

## Report of the Bishop

### Dear Partners in Ministry:

To the casual, outside observer of American church life, a review of the past year in the ELCA might lead them to think that the dominant issue for our church has been sexuality and the decisions made at the August 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

But if that same observer would walk in the churches of this synod on a Sunday morning or any time during the week, it would be difficult for them to find any sign of that issue. They would hear about worship, education, Bible study, service projects, baptisms and weddings and funerals, new members, and staff changes, and likely nary a word about what the newspapers write about.

This is not to say that those decisions were insignificant. For some in our church, they have been troubling; for others, they have been a breath of fresh air. But my point remains. We are called to be the body of Christ in the world, gathered for worship and sent for service. Thus our theme, “You will be my witnesses.” It’s what we’re here for.

At this assembly, our calling to witness to the world will be encountered in several ways:

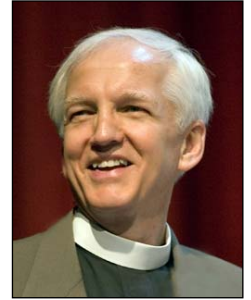
- Diana Butler Bass, theologian, speaker, author (*Christianity for the Rest of Us* and *A People’s History of Christianity*, among others) will be our keynote leader. She will help us think deeply about the world into which we are called and sent, a rapidly changing world, which calls us to changing forms of church life and witness.
- Padre Horacio Castillo, the head of our companion synod in Guatemala, will lead a Bible study on Acts 4:13-20.
- Congregational video vignettes of the many ways the people of this synod live out their calling to be Christ’s witnesses in the world will be sprinkled throughout our time together.

The synod assembly is not simply a time for budgets and resolutions and elections, but to experience something of the life together we have as church in this place. You will be glad you came! I trust you will leave renewed in your sense of being called to be witnesses in your congregation, society, and world!

### **Living with limits, focus, and zeal**

The church is not alone in experiencing these past several years as a time of contraction. That’s the word economists use to describe what’s happened since mid-2008. All sectors of our society have experienced it. Businesses have struggled for survival and have been bailed out. Governments have seen revenues shrink and have been faced with increased needs and diminished income and rising deficits. Charities have experienced drops in income.

Churches are not immune. Yet one could observe that it is a measure of people’s commitment to the fundamental value of their faith that income to churches has actually diminished less than in other sectors of society. Even so, it’s been a time of making hard choices, recognizing diminished financial capacity and doing the hard work of focusing efforts on those things most essential. As God’s people, we are free to do this with the hope and zeal that comes from being grounded in the promises of God for our life and mission.



Peter Rogness

For our life as a church body, this recent economic downturn comes on top of a half-century trend of congregations doing mission beyond themselves increasingly on their own and less as a church body. In the 1960s, most churches gave something like 20 percent of their members' contributions to the work done together as a denomination. At the time of the birth of the ELCA (1988) that average was about 10 percent. It is now about six percent—and less than that in our synod. Yet people continue to need and expect the many dimensions of their work that is tied to and supported by the synod and churchwide expressions. So as resources get tighter, it's important for us to focus clearly on those things that are essential for our work in the Office of the Bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod.

### **The values that shape our work**

Last year in this report, I reflected on the values that inform our priorities as we go about our work. These values are now shaping a mission strategy with a process led by Paul Erickson, assistant to the bishop for evangelical mission, a collaborative position with the churchwide unit of Evangelical Mission and Congregational Outreach, to articulate a mission strategy for the synod. Those four values (though I'm sure you remember them from last year!) are:

- Relationships are more important than programs.
- Outreach is fundamental.
- We are “repairers of the breach.”
- Being a Lutheran is an asset.

### **Leaner, more focused staffing**

We have tightened our own belts around staffing—as has the churchwide expression, other synods, and many congregations—in each of the last two years. For this report I looked back ten years, at the synod staff configuration in 2000 and compared it to now, 2010. Here's what I found:

- In 2000, staff (both full time and part-time/contracted) stood at about 9.5 FTEs.
- In 2010, staff (both full time and part-time/contracted) stood at about 7.5 FTEs.
- Typical of trends across synods, according to ELCA research, such reductions have taken place and at the same time, two particular areas of synod staffing have seen increases:
- Financial staff, which reflects a continuing trend toward special projects, specific and designated giving, etc. In our case, the amounts given to the entire synod/local and churchwide work of the ELCA (about \$1.1 million to each) is surpassed by gifts to the various dimensions of our work in the Iringa Diocese alone—about \$1.3 million last year, up from less than \$200,000 in 2000.
- Communications staff, which corresponds to the explosion of electronic communication and a host of new software applications to extend communications. We have now eliminated *FaithLink* as a printed resource, but have far more communications going out, including communication about an ever-increasing plethora of distinct ministries and the anticipated launch of a new website this summer.
- The bottom line suggests that since those two arenas of staff time have increased by about 1 FTE, that means that all the work of the synod staff besides communications and finance that was done by 9.5 people in 2000 is now being done by 6.5 people in 2010.

### **Synod Staff: The Main Things**

Given these reductions, our staff posed a question for our work at our retreat last fall, around “The Main Things” that went like this: Among all the things we do as synod staff, what three things are so centrally important that if we don't do them well, nothing else we do matters?

