

Bishop's Report, Part I

“Risky Business: Always Reforming”

2017 Northwestern Minnesota Synod Assembly

*“We are a modest people
And we never make a fuss
And it sure would be a better world
If they were all as modest as us.
We do not go for whooping it up,
Or a lot of yikkety-yak.
When we say hello, we avert our eyes
And we always sit in the back.”¹*

To say that Lutherans keep a low profile in the world would be an understatement. We avoid making a fuss about ourselves. We're little known outside our tribe. No Lutheran has ever been elected president of the United States.

Even when we Lutherans found ourselves in the spotlight, thanks to the popular success of Garrison Keillor's long-running *Prairie Home Companion* show on public radio, what image was projected? We became *famous* for our *modesty* (or, as a former president of Concordia College termed it, *militant modesty*²)! Keillor's depictions of Lutherans as taciturn, bland purveyors of hotdishes laced with cream of mushroom soup produced giggles from audience members. Keillor merely uttered the word “Lutheran” and the crowd snickered.

As much as many of us in the Midwest enjoyed Keillor's humor, the storyteller from Lake Wobegon did us no favors. His homespun monologues did not even hint at the rich, full, fascinating tapestry of global Lutheranism.

As we commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, our 2017 Synod Assembly will convene under the theme: **“Risky Business: Always Reforming.”** Our Lutheran movement started in 1517 when a brilliant but outspoken German monk took the risk of boldly addressing abuses in the church of his day. Martin Luther wanted to spark a debate, but things quickly got out of hand. His scholarly essay, *Ninety-Five Theses*, also known as the *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, was soon published using the brand new (in 1517!) technology of the printing press. Luther's critique spread like wildfire across Europe, ascending even to the highest level of the church of his day. The upshot was that in 1521 Luther was both excommunicated by Pope Leo X and condemned by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V for his radical teaching about *justification by faith* (not good works). Luther lived every day of the last quarter-century of his life with an outlaw's bounty on his head!

Does this sound like the life story of someone who was risk-averse, always playing it safe? Hardly! Truth be told, Luther's followers over the past five centuries have included all sorts of

¹ From “I'm a Lutheran” by Garrison Keillor. Accessed on 12/20/16 at <http://www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio/im-a-lutheran/>

² The late Dr. Pamela Jolicoeur (1944-2010) who came from California to the Red River Valley to become Concordia's tenth president.

strong personalities who've made a world of difference. See my 2017 monthly Bishop's Columns at <http://nwmnsynod.org/assets/2017-Lutherans-Making-a-World-of-Difference-Wohlrabe.pdf> for a sampling of these difference-making, risk-taking Lutherans.

The fact is that Paul (Luther's favorite apostle), when he was casting about for the word that would best describe the Good News of Jesus Christ, hit upon the Greek word *dunamis* from which we derive words like "dynamic." *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power (dynamite) of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"* (Romans 1:16-17)

At our Synod Assembly we will lift up stories of some bold, risk-taking Lutherans, in our history and in our lives today. In this written report, I want to point to some of the ways God is still reforming us to share the power of Jesus Christ through the life and mission of our synod.

Raising up Servant-Leaders

At last year's assembly I declared that our need for more proclaimers of the Good News of Jesus Christ was our church's paramount priority. This year I repeat this message: there is nothing more important in our common life today than raising up servant-leaders, including both rostered ministers and lay leaders. Of equal urgency is the challenge before us to create wise, honest, forward-looking and sustainable ways of stewarding these gifts for ministry—about which I'll say more in the next section of this report.

In last year's bishop's report I referred to a 2016 study by Dr. Kenn Inskip of the ELCA Office for Research and Evaluation, *ELCA Clergy Serving Congregations and Geographic Settings* and *The Supply of and Demand for Clergy in the ELCA*. Inskip's grasp of the situation in our church continues to be borne out in things we're learning this year:

- Across our ELCA seminary enrollments have declined by half over the last ten years. This is true for Luther Seminary, St Paul, right in our backyard.
- Last year our synod welcomed four candidates for first call in the spring ELCA assignment, all of whom are ordained and serving in congregations of our synod. This spring our synod was assigned one new candidate for first call.
- 2017 is the first year in which no "traditional" seminary interns are serving on our territory--though we are grateful for one Theological Education for Emerging Ministries or TEEM intern serving in our midst. We also rejoice to know that one of our congregations has been assigned a seminary intern for 2017-2018.
- We continue to see an uptick in clergy retirements, closures by congregations, and conversations about shared-ministry partnerships.

At last year's assembly I invited everyone to fill out a yellow card naming someone they know with gifts for servant-leadership in the church. This year I will repeat that same invitation, along with two related challenges for all our members and congregations between now and our 2018 synod assembly.

