

1. Bishop's Assembly Report 2019

By Bishop Pedro Suarez

2. Moving, Transition Time

As my wife Aura and I have continued the process of moving into our new home this year, I've had the chance to open boxes, look through pictures, and decide what gets to be part of our home in this season of our lives. I don't know if it's this way for you, but I find unpacking and resettling both rewarding and challenging.

3. Memories of Ministry

On one hand, as I unpack boxes, I uncover stories, souvenirs, mementos from some really great times. Pictures of our ministry in other places where we were regularly surrounded by young people, reminders of times that were full of learning and inspiration,

4. Children and Grandchildren

.... memories of time with children and grandchildren that fill my heart with joy. It's profound to unpack and be reminded of the rich journey we've been on so far.

5. The New Florida-Bahamas Bishop

And yet, we're unpacking because something changed, and we moved. And these pieces of the life lived elsewhere have to find their way into the reality of life today. And that's challenging. Get too caught up in unpacking and sorting through memories, and I miss what's going on around me in this new place.

6. Balancing

On the other hand, I can get so consumed with finding my way in a new location, new environment, or new job, and I feel ungrounded because I still have boxes at home that need to be unpacked. The challenge of moving is finding a way to hold the past, present and future in a healthy tension with one another.

I have felt that this second year as your bishop has been like moving into a new house. The house itself no longer feels new—we're beginning to find our way—but there are still some boxes to unpack and decisions to be made about what THIS season will look like.

7. Directors for Evangelical Mission

Last year at Assembly we introduced Pr. Rob Carlson and Pr. Khader El-Yateem as new synod staff. They had barely been in the territory before coming to Assembly, and they hit the ground running. In the midst of relocating their families and attempting to settle in to a new environment, they were hit with a tidal wave of a learning curve about these new roles as A2B/DEM. I don't think they had a learning curve, I think they had a learning WAVE. But they got to work. And it has been such a privilege to work alongside these pastors.

8. Bishops Before Me

One of my priorities as bishop has been to notice, affirm and celebrate the dynamic ministry that God has been doing through the Florida-Bahamas Synod. I believe the Holy Spirit has been working through those called to this position before me, so it's been my desire to strengthen and support that work wherever possible. That means this year we've continued the emphasis on stewardship introduced by Interim Bishop Marcus Lohrmann.

9. Stewardship for All Seasons - Tom O'Reilly

Thanks to the dedication and leadership of Mr. Tom O'Reilly, the Stewardship Table has been formed and is at work considering how to strengthen stewardship across the synod. Make sure you stop Tom or stop by the table in the Connections Café to hear about the congregations who have been involved with Stewardship for All Seasons. Through this resource, congregational leaders have received training, resources and support for building a stewardship culture in our congregations. And it's beginning to show in a commitment to generosity and mission. And while many of us hear the word "stewardship" and think "money," we know that stewardship is more than that. I'm continuing to see a growing commitment to and interest in stewardship of creation, stewardship of time, stewardship of relationships and community, stewardship of influence and power.

10. Public Policy Office - Russel Meyer

It's this stewardship of influence that has motivated us to affirm the creation of a public policy office here in FL. This was a conversation that started before me, but one I have been blessed to continue. Pr. Russell Meyer has been spear-heading our attention as church to issues of justice and advocacy in public policy. He keeps us aware of our need to steward our influence and privilege for the sake of others. Now, with the creation of a public policy office, Pr. Meyer and the networks build around this office will be able to more strategically educate, inform and activate people and resources for the sake of God's Kingdom.

11. Strategic Thinking

Strategic. That has been one of my key words this year. Many people are used to preparing...and then, let's be honest, forgetting about...strategic plans. And these plans can be helpful. But as I read scripture and consider what I believe God is saying about God's vision for the world, I have begun to wonder if maybe we need to be strategic planners alone, but strategic THINKERS. Given the reality of a changing society and changing church, planning and functioning the way we have been doesn't work the way it used to. We have to THINK differently, not just DO differently.

