

GRACE HAPPENS HERE! In the La Crosse Area Synod

Assembly Theme Text:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God –
not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
For we are what he has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.
– Ephesians 2:8-10*

Grace Happens Here! **I see it working in ongoing ministry:**

Our **congregations** live grace. In the eight months I have served as bishop I have had the opportunity to help lead worship in twenty-eight of our congregations (eight in North Conference, seven in East, ten in South, and three in West); preaching in twenty-seven, assisting with confirmation in three, and installing pastors in three. I also had the joy of presiding over the ordination of Pastor Anna Sorenson in her home congregation, Trinity Lutheran of Cook, Minnesota.

A vast majority of our congregations have lively young people in the pews, seasoned congregational veterans providing the wisdom of experience, and a good range of folks in the middle. Some have declining enrollment yet are hopeful for their future and looking for ways to redevelop themselves into mission centers in their communities. Some have pastoral vacancies and, thanks to my interim assistant Pastor Harris Hostager and our present Assistant to the Bishop Pastor Libby Howe, all congregations that have submitted their profiles to the synod office either have names to consider or have meetings set to receive names.

Bridge of Life Mission Congregation is growing in members and in ministry. It continues to need the financial gifts of individuals and congregations as it heads toward independence and chartering.

Agape Asian Ministry is looking for new ways to cooperate with existing ministries within the synod to better reach out to the Hmong population of the region. A new approach will be announced by the end of this summer.

The **Raising Up Leaders** initiative continues to train certified youth and family ministers and to provide resources to help congregations lead youth to lifelong service of our Lord both in and beyond our congregations. From workshops on Stepping Stone Ministry and Peer Ministry to

support groups for folks who work with youth, our synod, with the leadership of Rocky Danielson, is growing in its ability to raise up leaders.

Our **Companion Synods** continue to bless us as we seek to be a blessing to them. Pastor Pete Beckstrand of the Zion and Franklin Congregations served as teaching pastor to the Nekemte Christian Education College in **Ethiopia** in the fall of 2008. Future teaching pastors for the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years are being interviewed. Lynn and I were privileged to represent our synod at the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Jubilee Celebration. The EECMY has been recognized as a church body by the Ethiopian government for fifty years. In addition the EECMY celebrated one hundred and ten years of ministry. Also, Lynn Arends visited the Central Synod for a month in January/February of this year exploring ways that we might work with the synod to grow the quality of their health care system. While there are many ways to connect, most vital at this time is sustaining the clinics themselves as ELCA funding comes to an end. A resolution on this will be coming before this assembly.

In March of this year I also had the honor of representing the synod in **Peru** at the Annual Assembly of the Peruvian Lutheran Evangelical Church (ILEP). Our companion synod in South America is undergoing growing pains. Structural changes are taking place as they seek to minister more effectively as a body of congregations that comes from multiple missionary backgrounds. Their assembly was suspended on March 22 to provide time to find the best ways to work as a body. The meeting continues June 13 and the Lutherans of Peru covet our prayers. At the same time the church has grown from thirteen to fifteen congregations with another half dozen preaching points. I plan to lead a synod delegation to Peru in July of 2010. Applications to participate are available at this assembly.

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I have seen it in projects and programs heading toward completion:

Lutheran Disaster Response's **Project Recovery** comes to an end this summer in the South Conference of our synod. God's grace has been made abundantly clear as blessed people gave of their time and sweat and finances to bless those who were hardest hit by the floods of the last two years. Their compassion and the work of LDR leaders will not quickly be forgotten. We will take time in this assembly to remember and to say thank you.

Our **Synod Office** at 2301 South Avenue in La Crosse has been open for over a year. All major renovations are completed to both the office and the rental properties leased primarily by Lutheran Social Service of Wisconsin. Final projects to complete include improved signage and the forming of some green spaces. The property has turned out to be excellent space and it is cost efficient. All estimates show that by the end of 2009, with our rental income paying a great share of our mortgage, the synod will be paying out no more for building space than we would have for rent. Each year as rental costs go up, the synod's outgo for mortgage will remain stable. So each year we will have more funds freed for mission.

Some basic numbers on synod property include:

Purchase Price	\$290,000
Renovation Costs	<u>\$503,695</u>
	\$793,695

General Donations	\$ 62,328
Pavers	\$ 49,150
Grants/Matching Funds	\$ 71,000
Program Reserves	\$ 20,326
Mission Investment	
Fund Mortgage	\$555,000
Budgeted Building Funds	\$ 4,491
Pledged	<u>\$ 31,400</u>
	\$793,695

At the end of 2008 we ended our appeal for building funds and pavers. We are thankful to all who contributed toward the cost of our new synod home and acknowledge major gifts of matching funds from Gundersen Lutheran and Thrivent for Lutherans. We thank everyone who added their physical labor to the project and acknowledge the leadership of Mr. Dick Mannstedt and Pastor Judd Larson.

