



Bishop's Report

2020 Report to the Assembly

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

“One Body, Many Gifts”

This was to be the theme of our 2020 Synod Assembly – and will be the theme in 2021. Ironically, the truth of that theme has become even more evident during this COVID-19 pandemic that cause the postponement of the Synod Assembly until 2021.

In my lifetime, I have never seen a rapid, broad, and seismic change in the context of the Church's worship and ministry like that which we have experienced and are experiencing. And the most dramatic of the changing happened over the course of a mere three weeks. Shutting down in-person, gathered worship; going to telephone and videoconferencing for meetings and Bible studies; virtual youth group gatherings; various types of online worship; implementation of phone tree pastoral care; online giving – these are just a few of the new competencies that our ministers and congregations have discovered and cultivated. One body, many gifts.

Prior to the pandemic, I worshiped with one or two congregations every Sunday on a typical weekend. You know this if you have been to a Synod Assembly and seen my slide show of churches and other gatherings I had been to over the past year. “Stay at home” conditions and the suspension of in-person worship put those worship visits on hold. However, a joy has been that with the multiplying of online worship opportunities, I have listened to the sermons, prayed the prayers, and sung the hymns and songs of many of our congregations over the course of just a couple of months. As I write this, I have tuned in to broadcasts coming out of 44 of our congregations.

But let me back up. We came out of the 2019 Synod Assembly with the raw input from voting members and guests to explore addressing adaptive challenges that we identified a year ago. The Conference Deans took up the task of collating and categorizing this input and presenting it to the Synod Council. Ultimately, the Synod Council, guided by the organizing done by the Conference Deans, arrived at several proposed initiatives to bring before the 2020 Synod Assembly.

When pandemic condition forced the postponement of the 2020 Synod Assembly, the Synod Council decided that it would be worthwhile to the synod to invite congregations to participate in implementing two of those initiatives this June, in order to build on the momentum coming out of the 2019 Synod Assembly. We launched these on Pentecost Sunday, May 31st. One initiative is a coordinated “Dwelling in the Word” across our congregations, trusting God to deepen our faith and to enlighten us to the movement of God among us and around us – a year-long season of spiritual deepening and discernment. The second initiative is a “Sister Congregation” program – to randomly assign sister congregation pairs for one year – designed to lift sister congregations up in prayer and to foster getting to know one another in other ways appropriate to your congregations.

In recent weeks, the stress created by the pandemic has been compounded by renewed attention to racial tension in our country in the wake of more high-profile, unjust killings of Black individuals. These days when anyone with a cell phone can video an event, we witness racism in violent actions against people of color and racism in violent reactions to peaceful anti-racism protests. Our Synod Council adopted a Statement to address this racism; this clear Statement reflects the thinking of our Synod Council in light of our Christian faith in the Triune God and our Lutheran commitments to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. For easy reference, I have included the Synod Council Statement as an addendum to this report.

Continuing the Work of Synod Staff

Complying with “stay at home” civil orders, all synod staff except for Laura Lee transitioned to working entirely remotely beginning Monday, March 23. Laura Lee is the only person in the building. In addition to regular staff work, Pastors Reents, Rothfusz, Sandlin, Stein, and Tegtmeier make one-on-one phone call check-ins with our rostered ministers and with council presidents where there is no called or interim pastor.

With the help of Pastor Rothfusz, I have been holding weekly Zoom drop-in gatherings, to which all our rostered ministers are invited and may join in at their pleasure. In addition, the Conference Deans and I have been meeting weekly via Zoom, though recently the deans have elected to relax that schedule but still keep in touch.

Congregation and Parish Council Presidents’ “Coffee Hours”

To touch base with Congregation and Parish Council Presidents during the time when I am not visiting congregations in person, and to give these Presidents an opportunity to meet and to interact with one another, I invited them to participate in one of three scheduled Sunday late morning Zoom “Coffee Hours,” assisted by Pastor Rothfusz. Fifty-five presidents participated.

These were lively and informative conversations. They achieved the purposes I had hoped for. In fact, presidents requested additional “Coffee Hours” and asked about presidents exchanging email addresses.

