

REPORT OF THE BISHOP

At times, Christians drift into thinking that if we do the right things and say the right things, then all will go well with us – and it is when all is going well with us that we say we are “blessed.” However, when the whole of Scripture is considered well, Scripture does not support this line of thinking. A better overview of the biblical witness is summarized in Hebrews chapter 11 through the first 2 verses of chapter 12. Triumph and testing, struggle and joy adhere to Christian life, for individual Christians, and for the church.

Much about being the church today is discouraging. Though individual congregational situations vary considerably, aggregate statistical markers of church vitality continue to trend downward both in our synod and more broadly in ELCA: e.g., total number of congregations, number of baptized members, and average weekly worship attendance. I recently saw a chart that indicates that the number of Sunday School pupils reported by ELCA congregations has gone from slightly over a million in 1990 to fewer than half a million in 2010. Even if we could factor in the growing number of churches engaged in, say, Wednesday evening faith formation activities for young children and youth that are not “counted” as Sunday School, this suggests a breathtakingly rapid decline in our connections with young people.

Lay leader after lay leader shares with me the financial strain on her or his congregation. For pastors, including me, the yoke that is around our neck – the stole – seems to be such a burden.....a heavy burden.

But there is also a truer truth. The yoke, Christ’s yoke, as the church is Christ’s church; and Christ says to all of us, lay and clergy, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” How can this be?

Answer: because we are blessed by God. Truly blessed.

Paul writes in Romans, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” The pressure is off. That weight is off our shoulders. We don’t have to save ourselves. We never could anyway.

- In Jesus Christ’s suffering and death, were our sins forgiven fully and completely? Yes? We are blessed.
- In Christ’s resurrection, was death defeated and the power of Satan broken? Yes? We are blessed.
- Are we saved by grace through faith, a gift of God, and not as something we earn or accomplish? Yes? We are blessed.
- Are we called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by God? Is this the achievement we enjoy, not of our effort, but of the Holy Spirit? Yes? We are blessed.
- Do we enjoy the capacity and the giftedness to express gratitude to God, to honor God, and to serve God with talent and treasure? Yes? We are blessed.
- “Loved before the dawn of time; chosen by our Maker, hidden in our Savior. I am his and he is mine, cherished for eternity” (from “Salvation’s Song” by Stuart Townend and Andrew Small). Yes? We are blessed.

Our Assembly this year will explore this truer truth: we are blessed. And the Assembly will encourage us to journey, beginning with who we are, namely “blessed,” and extending to why we are here, “blessed to be a blessing.”

Synod Council

The Synod Council meets four times a year. Among its responsibilities, the Synod Council tends to be vision and purpose of the synod, acts on recommendations regarding the rosters of the synod (for example, "on leave from call" requests and "retirement status" requests), oversees the ministries of our synod committees and synod staff, recommends budgets to the Synod Assembly, and advises the bishop. In addition, the Synod Council approves appointments of persons from our synod to boards of directors of our affiliated ministries, such as Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, Lutheran Outdoor Ministry Center, and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. You can peruse the minutes of the meetings in the Assembly Reports.

It continues to be a joy to work with these faithful, highly-motivated disciples, who come from every conference in the synod. In addition to participating in the four meetings the Synod Council has each year, each member has an additional responsibility with a committee or group in the synod.

The Synod Council is informed of significant matters pertaining to congregations in our synod, particularly in instances where a congregation is considering dissolution or disaffiliation; in some of these instances, Synod Council action is required. As I write this, our synod is comprised of 132 congregations; the same number as last year. One congregation is officially pursuing disaffiliation from the ELCA at this time.

Staff

It continues to be a joy to serve with Pastor Wayland Middendorf, Pastor Ron Moorman, and Pastor Jim Reents as assistants to the bishop. Their reports to the Assembly were made available on the synod website: www.csis-elca.org

We are delighted to have, as of March 1, 2013, Pastor Bob Dealey as our synod's Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM). This is a three-quarter time position, with funding coming from the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit of the ELCA. Pastor Dealey also handles the quarter-time position in our synod of Coordinator of Communications and Networking.

You can learn more about Pastor Dealey and his work with us in his report to the Synod Assembly. However, I will briefly mention two items related to his work as DEM.

As many, if not most of you already know, my sense is that our synod is currently in a better position to work at renewing/revitalizing congregations than to plant new congregations. In that vein, thanks to the Spirit of God at work through the good people at Christ Lutheran Church, Harrisburg, turning over \$157,000 in residual assets to the synod as the congregation dissolved, the synod had the financial means to sign a three-year partnership agreement totaling \$90,000 with Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Mt. Vernon; the agreement focuses on assisting Prince of Peace Lutheran to have the capacity to call a full-time pastor. This is a pilot project that we hope will, in addition to glorifying God and to building and strengthening the body of Christ in Mt. Vernon, teaches us lessons about congregational revitalization. Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Pastor Dealey, and the pastor who will be called to the congregation will be working together closely for mission planning, encouragement, and learning. Pastor Dealey will also be conveying what he is learning to the New and Renewing Congregations Committee, which is

also taking strides to be a resource for congregations seeking renewal and revitalization, as you can see from their report.