Sugar Creek Bible Camp's Focus on the Future Campaign was approved to make an appeal throughout the synod a number of years ago. After a number of redesigns for programmatic applications and resource responsibility, the new dining hall and the new horse barn will be dedicated on June 27. The camp's final appeal to reduce the construction loan is under way. Gifts from synod members and congregations to Sugar Creek and **Luther Park** Bible Camps provide settings and scholarships that strengthen the faith of hundreds of young people and adults.

Lutheran **Campus Ministry**-La Crosse was also granted the privilege of raising funds throughout the synod a few years ago. They intend to break ground on a new facility in the spring of 2010 and anticipate a small wrap-up appeal to cover the cost of furnishings.

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I see it in new ideas:

When a synod office turns over its pastoral staff, it would be easy to see ministry stall or flounder. This has not been the case in the La Crosse Area Synod. Our synod support staff, Melanie Timmerman, Deb Wold and Alice DaFoe, have graciously and skillfully shown Pastor Howe and myself the ways of continuing ongoing programs while capable and active committees are dreaming of new ways to be mission in their areas of ministry.

The **Olive Branch** Awards are a simple example. As Lynn and I had the opportunity to represent you by our participation in the Bishops' Academy trip to Israel/Palestine, we saw first hand the need for a peaceful resolve for the Jews, Muslims and Christians living in that ancient land. So I am glad the Middle East Subcommittee is honoring those who have helped with awareness, accompaniment, and advocacy in the cause of peace in the Holy Land. This new idea grew from the ongoing **Green Leaf** Awards honoring those who act to conserve God's creation.

The **teaming** of our Evangelism and Communications Committees is a second example of new ideas. Realizing the interweaving of the goals of their committees they have intentionally found a way to be mission together. A new web site has begun: **GraceHappensHere.org**. Login for grace basics and grace stories. Find the basics of the best of being Lutheran Christians. Help friends find ELCA congregations near them. Use it to share your faith. Use it to proclaim that Grace Happens Here!

The **shared leadership** in our Candidacy Committee serves as a third example. The work of welcoming students into seminary education and accompanying them to ordination, consecration, and commissioning is rewarding, but time consuming. As Committee Chair Pastor Marty Hampton heads to a new call in Indiana she recommends that the chair be shared, so we have the first committee in the synod with co-chairs, Pastor Len Liptack and Pastor Joe Irvin.

A final example is the **Faith Festival Fair** at this assembly. The idea blossomed as the Planning Committee brainstormed ways to inform and engage assembly voting members. Three hours Friday afternoon and evening are scheduled to let us learn about ourselves, celebrate all that we do, and imagine mission for tomorrow, next month, next year, and years to come.

Grace Happens Here!

I see you live it:

A bishop friend of mine told me that a vast majority of my time in the office would be an opportunity to see the church at its best. Thank you all for letting his words come to pass.

I am thankful for the outpouring of **affection** and **good will** shown by our synod as Bishop April Urling-Larson completed her final term in office. Her farewells were excellent tributes to her service of Christ in this synod. In the same way, I am thankful for the **hope** and **support** shown to me as I begin my term in this office. The Holy Spirit's presence and your presence in my installation service continue to inspire me. Thank you to all who made these special events in our synod's history extra special.

The **optimism** and **generosity** of our synod's people is energizing. We are in challenging financial times. Our 2009 budget has been revised with a \$100,000 decrease. If giving patterns do not change, it is possible that we should have revised by three times that amount. Yet synod leaders and pastors have encouraged us to stay at a challenging level, counting on the blessed among us to stretch ourselves to be a greater blessing to others.

The **respect** and **care** that we give one another is pure grace. As we discuss issues of sexuality at this assembly I look forward to clear and care-filled discussion. We seek to understand God's will for us in this aspect of our personal lives and shared relationships. I know that we will be able to disagree on the subject without questioning one another's faith in Christ.

The **prayer** support that you promise is humbling and appreciated. Your prayers of blessing for Christ's work through our synod are felt. I believe God grants your prayers for strength and guidance for our synod's leadership. Today I encourage your prayers for our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson invites us to join in 50 Days of

Prayer for the Churchwide Assembly. Starting Monday, June 29, take time each day for fifty days to ask the Good Lord to guide our whole church into the future. Resources to guide individuals and groups in this time of reflection can be found at <http://www.elca.org/50days>

Special thanks to The Synod Council, Executive Committee, committee and subcommittee members, and, especially, the synod staff for the grace filled guidance they give me and provide for us all.

Ultimate thanks to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Gracious One, who saved us, leads us, and gives us hope. Because of the presence of Jesus' Holy Spirit in the La Crosse Area Synod **Grace Happens Here!**

Living in grace with you,
Jim Arends, Bishop