To better gauge the value of these “Coffee Hours,” Pastor Rothfusz put together a survey and invited presidents to fill out and submit it. Twenty-nine presidents have done so. Here are a few results:

- 85% rated the “Coffee Hour” with four or five stars out of a possible five;
- 89% reported that the 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning time was either convenient or very convenient;
- 96% agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting was helpful for their thinking about the direction of ministry at this time;
- 96% agreed or strongly agreed that the conversation gave them new ideas or insights about ministry in our current situation;

- 82% agreed or strongly agreed that this was a good opportunity to get to know the bishop;
- 82% agreed or strongly agreed that this was a good opportunity to get to know other council presidents;

Presidents gave personal reflections that strongly suggest that some schedule of future “Coffee Hours” would be worthwhile.

Pastor Rothfusz has begun more regular Zoom meetings specifically with Parish Council Presidents and Pastors.

Our Relationship with Companion Synods

We continue to nurture our companion synod relationships in The Lutheran Church of Madagascar, or the Malagasy Lutheran Church. At the 2019 Synod Assembly, we adopted a new five-year plan for financial partnership with our two companion synods, the Ambovombe-Androy Synod and the Fort Dauphin Synod. In this five-year plan, we promised to send \$16,900 in 2020 to support a seminary, two Bible Schools for the training of Catechists, and scholarships for seminarians. This 2020 funding was sent earlier this year.

Where does this roughly \$17,000 come from each year? Our synod budgets \$2500 for companion synod programs. We have dedicated Synod Assembly worship offerings to companion synod partnership support for many years, and those offerings have provided between \$6000 and \$8000 each year. For the remainder, roughly \$6500 to \$8500, we rely on generous contributions from congregations and individuals.

However now, looking ahead to 2021, we do not have the usual \$6000 to \$8000 from 2020 Synod Assembly worship offerings to build upon. Please keep this important mission outreach of our synod in your prayers and consider making a “2020 Synod Assembly offering” to provide for it.

Having said this, I will also mention the specific appeal this spring from our companion synods for financial assistance for the sake of those pastors and catechists of theirs who have been left without income as a result of suspension of in-person congregational worship in Madagascar. Our synod’s Global Mission Committee requested, and the Synod Council approved, a special appeal to meet this request. This, too, is in need of your prayers and support.

Synod Staff

It continues to be a joy and privilege to serve with the faithful and gifted people on our synod staff. I list them here in order of seniority. This year, I also note the “full-time equivalency” (FTE) of each staff person. I think that often when people see this long list of names, they assume these are full-time positions. Only the bishop and two other staff persons are full time.

Ms. Glenna Senters, Bookkeeper (0.6 FTE)

Pastor Jim Reents, Assistant to the Bishop (0.25 FTE)

Pastor Maureen Stein, Assistant to the Bishop (0.25 FTE)

Pastor Ken Sandlin, Assistant to the Bishop (0.5 FTE)

Ms. Laura Lee, Office Manager (1.0 FTE)

Pastor Ken Tegtmeier, Assistant to the Bishop (0.25 FTE)

Pastor Elise Rothfus, Director for Evangelical Mission / Coordinator of Congregational Resources and Communications. (1.0 FTE)

Mr. Brett Gosteli, Interim Administrative Assistant for Media, Communications, and Graphic Design (0.25 FTE)

Sadness, and yet peaceful comfort, reached into our staff when Glenna's husband, Ron, died peacefully in the arms of Christ in May.

We are blessed by such gifted, hard-working, and caring staff.

Reflection on Finances

We finished the 2019 fiscal year with about \$50,000 less income from congregations than in 2018. And yet, the picture is not one of declining mission support from every congregation. More than a third of our congregations increased their 2019 sharing over 2018.

It is too soon to tell what effect the COVID-19 pandemic will have on giving to congregations and giving through congregations to the work of the broader church. Most of the news I am receiving from congregations is that giving from members is roughly the same in 2020 to date as it was in 2019. Some congregations are seeing increased giving. And other congregations are experiencing moderate to significant declines in giving compared with 2019 at this point. Every congregation has its own unique set of circumstances.

Through it all, God is gracious, and God is generous to us. We strive to be good stewards of and faithful servants with all that God entrusts to us.

A New Name?

At the 2019 Synod Assembly, we began gathering suggestions for renaming our synod. 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".

Many people submitted potential names. Thank you. However, when the pandemic hit us, it became clear to the Synod Council that we had to address matters more pressing than this name change. So, the Council decided that we shelve this issue for the time being.

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, 2020).

It is a privilege to serve Christ by serving you: "One Body, Many Gifts." Be filled with the joy of the Lord!