



Bishop's Report to the Assembly, 2019

*Bishop S. John Roth
Central/Southern Illinois Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

“We Lift Our Eyes to the Hills”

I think that we would all agree, I think that it is obvious to all of us, that the conditions under which we are trying to be Christ's church in the world, and in our communities, are different than they were for our parents and certainly quite different than they were for our grandparents. Whenever I visit a congregation, it seems that in some way or another, the question comes up, “What about our future?” It's a hard question to answer. None of us can see into the future. None of us can say for certain what the future is going to bring or what God has in store for us as Christ' church.

But I believe that God gives us glimpses, or perhaps, God gives us clues to what God is calling us to. In a sense, I went into my sabbatical at the end of last year looking for such clues, trying to be open to whatever I might see.

I came out of the sabbatical with clues and questions for us, and I put a lot of these into my sabbatical report to the Synod Council. At the Synod Council's urging, we are going to dive into the clues and questions in the context of adaptive challenges that face all of us, all of our congregations – and the ELCA more widely.

Please consider my sabbatical report to the Synod Council to be also a report to you, part of my Bishop's Annual Report to the Synod.

The stated purpose of my sabbatical project was to identify and to distinguish technical challenges facing us in our synod from adaptive challenges facing us. Basically speaking, technical challenges are those challenges for which we already have systems, procedures, and resources available to address the challenges effectively; adaptive challenges are those challenges for which we will have to learn or create ways unknown to us now, in order to address effectively the challenges, because our current systems and procedures don't really work.

I'm not going to get into the substance of my sabbatical report now. You will talk about that in the forums tomorrow. Now, I'm going to lay some groundwork, or set the table, so to speak, for the conversations you will have tomorrow.

I would like to start this conversation by taking us back to our roots, to the biblical picture of Christian community, the biblical picture of Church. And that picture is very simple. What is necessary to have a Christian community? Answer, at its essence:

- water
- bread
- wine
- Scripture
- and, at least two baptized people.¹

Over the centuries, as the Church has grown and expanded around the world, Christian communities have developed into a variety of shapes and sizes, and into a variety of ways of

¹ Bishop Wayne Miller made this trenchant point in his report to the Metropolitan Chicago Synod Assembly a several years ago.

organizing together. Church life has gotten more complex. For the sake of bringing the gospel to changing contexts for church ministry and mission, the Church has developed structures, procedures, denominational systems, ways of preparing pastors for the Church, youth ministries, camping ministries, campus ministries, social service agencies, and on and on. Congregations have constitutions and bylaws, and buildings, and salaries, healthcare insurance, and retirement plans. Our church body has standards for ministers, has ecumenical relationships, and has international sister churches. All this complexity developed gradually over hundreds of years.

Here in central and southern Illinois, our sense of what the church is and what congregational life is was shaped by the largely rural and small-town areas that immigrants settled into: Norwegians, Swedes, Germans, Danes --- and North Carolinians. Populations were growing, communities were becoming more and more stable; by and large, congregations were growing and becoming more and more stable, self-sufficient, and organized. And expectations for what the congregation needed to truly be a congregation increased: your own pastor, a graded Sunday School program, a women's group, a men's group, a youth group, for example.

All of these buildings, programs, and expectations have been good – they have contributed to the outreach and generosity of the congregation; they have built up the body of Christ, and they serve the community and help people worldwide. However, they have also hardened into our congregational life a labor-intensive ministry structure and a rising cost-of-ministry structure. For most of our congregations, the current trajectory for capacity for ministry in present circumstances is not good.

So how do we imagine a new future? A future to which God calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us?

I remain convinced – despite the rising percentage of Americans who report having no interest in religious affiliation – that there are people around us who hunger for the grace of God in Christ Jesus – people who are truly open to trying out a Christian community that will nourish them in the faith, will nurture their walk with God. And I remain convinced that we can reach these people.

But here is the thing. To connect with these new people, some of our assumptions about what the church is and what the church does will have to die – not everything, of course. We will always grasp hold of the water, the bread, the wine, the Scriptures, and our faithful fellowship. But some things we have to rethink. We have to not be afraid to ask ourselves challenging questions about what we say and how we say it and what we do and how we do it, for the sake of the Triune God who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies Christ's Church.

Sorting this out is the conversation that I hope we start at this Assembly. I hope that my Sabbatical Report helps to stir this conversation in you now and going forward.

Our Relationship with Companion Synods

We continue to nurture our companion synod relationships in The Lutheran Church of Madagascar, or the Malagasy Lutheran Church.

Last summer, the four ELCA synods with companion synods in Madagascar were able to bring representatives of educational programs in Madagascar that our four synods support financially, along with funding from ELCA Global Mission. Visiting our synod – which was a reunion of sorts for her – was Ms. Toromare Mananato. Toromare is a graduate of Wartburg Seminary. The Malagasy Lutheran Church does not at this time ordain women. However, fully prepared and credentialed women, such as Toromare, are rostered as “theologians” in their church body. Toromare has held several offices in the Malagasy Lutheran Church, including being the head of the church body's women's organization. In late 2016, Toromare was elected Vice General Secretary of the four-million-member Malagasy Lutheran Church. Vice General

Secretary is one of the five FLM officers that make up the Foibe (the executive leadership of the church body). Toromare is the first woman in the Malagasy Lutheran Church's 150-year history to be elected to the Foibe. While with us last September, she attended worship and spoke at St. John's, Springfield, participated in our Professional and Lay Leaders Retreat near Carlinville, spoke at events in First English, Peoria, and St. Andrew, Champaign, and she attended the installation of Pastor David Glesne at St. John's, Bloomington. In addition, she and I attended companion synod consultation meetings at the ELCA churchwide offices. Our hope in these visits was to strengthen and clarify the ministry we share with our companion synods and the broader Lutheran Church in Madagascar in preparing pastors, catechists, and women theologians for service in the Church.