12. Staff - We are different

I don't know if you've met my staff, but we all don't THINK alike. Some of us will jump into action, while others would prefer to swirl around ideas for a while first. Some of us will insist on data and definitive information, while some of us are comfortable with concepts and ambiguous vision. Some of us will naturally identify their role in the solution, while others will naturally identify partners and others who can contribute. We THINK differently. When you add Synod Council to the mix, you have even more ways of approaching the question I hear all the time, "So, Bishop...what are we going to do about this?"

13. Staff and Council Thinking Together

So staff and council both have spent time this past year thinking together. The council gathered with the staff at a retreat last August and had great conversation about those things that are essential to our identity and life together. Ask someone on synod council about the elixir they developed. This conversation resulted in follow-up discussion held by the staff over a few

staff meetings, where we wrestled with what exactly the Office of the Bishop does, and what our core values are.

14. Strengthen, equip and inspire

We adjusted our purpose statement a little bit, and are now saying that the Office of the Bishop exists to strengthen, equip and inspire ministries, leaders and partners. In January, the staff and I went off-site overnight for a retreat where we checked in with one another about these things, and we continued talking about the goals and objectives we've begun to discern as we consider mission in this synod.

15. With DEM's

In March I spent some time with the DEMs, and we have another date on the calendar for the Executive Leadership Team to get together. To some, these retreats and meetings may not look like they're resulting in action...in doing anything. But I can see the results. We're getting to know one another deeper. We're understanding the unique gifts and strengths we each bring to our work together. We're getting better at having tough conversations because we're developing trust and respect for each other. And we're thinking strategically about our purpose, our vision, our values and our mission and ministry.

All this thinking, discussing and listening is resulting in some important learning. We learned that we say we value communication and stewardship, but we continue to hear questions from people in congregations about "where does our mission support to the synod actually go?"

16. Summary in a Postcard

So we developed a postcard that has some clear information about what exactly we were able to do with mission support in 2018. We have some of those post cards available for you at the Stewardship Table in the Connections Café. We learned that there continues to be a sense that 'the synod' is separate from the congregations. So we checked our calendars and realized that in the last 2 years, 160 congregations out of 180 have had some kind of direct contact visit from a synod staff member. We updated the resources for congregations page of

the synod web site—a page that holds a LOT of important information but was not particularly well layed out—so people can more easily find forms, documents, and other resources they’re regularly looking for. We used our Facebook page and e-Spirit newsletter to do more story-sharing about what other congregations are doing, as a way of increasing a sense of connection and encouragement.

17. Mission Tables - Vitality, Diversity, Leadership

And the learning continues. Based on the ideas and concepts laid out in the book “The Mission Table,” by Stephen Bouman, we are trying to organize ourselves around Tables rather than committees.

These Tables will reflect the three prongs of the vision: Ministerial Vitality, Intentional Diversity and Healthy Leadership. The Stewardship work I’ve already mentioned is a sub-category of Vitality. The Public Policy office is a sub-category of Diversity. The task force being created to evaluate synod youth ministry might be a sub-category of leadership. This is a slightly different way of organizing our shared work, and we’re learning as we go. For me, I like this image of the tables as Pr. Bouman lays them out—not just because I like to eat, but also because it generates opportunity for expanded involvement and engagement. My staff is pretty amazing, and some days I am convinced that they have super powers. But they cannot do all the things that need to be done to live out our mission statement: to boldly proclaim Christ, passionately make disciples, and faithfully do justice. That’s the mission of the synod...not the office of the bishop. That mission requires ALL OF US coming together. This image of the Tables gives us ways to invite, include, and engage more people in that mission.