Here's what we identified:

- **Equip, resource, and support leaders and congregations.** We embrace a posture of collegiality and partnership. The bishop is “the synod's pastor,” and the Office of the Bishop equips the whole people of God in the synod to be God's presence in the world. Specifically, that means we need to be clearly focused on doing those things you—congregations and leaders—need us to do in order to maximize the church's vitality in every community. We work intensely with you at times of transition, crisis, equipping. We hold gatherings to support and equip both rostered

and elected lay leadership. We make ourselves available to walk with you in ways that empower the whole work we do as the body of Christ in this place.

- **Serve as catalysts for mission and vision.** We are not simply a spare parts department to keep the machinery of your congregation running. Since we are most often called on at times of transition and crisis, we play a role in raising the mission question, calling attention to the church's role in the world, the breadth of the church's work, the many ways we become powerful together and missional locally. We remind folks of the key questions in those times: How is God walking with us into the world? Where are we going? How do we get there?
- **Create and sustain competent infrastructure that connects congregations to the wider church.** We are aware of the need for basics like competence and efficiency. Too often the church settles for organizational mediocrity, and in a time of increased need and scarce resources, we believe competence, responsiveness, attention to detail is important. When you expect to count on us, we expect ourselves to be dependable. We look to help create a church where all people can expect that from one another.

How have “The Main Things” been reflected in the work of synod staff? As we have sought to equip, resource, and support leaders and congregations, we’ve coordinated training sessions for planning stewardship campaigns; networking and educational workshops for children, youth, and family ministers; informational workshops addressing nuts and bolts issues for congregational leaders; gatherings for chaplains and interim pastors; seminars to address the unique issues involved with clergy taxes; workshops for carrying out the Book of Faith initiative; theological conferences and ministeriums for rostered leaders, and, of course, this annual assembly itself that brings us all together.

Collaborative mission tables, mission renewal opportunities for congregations seeking to revitalize their ministry, companion synod endeavors, and supervision and mentoring for mission developers have sought to broaden partnerships among local congregations and the synod and spark and multiply mission opportunities. Ongoing support for rostered leaders at all levels in their ministry—from candidacy to first call to call process to retirement as well as to those congregations and leaders struggling to carry out ministry in the midst of conflict—has created a sense of accountability to one another and to our connections with the whole church.

And all of these efforts, every single one, have been made possible because we have sought—and continue to seek—to create and sustain strong systems and infrastructure that will support all of you around finances, communications, mobility, call process, governance, and a host of other matters. When you call or email synod staff, we seek to respond promptly with resources or answers. We believe in the importance of attending to details and follow through. We want you to count on us...as we count on you!

### **Celebrating denominational life**

Our life together as a denomination adds immense value to our work in ways that often go unnoticed. Why are our clergy among the best prepared theologically in this age of self-appointed leaders? Because we attend to the infrastructure of theological education.

Why is Lutheran Disaster Response among the most efficient and highly regarded relief agencies around? Because our denominational support provides the infrastructure, and thus 100 percent of your gifts to disasters like Haiti go straight there.

Why are you able to count on thorough and accurate information about rostered leaders you consider for call? Because we attend to the relationships, oversight, and communication that makes that happen.

We do the connective work with ecumenical partners. We bring our faith into the public arena. We train and support leaders for new congregations, global missions, and campus ministries. The list goes on and on and on.

I am privileged to serve you in ways that are supportive, missional, and responsive. I do that along with a fine group of people who join me in this work. I'm confident in reporting to you that the staff I serve with in your synod office bring a level of competence to their work that is as high as I know anywhere in the church:

- Cyndi Berg organizes the internal work of the office, supports the work of candidacy, mobility, and call process, coordinates workshops and special events, and assists in the administrative details of mission congregations with a zest for work and a spirit for people that makes this both an efficient and a hospitable place.
- Suzie Bjork, though she works only eight hours a week for nine months a year, brings a longer running familiarity with this synod than anyone else and is a constantly upbeat presence.
- Paul Erickson (in a position housed as part of the staff but provided by the churchwide mission unit) brings to his work a passion for outreach, a connection with ethnic communities, and a drive to bring people around tables to shape new mission strategies that push beyond the familiar.
- Beth Helgen brings a combination of administrative attention to detail combined with knowledge of the breadth of the responsibilities of the bishop's office beyond any I've encountered.
- Julie Keefe has brought since January a wonderful welcoming spirit to her part-time work as program assistant.
- Susan Miller brings a passion for congregational life and an understanding of the dynamics of conflict that comes from years of walking with congregational leaders.
- Myrna Lamberton, who works three-quarters time, brings more organizational competence and mastery of increasingly complex financial matters than any full time person I know.
- Kate Penz in just two short years on staff has brought us a level of competence, creativity, and expertise in electronic communication that is envied by many...and keeps getting better.
- Noreen Stevens is recognized widely for her excellence in attending to candidates preparing for ministry and now brings that same attentiveness to her work with all rostered leaders and the congregations under her care.

For the wonderful ways you all partner to be the church together in this place, I give God thanks.

For the privilege of continuing to serve you, I give you thanks!

**Peter Rogness**