Year 2019 began the fifth year in our five-year plan for financial partnership with our two companion synods, the Ambovombe-Androy Synod and the Fort Dauphin Synod. Thanks to your generosity through Synod Assembly offerings, congregational and individual designated contributions, and the 2015 Pedal for a Purpose, we sent our promised \$16,400 for 2019 to designated ministries in these two companion synods. Funds from our synod provide scholarship support for Malagasy seminarians, subsidies for one seminary and two schools for catechists, and several specific projects, such as women's development programs and a literacy program. I will note that both schools for catechists that we support are deeply dependent upon funding from us for maintaining their general operations.

I am in the process of formulating a new five-year partnership plan with our two companion synods. Five-year planning with us has provided the two synods with stability and planning capacity that they had not previously known. Putting together a new one at this time is a venture in reality and hope.

Our synod budgets \$2500 for companion synod programs. We have dedicated Synod Assembly offerings to companion synod partnership support for many years, and those offerings have provided between \$6000 and \$8000 each year. Assuming these two funding streams would continue, in order to maintain the level of annual support we reached in the now-concluding five-year plan, namely \$16,400, we would need to raise roughly \$6000 to \$8000 per year through contributions from congregations and individuals. I know that our people have a heart for the vital ministries we support in Madagascar. Please let me know how you think maintaining this support might be possible.

Synod Staff

It continues to be a joy and privilege to serve with the faithful and gifted people on our synod staff. Let me take this moment to thank them in order of seniority:

Ms. Glenna Senters, Bookkeeper

Pastor Jim Reents, Assistant to the Bishop

Pastor Maureen Stein, Assistant to the Bishop

Pastor Ken Sandlin, Assistant to the Bishop

Ms. Laura Lee, Office Manager

Pastor Ken Tegtmeier, Assistant to the Bishop, joined our staff on July 1, 2018, upon retirement, having most recently served Resurrection Lutheran Church, Godfrey.

Pastor Elise Rothfusz, Director for Evangelical Mission / Coordinator of Congregational Resources and Communications, joined our staff on August 1, 2018, coming from 13 years of ministry at Salem Lutheran Church, Peoria.

Mr. Tucker Good finished his service with us as Administrative Assistant for Media, Communications, and Graphic Design in April of this year. He and his spouse have relocated to Utah. We thank him for his service and wish them God's blessings in their new ventures.

A New Name?

When the ELCA came into being in 1988, our synod was assigned the title “Central/Southern Illinois Synod.” There is no getting around it: the name “Central-slash-Southern Illinois Synod” is an awkward name. We don’t say the “slash”, and the result is that when people hear the name, their first impression is that our territory is the central part of southern Illinois – like the “South-Central Synod of Wisconsin” is located in the southern part of central Wisconsin (notice the hyphen, which is also not said with the name). Moreover, we are constantly being mistakenly called the “South-Central Illinois Synod”. Though I do not want to get hung up in a dispute over our synod name, I seriously think that we would do well to adopt a friendlier name.

Procedurally, a name change would require two Synod Assembly votes, because our synod name is stated in a constitutional provision, and approval by an ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Therefore, the soonest that a name change could become official would be summer of 2022. Though that is a few years out, there is no reason not to get it going now.

There are suggestion boxes here at the Assembly. Give it some thought, and if a name strikes you, put the suggestion in the box. A good name will be easy to spell, easy to say, easy to remember, visual, appropriate for the context, and will generate positive emotion.

Reflection on Finances

Let me take a moment to reinforce something that I mentioned last year.

God is blessing us in many ways, including financially. Yes, I see the persistent downslope trend line of dollars provided by our congregations in mission support. But when I look at the dollar amounts, I am awed and humbled that last year the good people of our congregations provided one point three million dollars for Christ's mission and ministry through our church body – yes, \$1,300,000. This is bountifulness – entrusted to us for faithful stewardship. God has provided for us richly! But it will always be true: "Where Christ is there is plenty for all."

I really like the narrative budget that Pastor Elise Rothfusz and the Mission Support and Stewardship Education Committee have put together for us. What a wonderful way it is to encapsulate and visualize the ministry that we do together and the ministries that we support together.

As we “Lift our Eyes to the Hill,” we see the dollar numbers with clear eyes, and we do the practical work of prioritizing our use of these financial resources. At the same time, we also celebrate the bounty we are blessed to receive. I ask that we emphasize 1) the joy of participating financially in the Christ's mission and ministry, 2) that stewardship in all contexts is about our faith before it is about our finances, and 3) personal and congregational stories that show that the incredible giving capacity that we have among us. Let me say again, "Where Christ is there is plenty for all."

Our Synod's Life and Work

My report includes the statistical information on the synod that you will find available on the synod web-site: www.csis-elca.org The statistical information includes the current number of congregations in the synod and the transitions of rostered ministers over the course of the past year (through May 31, 2019).

It is a privilege to serve Christ by serving you. As we gather in assembly, as “We Lift Our Eyes to the Hills,” our help comes from the Lord. Thank you for being here at this Assembly to tend to the work of Christ's Church. May you be filled with joy of the Lord!

As I have done in previous years, I will conclude my report with a slide show of some of the places where I've been over the past year: scenes of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod.