

## ***ALWAYS BEING MADE NEW***

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth,  
do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19)*

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)*

*And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,  
I'll sing the old, old story that I have loved so long. (ELW #661, v3)*

Lutherans have a habit of living in more than one reality at the same time. We confess that we are, at the same time, saints and sinners. We believe we are called to live under God's reign now, while looking to a time when we are gathered together in the eternal reign of God. We teach that each passage of scripture is both a word of law and a word of gospel. And we love the old, old story while we add to our repertoire new, new songs.

In nominating caucuses this past February 23, you lifted up my name alone to be your nominee for the next six-year term of bishop of the La Crosse Area Synod. I thank you for this and the confidence that it shows. It does make for some constitutional fun at this assembly – since the constitution says we must elect a bishop, and since our synod's process says I am the only one we can vote for at this point, I am about to be elected by a unanimous ballot. Again I do thank you for your confidence.

Now since human beings are creatures of habit, I am assuming that you expect more of the same from me. You expect me to preach, to pray, to teach, to administer, and to continually look for better ways to be Christ's Body together. You expect our synod people to celebrate with you in dedications, installations, ordinations, and anniversary celebrations. You expect the synod office to be with you in tough times - to offer coaching, help you find new ministers when former ones leave, work for resolution of conflict, and to stand up for order within impending chaos. You expect us to make connections to resources as you do the Christ-centered ministry that is best for your individual contexts. You expect me to challenge you with ministry opportunities beyond your neighborhoods, and to allow you to focus on the ministries that most touch your hearts. And you expect me to be your presence in the church beyond our synod's borders. These are the central tasks of the bishop's office and I strive to do them well.

These roles are many and varied. Our ministries are many upon many - too many to name in one report. So let me lift up some particular areas of celebration and concern.

In the most recent edition of Wartburg Seminary's "Life Together," second year student Nathaniel Bothwell reflects on his 2014 J-Term experiences in Tanzania. He names a general truth when he writes, "In Africa, the church is intimately involved in the doing of Christianity. The church seems acutely aware of the need not only to preach Jesus, but to be Jesus." As the Body of Christ, we are called to be Jesus. To be Jesus is to bring new life. These principles are at the center of this report.

## WORKING TOGETHER

The gift of life is a treasure when all parts of the body work together. Over the past six years I have had the joy of celebrating the life Jesus brings to many of us, our groups, our congregations, and our synod's ministry. In the DVD and written copies of the sermon I provided for use in congregations I use examples of the Lord growing new life in twenty different congregations in the synod. And that is only a sampling. I have more and more stories to share of successes and best practices. These give the opportunity for us to gain, adapt and grow. God is doing new things and blessing old. Do you not perceive it?

Now on occasion, when I share the positive examples, I hear jealousy in comments ranging from, "Doesn't the bishop know we do good things, too?" to "They may be doing that, but look at the resources they have," to "But they're not very Lutheran." This behavior has got to stop. Jealousy must decrease. Mutual support must increase. Squabbling over personal interests and fighting to maintain the comfort of nostalgia must stop. Being Jesus in a world that desperately needs the loving Spirit of God must be our central endeavor. We are part of a shrinking church in a rapidly changing world that is seeing the church as less and less relevant. We need each other's support and help and experience to be a church that makes a difference – that is the loving presence of God where love is so needed. My older, grumpier self promises to name more quickly behavior that harms the body of Christ. And I promise to coach and support pastors and congregational leaders who need to name behavior in members that harms the body of their congregations. My Christ-centered self promises to keep lifting up examples to guide us all, because all over this church the Christ is finding new ways to live in and through well-established congregations and ministries. Again, new things are springing forth. Do you not perceive it?

I especially want to commend the congregations of our synod that are intentionally working on mission plans, strategic plans, and new initiatives. Pastor Libby Howe, as our Director of

Evangelical Mission, is working with seven congregations in mission planning and/or one-on-one training processes. She is providing coaching for mission development and/or revitalization with twelve congregations. She is assisting eight congregations with stewardship education and/or Consecration Sunday Programs. In addition, in the synod office, we are aware of at least six other congregations engaging in intentional mission development. I assist where and when I can and greatly appreciate the opportunities to do so.

