

Report of the Bishop
La Crosse Area Synod Assembly
Luther College
June 10-12, 2016

GOD DOES NOT LEAVE US ALONE

Once a year we gather in Assembly to celebrate that God brings us together and that together as the Body of Christ we can do more than any one household or any one congregation can do alone. We celebrate the ministries we live out in the name of Christ. We celebrate the work we do as Jesus whispers in our ears, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” But we don’t get comfortable, because God does not leave us alone. God is always challenging us to be more and more, the living Body of our Sovereign and Savior.

OUR MESSAGE

“Jesus is Lord!” – Many call this the first Christian creed. One of the shortest sermons I ever heard was, “Jesus loves you – live with that.” And isn’t this enough? We are thankful for the simple truths of faith. We can rest in them.

But God does not leave us alone. Since Jesus is our friend, we want to know Jesus better. Since we want to tell people about our Divine Friend, our Savior and Sovereign, we want more to share. Since we are called to be Christians in the Lutheran tradition, we want to know who we are. October 31, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

The synod’s Anniversary Committee has set a simple goal for the learning period from now until the observance: That every member of every congregation can name:

- 1) One thing special about being an ELCA Lutheran, and
- 2) One thing ELCA Lutherans contribute in this world.

Is it time to spend more time in Scripture? Is it time to learn more about your faith and your tradition? What would you like to know to share your faith more clearly?

OUR BUILDINGS

We love our church buildings. Many of us sit in worship, look to the chancel, and see in our minds our little ones in cherub robes waving and singing with shouts. We see our youth, now moved away to colleges and big city work, standing in confirmation stoles sharing their statements of faith. We see wedding dresses, baptismal gowns, and funeral palls. We see the candle glow of Christmas and hear loud Easter choruses. We look to the past, lean back in our pews, and thank God for the comfort of this place.

But God does not leave us alone. God calls us to see our buildings and ministry centers. And we open our doors. The number of Come for Supper sites continues to grow throughout our synod. Food pantries are

moving from closets to classrooms. Office space is donated to county services and Lutheran Social Services. Stately sanctuaries seasonally see pews covered in patchwork quilts to be donated, piles and piles of food headed to hungry people. Comical mosquitoes and cartoonish cows celebrating both malaria and hunger fought. Classrooms are used by Alcoholics Anonymous groups, by county health screeners, and for supervised parental visits with at risk children.

One of the greatest assets our congregations have is our buildings. Many, many rooms are unused for great portions of each week. How does your church building serve our God? How does Jesus want to expand the use of rooms consecrated for service?

OUR TREASURES

We have weathered one of the greatest recessions in the history of our country. Many are still hurting, many are stable, and many are doing better. In a time of recession we make sure our security is guarded as much as possible. Many cut back their giving to the ministry that we share. Many were thrilled they were able to maintain a dollar amount. We thank God that we made it through and we rest.

However, the reality of the last three years is reflected in the amount we have been able to apply to our work through our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As mission support from congregations has remained fairly stable over the last three years, synod operating costs have risen. This has resulted in a difficult decision. The Synod Council is recommending that this assembly adopt an amended budget for 2016 and a new budget for 2017 that will reduce our mission support contributions from 55% to 50% of our income. We have been a 55% synod for a long time. Please take home from this assembly the stories of what we do together as a church. Please work to increase the mission support giving of your congregation to continue these vital ministries. The Synod Mission Support Committee is eager to help our congregations in stewardship education for our members.

At the same time this weekend we are particularly celebrating a herd of cows now grazing on the library lawn of this college. Each cow represents \$500 given by a congregation to fight world hunger. I will report the amount of giving to date at this assembly and we will have cause to celebrate. We are well on our way to our 2016 goal of \$150,000, a goal that was surpassed in 2015 with a total received of \$153,457.94. (In addition, we announced at the 2015 assembly that the synod had surpassed its three year goal in the malaria campaign of \$150,000; at the end of February 2016 the La Crosse Area Synod had contributed \$180,170.63 to fight malaria.)

But God does not leave us alone. We know as faith-filled people that all we have is a gift from God. We know that we are called to tend our treasures for the good of God's world. We remember that we have been taught as children of God to share.

How are you sharing beyond your family – in your neighborhood, congregation, and beyond? How is your congregation reaching out beyond its doors? Where is Jesus calling you to share?

OUR PEOPLE

We train our pastors well in the ELCA. Our congregations call their pastors carefully. We get a pastor we enjoy – full of energy, fine preaching and teaching skills, good with the youth and a blessing to the homebound and hospitalized. We thank God that our pastor has limited office hours, because most of the time our pastor is out of the building meeting people where they are at – the coffee shop, the school, the warming shelter. We thank God that our pastor is active in organizations on our behalf making our communities better places. We thank God that our pastor attends regular text studies to create the best messages we need to hear and attends theological conferences to hone the skills each pastor needs. We are thankful and rest in the blessings.

But God does not leave us alone. God reminds us that our pastors are only part of the ministry to which we are called. God works in us the need to serve and pushes us to volunteer. We are called to teach children and adults, to mentor youth, to lead the service ministries of our congregations, and to be the Christ-filled people who are needed volunteers in schools and hospitals and service groups, in short term projects and long term ministry. God calls us to speak of Jesus, to make disciples, and to raise up leaders.

A specific need: it is estimated that in the next ten years the number of active clergy in the ELCA will be reduced by 1,000 pastors. This means more and more leadership will need to be done by lay people. I believe this will be a positive change for our church. But change does not come easily. Now is the time to become more active. And now is the time to encourage people to consider professional leadership in the ELCA.

How is your congregation making disciples? What discipleship skills do you need to grow in? Where are you called to serve?

THANKS

Speaking of people, I am thankful for the servants who share a passion for God's work as we seek to be synod together. Thank you to leaders in congregations and those who serve in committees and projects of the Synod. Thank you to the synod staff – Pastor Libby Howe, Melanie Timmerman, Deb Wold and Alice DaFoe. Thank you to my spouse Lynn.

God does not leave us alone, what a promise! God does not leave us alone, what a challenge!

Thankful we are in Christ together,

Bishop Jim

Rev. Jim Arends, Bishop