

Synod Assembly 2017
Bishop's Report (verbal)

The Bishop's Report traditionally gives an accounting of the past year, the developments that have taken place since the last Synod Assembly. There have been a number of significant advances here in the Central States Synod:

- 1) The Parish Ministry Associate table began its work, retooling our PMA program to better provide leadership to a growing number of our congregations.
- 2) In St. Louis we face both a wave of clergy retirements and a shortage of interim pastors to provide care and leadership in the transition period between called pastors. So we are structuring a process in which teams of volunteers, specialists in their own ministry areas, are assigned to specific congregations to offer assistance and coaching to existing staff. This concept puts appropriate responsibility in the hands of the congregation itself.
- 3) Since congregational leadership is one of our emphases, synod staff continued its training with the Kansas Leadership Center. Three staff members are now qualified to teach KLC's principles. Such teaching has already happened with several church councils and staffs.
- 4) This year's round of Area Ministry visits, with stewardship as their focus, drew consistently larger-than-expected turnouts.
- 5) I conducted several Open Door visits in the synod, initiatives in which I invited open-ended conversation with rostered persons, PMAs, and congregation members. There were two ground rules: You set the agenda, no holds barred. Those conversations have been humbling, inspiring, and confidential.
- 6) We began work on a Rural Ministry table in which, in partnership with the Parish Ministry Table, we began to envision how our rural congregations can continue, and in some cases even expand, their vital ministries.

Those have been significant developments in the life of our synod, and I encourage you to read about them in my written report in your Assembly App and in the binders on your tables. I want to focus the majority of my report, however, not on the past but on where I believe God is calling us into the future.

We live in anxious times in our church and in our culture. In our society we have come through a very divisive presidential campaign. Tensions continue to be high around issues of race, immigration, political partisanship.

According to data from the Gallup Organization and Pew Research, our country is in the midst of two massive developments: a record number of us is aging, with an estimated 10,000 Baby Boomers retiring every day, many of them not as prepared financially as they had hoped to be. That will put extra stress on our nation's safety net just as the current wave of Millennials is in danger of becoming the first generation in our nation's history to have a lower standard of living than their parents. All of which is creating a pressing challenge for our elected leaders: How to keep faith with our elderly citizens without at the same time bankrupting our young?

And while we are experiencing the graying of our country, we're also on the path of becoming a majority non-white population. Asians, Latinos, and multiracial Americans are the fastest growing groups in our nation.

Ever-widening gaps in our society are being noted – gaps in our political values, economic stability, family systems, racial and ethnic and gender identities, our religious affiliations and our proficiency with technology. Data are telling us that these changes are resulting in younger and older Americans increasingly becoming unlike in how they think and act.

There is more animosity between activists in both major political parties than ever before, which apparently has given rise to a third group in our culture, those who are turned off by extreme partisanship and gridlock in Washington, D.C. Data show these people are less likely to vote but at the same time want our elected leaders to work together to seek compromise. This third group has been called "America's new silent majority."

Three groups of Americans – outspoken political partisans on the left and on the right, and a quiet group that just wants us all to get along. Three groups that make for an anxious society. Three groups of people who gather up their commitments and their passions and their cultural and political viewpoints and, if we're lucky, come to church on Sunday morning. We know these people well, because they are us.

Over the last few months we've been asking groups of pastors in our synod to describe the current mood in their congregations. The most-often heard responses were "anxious, divided, uncertain, tired of the tension in our culture." We heard stories of congregation members and pastors, worn out from, and made super-sensitive to, intolerance and anxiety and uncontrollable changes in our wider culture; they wanted church to be truly a sanctuary where they could go to get away from polarization and hair-trigger tempers. The problem was, when people

came to church they couldn't help bringing with them those same pressures and anxieties they experienced in our society.

The result? In our churches we tend to stay away from touchy topics. We don't want to offend, and we don't want to *be* offended; so it's easier and safer to simply not talk about troublesome issues like race, immigration and refugees, economic haves and have-nots, and that frightful "P" word: politics.