Also, I give thanks for congregations that continually strive to be ministries that involve people of all ages. One reflection of this is worth noting today. Assembly Young Adult Voting Members are individuals who are confirmed and no older than twenty-four. This year we have sixteen Young Adult Voting Members, the most of any assembly to date.

At this assembly, you will hear the blessings of some of the ministries we bring as we work together as the La Crosse Area Synod. As I address the gift of working together, I want to thank the many who serve through synod ministries, especially our Synod Council with our present officers: Vice President Lori Toso, Secretary Mike Schnitzius, and Treasurer Derek Jackson. I want to share my deep appreciation for our synod staff: Assistant to the Bishop and Director of Evangelical Ministry Pastor Libby Howe, Executive Assistant Melanie Timmerman, Office Assistant and Call Process Coordinator Deb Wold, and Bookkeeper Alice DaFoe. Most of all, I also want to thank the person I've worked with the longest in life and love, my wife Lynn.

#### MISSION SUPPORT (basically money)

I was first elected in 2008 and took office at the start of the Great Recession. Finances have been difficult for households and congregations. So finances have been a challenge for our synod ministry and our outreach through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Our plan has been simple: we keep our spending in line, we keep our ministries Christ-centered, and we challenge our congregations to support the mission. And you have. After a nasty drop of over \$55,000 in mission support from fiscal year 2009 to 2010, you have restored over \$6,600 each year since. This year has started out with challenges. Increased insurance costs and high heating bills have added to the necessary expenditures of our congregations. And they have led to a shortfall in mission support. At the end of May your contributions to our shared ministry in the synod and the ELCA lag behind last year's giving by \$15,472. Our synod and churchwide offices work constantly to avoid any wasteful spending. To continue the ministries that we are celebrating in this assembly, I ask you to take the need back to your congregations and encourage people to give as they are able. As you increase your giving to your congregations, you increase the proportional share of your mission support and you grow God's work in our

world. (I am leading an assembly workshop on responding to mission support questions in our congregations.)

While we are talking money, let me give you three words of thanks and four more challenges. First, thank you for the mission support you have shared. Many congregations have worked hard to give beyond their doors in tough times. Some congregations have made commitments to send a percentage of their offering weekly for use in our synod and churchwide outreach. I challenge you to take an intentional look at your percentage giving to mission support. Consider working toward a ten percent tithe, setting an example to your congregation's members to consider tithing.

Second, thank you for fighting hunger in our world. I am thankful that last year our synod contributed \$2.77 per baptized member to the ELCA Hunger Appeal. But, as you will hear when we look at the resolution to fight world hunger, our per-member giving ranks 57<sup>th</sup> out of 65 synods in our church. My challenge to you is to adopt the resolution today - and to begin today - to raise our average to \$4.00 per baptized member.

Third, thank you for rising to the challenge to wipe out malaria in this world. The 2012 Synod Assembly set a goal of raising \$150,000 in three years to fight malaria. At this two-thirds point, we have given over \$130,000 to the battle. My challenge? Let's reach our goal this summer. If each congregation plans one special event, we can do it.

Finally, our ELCA in its 2013 Churchwide Assembly, seeking to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our church, established our first ever capital campaign: *Always Being Made New – the Campaign for the ELCA*. The goal is to raise \$198 million over the next five years to undergird and expand a number of ministries that are dear to us. Gifts to the Hunger Appeal and the Malaria Campaign will count toward the total. Gifts to start new congregations will count toward the total. Gifts to the Fund for Leaders, which provides seminary scholarships, will count. So will gifts to support Young Adults in Global Mission, global ministries, youth ministry initiatives, and more. While we are talking money, I invite you to take the challenge to grow our church's ministry. Adopt the resolution which promises our involvement and, as you are able, please, give.

