenings: Listening to God through scripture conversations, prayer, and worship; listening to community leaders in their service area; and listening to each other as the Spirit leads them out into their neighborhoods.

As an Office of the Bishop we have continued to be focused on our role to ignite and connect God's people in our three-fold purpose. We have been bold in finding new and at times experimental ways to share the good news of God in Christ in changing times.

We are currently partnering with two new Congregations Under Development (CUD): Living Faith in Tradition with Pr. Maryanne Kehlenbach and Santiago Apostol (St. James) Miami Area Latino Mission with Pr. Eliezer Ramirez. We are partnering with six Synodical Authorized Worshipping Communities (SAWC) which are places with potential for ministry but are not ready to be Congregations Under Development (CUD).

As we continue to strive to reflect the changing demographics of Florida, five of our Synodically Authorized Worshipping communities are Latino ministries. Our Directors of Evangelical Mission are currently partnering with four existing congregations who are redeveloping. As a sign of being church together, all these ministries receive financial support from both the Domestic Mission Unit of the ELCA as well as the FBS. Four historically Anglo congregations in areas with a growing Latino population have called bilingual Latino pastors.

I have said before that we live in a time of holy experimentation. We need to think outside the box for the sake of mission, take some risks, and be ready to make a few mistakes, and possibly even fail once in a while along the way. I think as people who have died and risen with Christ in the water of baptism we can be confident enough in God's love and grace to take some leaps knowing that no matter what, we are in the arms of a loving God.

A few months ago, our synod council approved a Synodically Authorized Worshipping Community like no other. In this season of the rise of those who claim no religious affiliation, especially among the millennial generation, it is time to try something different. When only about 25% of traditional church plants are successful, it is time to try something different. The groundwork has been laid for the Castle Church Brewing Community in Orlando. This church will be a Christ-centered and caring community that nurtures people for meaningful service in the world. The attached micro-brewery will craft high quality beer that brings people together for food, fellowship, and fun. The Castle Church vision is to be a place for everyone interested in finding an authentic faith community alternative outside of a traditional religious institution. This new outreach will be led by Aaron Schmalzle and Pr. Jared Witt whom the synod council called yesterday as mission developer.

For established congregations, we are catalyzing mission by Together in Mission grant for the *DreamLeaders* Initiative led by Pr. Jeff Lineman and the *Seven Habits of Jesus* Discipleship Training authored by Pr. Robert Schmalzle.

The *DreamLeaders* Initiative is designed to encourage, inspire, and challenge leaders in today's church to embrace their role as dream leaders so that congregational renewal and growth is a more likely outcome. The Together in Mission grant allowed this at my recommendation to be experienced in 12 congregations in the past year and a renewed grant will now allow me to nominate 12 more.

The Seven Habits of Jesus provides comprehensive and practical ways for Christians to live as disciples of Christ in the world today. The original grant and the renewal allows a workshop to be held in all 15 conferences of the synod coaching leaders to implement and use this discipleship tool. It also allows each congregation to receive two copies of the book.

Proclaiming the good news with youth and young adults has received new attention through the creation of the position of Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry held by Sue Mendenhal, AiM. This three year experiment came about as the result of the bold action of our synod council to fund it from board designated funds for 40%, and a creative partnership with Novus Way. Sue directs camping ministry the other 60% of her time. This year we held the first synodwide youth event in 7 years at Word of Life Retreat Center in Hudson.

2. to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,

When we hear the word of God and share the eucharist, we come to the heart of who we are as Christians and what the flaming center of the church is all about. In the end, we do a lot of good things, we cloth the naked and feed the hungry, we serve those in need and we stand up for justice. As important as these things are, none of these things make us Christian. We are church first. At the center of our life together as Lutheran

Christians is an assembly gathered for worship, and at the center of our worship is the crucified and risen Christ who is present in word and sacrament. It is in hearing the word and sharing the Meal that we find the source and motivation for our witness and service in the world. Worship is where we must devote our energy and excellence.

I continue to see my role primarily to be the synod's pastor. From time to time I am asked to do children's sermons in congregations. I often try to explain what I do as a bishop by explaining the things that bishop's often wear. Only once has this children's sermon come to a screeching halt. Standing in front of the kids with my pastoral staff and miter, I asked, "Do you know who I am?" To which a beautiful little girl jumped up raising her arms and screamed out, "Little Bo Peep?" I've thought twice about asking that question ever since.

Point is, as this synod's pastor, my top priority is to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in congregations of this synod and to have primary oversight for the ministry of word and sacrament in our congregations. This is what gives me greatest joy in ministry. To date I have had the honor of presiding and preaching in all but about 40 synod congregations. By the next assembly, God willing, I will have preached and presided in all our congregations.

1. to live among God's faithful people,

The first promise of the baptismal covenant has to do with community: to live among God's faithful people. Our faith is never lived in isolation. It's not about me and Jesus. Christianity is always a team sport. We are church together. In this age it is interesting to examine the impact of the globalization that technology has fostered. People are increasingly connected, but technology also increases isolation—building community must be high on our agenda. Those of us who serve in the Office of the Bishop continue to emphasize accountability and community among our rostered leaders and congregations. My staff is working hard to foster this mutuality, encouraging the filing of annual parochial reports, mission support covenants, annual rostered leader reports, and participation in colleagues groups, Conference on Ministry, Bishop's Lenten Visits and, of course, Synod Assembly. I am thankful for the positive results we are seeing in many of these areas.

In addition we are encouraging our life together through a revamped First Call Theological Education program for our newest rostered leaders, and Transition Training for all serving as Interim Pastors as well as for a newly called pastor, or pastors seeking new direction into God's future. Every congregation in pastoral transition is now participating in a visioning retreat, and healthy congregation retreats have now been held in 15 congregations with new leaders and is planned for 7 more.

Conclusion

If you are hearing this report you are here as a rostered leader or a congregational leader. I want to conclude by asking you to reflect on these words from Ron Heifetz's classic book *Leadership without Easy Answers*.

Leadership is only necessary, if an organization needs to go somewhere and is accountable to some mission more important than its survival. Many people in leadership try to be efficient managers rather than risk-taking leaders, because institutions crave the placidity of the status quo and reward those who keep them comfortable.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are being *Called Forward Together in Christ*. After 28 years, as a church, the ELCA wants to discover how we can continue to faithfully serve God's mission in the years ahead and reach a shared understanding among church leaders about the ministries that are most important. This whole church has been called by our presiding bishop to engage in this *Called Forward Together in Christ* process to assess whether the structures that were set up for this church are right for the future, and to consider how we use our resources in the best possible way. I hope many of you will attend the workshop on this topic tomorrow and give input for our future directions.

In the meantime, please know I am so very thankful for each of you and for our partnership in the gospel!

Respectfully submitted,

Bishop Robert G. Schaefer

June 10, 2016