We're careful. We're guarded. But our preoccupation with maintaining quiet causes us to forget that we are to be communities of praise and communities of missional obedience. The obvious truth is that we are not of one mind on many issues, but that diversity does not have to threaten our unity, because our unity does not come from us. We're held together as Church not by our agreement about sexuality or politics or economics or any other issue. We're held together by the Gospel, which says that we are, each of us, equally loved and forgiven and claimed by God for eternity through the reconciling work of Jesus.

Through faith we participate right now in the Kingdom of God, the kingdom that was announced by Jesus. At the same time we await the fulfillment of that kingdom and the complete redemption of the whole creation. So we live in two ages, the present age and the age to come; as we live out the Gospel we participate in a future that is not fully here yet. As Jesus points out in John's Gospel, we are *in* the world but not *of* the world. Luther put it a little more graphically: Christians, he said, are both saint and sinner at the same time. So yes, we are what Saint Paul calls "a new creation from God," but we are still part of a fallen humanity living amid the brokenness of the world.

And it is as forgiven sinners that we are not to shy away from engaging one another in our churches in conversations about difficult topics. In our Social Statement, "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective," we're reminded that "Christians fulfill their vocations diversely and are rich in the variety of the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, they often disagree passionately on the kinds of responses they make to social questions. United with Christ and all believers in baptism, Christians welcome and celebrate their diversity. Because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world."

So how will we have a better conversation in our churches than we have in our culture? I suggest we take our perspective on that question from Scripture itself – the Bible, which is not one seamless narrative. The first five books in the Old Testament in particular are composed of four distinct literary types – four categories of authors contributing what we have come to see as four different voices with four different emphases. They all flow into the grand story of God with no attempt by the Spirit-led compilers of Scripture to harmonize them.

I woke up to these different versions in college, when a friend pointed out to me that there are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. Two, not one! I took a look, and sure enough, Genesis 1 has one account, Genesis 2 the other. Two different versions, apparently coming from different traditions, written at different times. I was shocked!

I stopped in to see my campus pastor. “Pastor,” I said, “do you realize there are two different stories about creation in the Bible?” I figured somebody needed to tell him about this. “Yes,” he said, “I noticed.”

“Well,” I said, “which one is right? Which one am I supposed to believe, which one really happened? Was it the one in Genesis 1, with people being created on the sixth day, or the one in Genesis Two, where it looks like people were created right off the bat? Which one is right, Genesis 1 or Genesis 2?”

He said, “Yes.” He went on to point out that the Bible was actually written over a long period of time by a number of different authors, that many hands and hearts had contributed to compiling the sacred story of God. He said that when it comes to reading the Bible it helps not to think either/or but rather both/and. For example, he said, the four Gospels paint four different portraits of Jesus; we’re not supposed to judge which one is “right”; instead, we’re supposed to appreciate and value each of them as accounts written by people with distinct perspectives on the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Each one is essential to understanding and experiencing more fully the Savior of the world.

The Word of God itself is constructed of various and sometimes competing voices, and this is the Word that powers us as Church. This richly diverse Word grounds us even as it sets us free. Luther characterized our freedom in his well-known paradox: *A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.* At the same time, *a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.* Luther was motivated by Saint Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians when Paul professes that “though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all”

Jesus Christ sets us free from sin, death, and the power of the devil, but our freedom is *never for its own sake*, as if we can now simply do what we want. We are set free in order to serve the interests of the neighbor. We are set free in order to spend ourselves courageously, to tend to one another sacrificially as sisters and brothers in the family of God.

The faithful exercise of the church depends on us living in this freedom, which enables us to invite and hear and honor voices other than the ones we prefer. We are not threatened by our differences; in fact, Christ has called us into a Church to form community with those who carry a different set of experiences and a different set of hopes.

In the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul encourages his beloved church in the imitation of Christ. Let's read these verses together: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Let that same mind be among us, indeed.

My hope and prayer for the churches of this synod is that in this new year we will be courageous in claiming our unity in Christ, and in that unity find the strength to let go of what needs to be left in the past – both as individuals and as churches – so we might embrace the future God is bringing to us. May we be bold in claiming the gift of discipleship! Thank you.