At the same time we are moving forward in efforts at revitalization of existing congregations, we need now to be exploring planting new churches. But this exploration begs the questions, "What will the church look like 15 to 20 years from now? And what will fruitful church plants look like in the context of our synod?" Pastor Dealey and I hope to have many conversations with many of you as we think this through.

We are blessed by the able service of Cindy Koonce, Office Manager, and Glenna Senters, Bookkeeper. I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to them. In addition, we thank Barb Purple for her generous and ongoing help as an office volunteer.

Companion Synod Relations – Malagasy Lutheran Church

It has been a trying year for our brothers and sisters in Christ in Madagascar. A hurricane and flooding in the southern portion of Madagascar pave the way to a severe locust infestation, threatening the food supply for an already at risk population. However, they continue to trust in the power and goodness of God.

We relate to two synods (or dioceses) of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM), which is the Lutheran church body in Madagascar: the Ambovombe Synod and the Ft. Dauphin Synod, both of which are located in the southern region of Madagascar. We continue to support the regional seminary in Bezaha, the Manatantely Bible School in Ft. Dauphin, and the Mahavelo Bible School in Ambovombe. Our C/SIS Women of the ELCA have a well-developed relationship of spiritual and financial partnership with Toromare Mananato, who serves the FLM Women's Association.

A new development in Madagascar this year has been the placement of eight Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) in various locations around the island. One of these YAGMs, this past year in Ambovombe was Luke Stappler. Pastor Middendorf has been our contact person with Luke.

As the Global Mission Committee will be telling you, our synod is planning a trip to Madagascar, to visit our companion synods, in the fall of 2014. Our visit is a direct response to a request by FLM Presiding President Modeste Rakoto that we visit them for the sake of developing personal contact, which is so important to the Malagasy people.

Upcoming ELCA Churchwide Assembly

Our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will meet in Assembly this summer, August 12-17, 2013. This is the last ELCA Churchwide Assembly on the two-year cycle of assemblies we've known since the beginning of the ELCA in 1988; after this year, we begin a three-year cycle of assemblies. Our ELCA representative this year, Ms. Else Thompson, will tell you more about this upcoming Assembly. I will simply note that among the noteworthy actions of this summer's Assembly are the election of a presiding bishop, the election of a secretary of the ELCA, and consideration of an ELCA 25th Anniversary Appeal.

This Central/Southern Illinois Synod Assembly

The Synod Assembly is the highest legislative authority of the synod. It is the one gathering that draws together voting members selected from every congregation in our synod and every called pastor in the synod. Our hope is to take full advantage of the unique character of this gathering.

This year's Synod Assembly is designed to serve three purposes: conduct necessary business of the synod; inform people from every congregation in our synod of ministries being undertaken on their behalf locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally; and enhance the Assembly participants' ability to do the work of ministry locally and beyond.

What we will be doing to conduct necessary business and to inform people will be similar to what we have done in the past with Assembly business, reports, and greetings. We have, however, increased our efforts at ministry enhancement, particularly through the expanded Assembly Forums. We have organized forums on eleven different topics, which will be held during two time slots on the agenda. Seven of the topics will be presented twice; four of the topics will be presented once. Organizers have taken care to see that the forums have substance and are well worth the Assembly time that we are devoting to them.

Central/Southern Illinois Synod Moving Forward

The principal challenge in front of us, in all of our congregations and ministry settings, is to trust and to articulate the Christian gospel. All our efforts in various needed directions – defining our mission, funding our ministries, building community, fostering discipleship, staffing smaller congregations, building communication, supporting congregations and pastors in conflict, restoring frayed relationships, being truly inclusive, doing evangelism, interpreting Scripture, and so on – will lack focus, energy, and staying power unless they credibly proceed from our Lutheran theological core: realization of our profound human brokenness and God's undying grace through Christ crucified and risen – realization that in our joys and in our sorrows we are blessed.

As I said to the Synod Assembly last year, there are already wonderful stories in the congregations of our synod of life-giving trust in the Christian gospel bringing about joyful acts of compassion and generosity. At the synod office, we now have Pastor Bob Dealey on board as our quarter-time Coordinator of Communications and Networking, and with that we intend to develop a more effective synod communication network that will enable these stories to be widely shared, so that we may "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." In addition, let me urge all of you to put yourself on our synod e-mail list. Individuals on the synod e-mail list receive announcements, prayer requests, and occasional other communications from us; however, all of these e-mailings are blind copied to everyone on the list so that no one's individual e-mail address is made public by receiving the communication.

I thank the Lord for the grace that gives us life and for the faith that binds us together.

I thank you for your presence at this Assembly. Your commitment to being here reflects your love for Christ and for Christ's church. The synod is you – along with the other 43,711 souls in our 132 congregations.

I am awed by the trust that you have put in me. I covet your prayers. Please know that you are in mine. In all that we do, may God be glorified.

Together with you in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. John Roth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

S. John Roth