18. Congregational Conections

Because, like I said—we can’t do this work alone. The part of my job I continue to enjoy the most is participating in the life and ministry that’s happening in local congregations. Gathering with your communities around Word and Sacrament; installing, ordaining, consecrating and commissioning leaders; celebrating anniversaries; participating in vision and planning conversations—these are the treasured ways my staff and I are invited into the work of the Holy Spirit in your midst. And that Holy Spirit IS ALIVE in our congregations. Let me say that again—THE HOLY SPIRIT IS ALIVE IN OUR CONGREGATIONS. Whether your congregation

is small or large, the Holy Spirit is alive. Whether your congregation has youth or not, the Holy Spirit is alive. Whether your congregation has called a pastor or is in transition, the Holy Spirit is alive. And I can see the stirrings of vitality and transformation as we are invited to open our eyes and hearts and be attentive to this life within and around us.

19. The Vision - Atom Logo

Speaking of vitality, I have mentioned before that I have lifted up 3 prongs to the vision for my season as your bishop: Ministerial vitality, Healthy Leadership, Intentional Diversity. These prongs have roughly been informing our priorities and planning. Last year, with an emphasis on Vitality, we encouraged congregations to use the Congregational Vitality Survey tool to begin conversations about the importance of listening to God, listening to each other, and listening to the world. This survey tool has been used by at least 18 congregations in the past year, and has fostered some incredibly valuable conversation. It doesn't give quick and easy solutions...but it does give a good foundation to strategic thinking.

We invited Pr. David Hansen and Jessica Noonan from LEAD in Texas to be with us at the Conference on Ministry, where they introduced us to the ideas shared in Peggy Hahn's book "Faithful Metrics," which is a useful handbook for congregations wanting to think differently about how they evaluate, measure and plan for 'vitality.' Pr. Rob Carlson will be introducing us to an approach to vitality that grounds us in intentional listening to God as God's dream for us and our communities emerges. But vitality is not a stand-alone priority. It doesn't take long to realize that vitality and leadership are intricately connected. So this year we added to our focus Healthy Leadership. Healthy leadership at all levels of congregational life is essential—volunteers, staff, rostered leaders. And just as quickly, we realize that leadership is related to diversity, which is related to vitality. So it's all connected.

In a day and age when there is so much 'either/or' polarities, I continue to see the church—and especially the Lutheran church—as the gift of the 'both/and.' Leadership is not either pastors or council...it's both pastors AND council. Diversity is not about politics OR social justice, it's about both. In the church we can be an example to the world of standing together while holding different ideas...maybe even different beliefs. I continue to pray that as we engage in strategic thinking and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in areas of vitality, leadership and diversity, we will see more and more signs of life within and throughout our synod. As we combine the three prongs of this vision with the mission statement developed previously--boldly

sharing Christ, passionately making disciples, faithfully doing justice—and as we continue to be church together in all expressions of the church—congregation, synod, churchwide and partners—I think we will continue to experience energy and life. That’s why I love this image based on the atom...the energy comes from the inter-connection of these different things.

20. What Does a Bishop Do?

People ask me what exactly a bishop DOES. Let me tell you...bishops go to meetings and show up at stuff on behalf of the church. That’s really what we do. This year, I had the privilege to accompany other bishops to Geneva to a visit with Lutheran World Federation. I was able to be part of ELCA Advocacy Days in Washington D.C. I regularly participate in Region 9 gatherings and meetings as I’m able...which meant I got to go to Puerto Rico. I spent some time with the ELCA Church council. Now, before you get too jealous, let me summarize those events for you...LOTS OF MEETINGS and LOTS OF TALKING. I am an extrovert, so I don’t mind the talking, but even I can get a bit tired of meetings. And yet...in the midst of the meetings, I am energized by the life that the Holy Spirit is activating through these partnerships. New ideas are swirling about how we can support our siblings in Puerto Rico. New ideas are swirling about how we can better impact those in positions of influence around environmental justice issues. New ideas are swirling about how we can better hold space for accountability and care for rostered ministers.

21. Synod Assembly 2019 is ALIVE!

Dear friends, there is LIFE in the Florida-Bahamas Synod. The Holy Spirit is at work and God is calling us to stay faithful to our mission and vision as God’s people. In Christ we are alive!