As daunting as this challenge is, there are also signs of hope. Together we are taking steps to address our critical need for servant-leaders, both rostered persons and laity:

- Folks are breaking their silence and actually *talking* (!) to persons about how God has gifted them for servant-leadership in the church. The Spirit is using our vocal cords to invite persons to consider preparing to become pastors or deacons in the ELCA!
- Our synod's Candidacy Committee is collaborating with other neighboring synods in preparing and launching "Discernment Retreats" for individuals who are pondering the call of God in their lives.
- Last autumn our synod established the NW MN Synod Fund for Leaders Endowment, which is part of the ELCA Fund for Leaders. This new fund will empower our synod to help cover the financial costs of attending seminary. As this report is being written we're delighted to know that over \$75,000 has contributed to this growing endowment fund.
- In collaboration with the Eastern ND Synod, our School for Lay Ministry has seen increased enrollments in its lay theological course offerings. Other opportunities for lay persons to explore theological education are also cropping up, like the Region III Lay Preacher Training classes at Joy Ranch in South Dakota.
- The ELCA Conference of Bishops is inviting all of us into a season of focused prayer. At our spring 2017 meeting the Conference of Bishops resolved to "call our worshipping communities to pray for raising up leaders for this church. We ask that the petitions of every worship service include a plea that new lay leaders, deacons and pastors be identified, invited, encouraged and supported in responding to God's call to ministry."

Going Above and Beyond: the Campaign for the ELCA

The past year 2016 marked the third of the five years of *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*. Rev. Ron Glusenkamp, Director of the Campaign (and our churchwide representative at last year's synod assembly) reports that across the ELCA we ended the 2016 fiscal year having raised \$113 million which represents 57% of its \$198 million goal. 63.5% of all ELCA congregations have contributed to the Campaign which has also spurred \$22.5 million in planned gifts for Campaign ministries (as these are gifts that will mature in the future, they are not included within the \$113 million raised thus far.)

Closer to home our NW MN Synod ended fiscal year 2016 with over \$530,000 contributed to Campaign ministries—bringing our synod's total contributions (through 1/31/2017) to just under \$1.86 million toward our \$4.75 million goal, which represents over 39% of our goal. By the time we're together for synod assembly I hope to update you regarding progress toward our ELCA Campaign goals.

It's so wonderful seeing generous individual and congregational gifts coming in for the Campaign. We have a long way to go to achieve our goals, however, so please explore the many fine resources that are available on the ELCA website (<http://elca.org/Resources/Campaign-for-the-ELCA>) and our synod's website (<http://nwmnsynod.org/campaign-for-the-elca/>). Specifically, our synod's *Congregational Toolkit* offers a host of ways your congregation can engage with the Campaign.

Remember, our synod has voted to “*challenge all the congregations, organizations, rostered leaders, baptized members and friends of the synod to contribute at least \$4,750,000.00 to the Campaign for the ELCA by January 31, 2019*” (quoting the resolution passed at the 2014 NW MN Synod Assembly). The question is: how are you and your congregation going to make sure we exceed our synod’s goal?

Always Being Reformed

Although we refer to Martin Luther and his collaborators as reformers, they knew who the real Reformer of the church was! Refusing to take credit for the renewal of the church, Luther mused: “*I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip [Melanchthon] and [Nicholas von] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.*”³

This same Reforming God is at work in the congregations of our synod—renewing God’s people through Word and Sacrament, cross-shaped community and steadfast care, winsome witness and costly service. Some of the places where God’s reforming work is most noticeable include:

Congregations like Calvary Lutheran Church of Alexandria and the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Moorhead are among the 44 congregations of the synod that have seen ***growth in worship attendance***. What’s more, eleven of these 44 congregations happen to be located in areas where the population in the surrounding area is in decline.

A heart-warming story of ***congregational redevelopment*** comes from First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Parkers Prairie. Rocked by the sudden departure of many long-time members after a failed attempt to disaffiliate from our denomination, First Evangelical applied for and received an ELCA renewing church grant that allowed them to call Pastor Rachel Stout as ministry redeveloper. “*What a difference a year makes,*” exclaimed the congregation’s president in his latest annual report. “*Joy and laughter are heard as folks come for worship. We’ve seen an increase in worship attendance and involvement through the year. Extra opportunities, like Worship in the Neighborhood during summer and occasional Beer and Hymns gatherings have opened a whole new awareness of our congregation in the community. It’s so refreshing to see children enthusiastically involved in Sunday School.*”

Shared-ministry arrangements involving two or more neighboring congregations also bear witness to God’s reforming work among us. The three congregations (Eksjo, Grace and Immanuel) of the Lakes Area Mission Partners (LAMP) near Detroit Lakes embody their vision for *Shining Christ’s Light* by partnering with the Waters of Grace Lutheran mission development in Frazee to support ten youth from low-income families so that they can attend Pathways Bible Camp this summer.

A new ***ecumenical partnership*** is emerging in Crookston, between Trinity Lutheran Church and the First Presbyterian Church. “*It began with a shared outreach to those who, for whatever reason, are not comfortable with traditional church,*” observes Trinity’s Pastor Greg Isaacson.

³ Luther, M., 2012. Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings. Third Ed. Eds. T.F. Lull and W.R. Russell, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp.293-294.