## GLOBAL MISSION

Our global connections and ministries have changed radically over the last six years. At the start of 2013, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus severed ties with our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in protest over the ELCA's decisions regarding sexuality issues in

2009. This put our companion synod relationship with the Central Synod of the EECMY on hold. Many of us continue to grieve this loss.

At the same time our companion church in Peru, la Iglesia Luterana Evangelica Peruana (ILEP), has been challenged with leadership and accountability issues. While the congregations continue to do powerful ministry individually, the church body is in need of reform. At the present time, the ELCA has stopped funding any ministries in Peru, calling for much needed reform in leadership and accountability in financial matters. Pastor Raquel Rodriguez, ELCA Director for Ministry in Latin America, has recommended our La Crosse Area Synod take a delegation to Peru as soon as possible to visit congregations, celebrate ministries, and provide the pastoral care of listening. Our Peru Subcommittee will be exploring the option soon. Start considering joining the delegation. And, for those with a passion for this ministry, your contributions are needed.

So in this time of flux, how do we keep our spirit for and our commitment to connecting to Christians around the world? First, sponsor one of the two individuals from our synod to serve as Young Adults in Global Mission from August 2014 to August 2015. Jenna Putz from Christ Lutheran in Arcadia will serve in Uruguay-Argentina. Elise Hynek from Our Savior's-La Crosse will serve in the United Kingdom.

And second, our Global Mission Committee has an answer. They are creating a *Global Mission 2Go* event. It will provide the opportunity to bring the joys and gifts of global mission to your congregation. Consider being one of the first congregations to welcome *GM2Go*!

## CAMPUS MINISTRY

Every year students from our congregations go off to college. They welcome their family on campus for Family Day and another event or two. But mostly they want to try out a new world on their own. Campus Ministry was designed to reach into their lives with faithful people in new ways, while home congregations are left at home. Our Lutheran Campus Ministry of La Crosse is vital for doing new, perceivable ministry at UW-L, Viterbo, and Western. But it cannot function without our help. A new full-time campus pastor needs to be called. Programs need to be funded. Payments toward the remaining \$200,000 on the mortgage need to be made. And our present support leaves us short of full time ministry. A few of our congregations contribute thousands of dollars each year. Others supply smaller amounts. Leaders in a few of our congregations have promised to challenge their congregations to provide an additional \$5,000 a year for three years. We need six congregations to take on this challenge – yes, another challenge. And we need additional funds to start pouring in before August 1.

## SAME GENDER UNIONS

On Friday, June 6, a federal judge ruled against Wisconsin's ban on same gender marriages. The full implications of this are expected to be laid out by the end of the month. Our church's actions of 2009 are our guide for the future. We have voted that congregations that choose to may recognize publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same gender relationships. Our developing guide is that recognition should require couples to be united in the most complete option allowed by a state. If that is marriage (as is the case in Minnesota), marriage would be the standard for recognition. Because of church/state issues, no pastor can be mandated to preside over any marriage ceremony, whether male-female or same gender. In our denomination pastors have the authority to preside because of their call to a congregation. So, pastors of this synod should have the authorization of their church council before they preside over any uniting ceremonies. I have sent two resources from Minnesota synods to our pastors to help them look to the future with their congregations.

## FINALLY

My ministry as Bishop of the La Crosse Area Synod has been to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. My ministry has been to bring you more challenges than you want to hear. My ministry has called us to see the connected nature of our mission. My ministry has been to keep the fundamentals before us: to know that *Grace Happens Here*, to be *Rooted in the Word*, to trust that we are *Spirit Led-Spirit Fed*, to receive *Generous Love* as we lead *Generous Lives*, to perceive God's presence as we are *Always Being Made New*. My ministry has been to be there for you in good times and in bad. I regret where I have failed. I thank God where our shared ministry has been successful. This is the ministry I promise to continue.

At the risk of sounding "corny," while being totally sincere, I close with the words of ELW Hymn #659:

*Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey, we are trav'lers on the road;  
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.*

*I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.*

*I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh I'll laugh with you.  
I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.*

*Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.*

Thankfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James A. Hendo".

Bishop