“Wandering Vine ministries began offering off-site worship at the University of Minnesota-Crookston campus, along with a group study held at the State Farm Office’s conference room. They also offered workshops on topics like: Compassion in Leadership, Handling Conflict, and What’s the Big Secret? (about removing the stigma from mental illness). These opportunities have drawn folks together to speak to issues from a faith perspective in a safe place where everyone is welcome, voices are heard, and people share in ministry together. Soon Trinity and First Presbyterian will call a ‘Shared Pastor’ to serve both congregations.”

ELCA and synod staff and programmatic resources undergird all these risk-taking ventures for the sake of God’s mission. Over the past year some of these resources have included:

- Pastor Keith Zeh, Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) has been instrumental in growing our cadre of ***synod mission interpreters*** who have made intentional visits to church councils in nearly half of our synod’s congregations. This year, in addition to growing the total number of trained synod mission interpreters, 90-minute workshops will be offered to train ***congregational mission interpreters*** as well—folks who can tell the stories of how their congregations are making a difference in God’s world.
- Pastor Paul Erdal, Assistant to the Bishop for Stewardship has been working with the synod’s Stewardship Table to sponsor major ***Stewardship Events*** for the Eastern ND and NW MN Synods. He is also coaching several pastors who want to grow in their capacity to be stewardship leaders, and he spearheaded the planning process for the two ***Equipping Congregations*** events that were held in March of this year.
- Pastor Laurie Natwick, Assistant to the Bishop for Servant-Leadership, has been going “on the road” with her very popular and well-received presentation on ***How to Keep Persons From Coming to Your Church***—a tongue-in-cheek look at ways that congregations do and do not practice ***Christ-like hospitality*** to strangers in their midst.
- John Bell, the synod’s Communications and Events Coordinator has been leading breakout sessions on ***using social media in ministry***, a very hot topic in today’s church.

Not Allowing Conflict to Get the Best of Us

In 2018 we’ll look at Faith Practices 2.0 and focus on ***“relentlessly pursuing reconciliation—ceasing to tolerate unresolved conflicts, simmering feuds, stewing discontent. Not allowing bullies or busy-bodies to hijack our congregations and ministries. Developing patterns for confessing, seeking forgiveness, offering forgiveness, and moving beyond the rubs that inevitably happen even in the church.”***

Given the free-floating anxiety and unfocused anger that are so widespread in our nation nowadays, civility is often in short supply. Alas, the unsettledness in our culture frequently spills over into our congregations. Although conflict is always present in the church, lately it feels as though there is more bullying, uttering of threats, and expressions of disrespect in our dealings with one another.

- We on the synod staff regularly witness situations in which gossip (often regarding the pastor) runs amok, allowing rumors to have a life of their own. To use a term currently in vogue, gossip is most often “Fake News.”
- More than once I have heard of or encountered emotionally unstable church members who’re “high-jacking” the work of the staff, church council or other parish leadership groups.
- Some pastors have even told me that they’re fearful for the safety of their own family members in the church building.

As ugly as such things are, I'm even more troubled by our seeming *inability to self-regulate our behaviors in the Body of Christ*. Someone says something outrageous—and no one challenges them. Church members are raked over the coals—and no one stands up for them. Disrespectful, inappropriate language is used to describe a fellow believer—and the rest of the Body of Christ grows silent.

Friends in Christ, one of the boldest and riskiest things we can do is to exercise a salutary discipline within the Body of Christ. We have tongues in our mouths—let us use them to disempower the bullying, gossiping, and “dissing” of one another and of our pastors. Find your voice and push back on misbehaviors that are besmirching our Christian witness. You can say things like

- “We don’t treat one another that way in this church.”
- “You can’t say that about our pastor.”
- “Gossip has no place in this faith-community.”
- “We don’t tolerate bullying, threatening or black-mail in this congregation.”

Ten Years of Partnership

June 10 (the second day of our synod assembly) will mark the tenth anniversary of my election as bishop of this synod. That means that two years from now there will be another bishop election. In my oral report during synod assembly I will have more to say about this, and assembly participants will have an opportunity to discuss some of their hopes and dreams for our synod as we look ahead to 2019. I will also provide some updates on anticipated changes in how our synod is staffed.

For now though, let me simply express my profound appreciation for the Call to serve you as this synod’s pastor. Thank you for inviting me into your congregations and communities. Thank you for your friendship, generosity, goodwill and service in our synod. Thank you to the wonderful staff who serve with me: John Bell, Paul Erdal, Marsha Hendrickson, Laurie Natwick, Shirleen Wyland, Cheryl Zeh and Keith Zeh—not to mention our part-time contract staffers Amy Bigot in planned giving, Kristina Dernier in youth ministry, and Jon Olson in First Call Theological Education.

I look forward to our time together, June 9-10, at Concordia College in Moorhead.

Your brother in Christ,



Bishop Lawrence R. Wohlrabe
Northwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God’s work. Our hands.

