

2010 Bishop's Report

“Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.”

Psalm 103:2-5

“There is no use trying,” said Alice; “one can't believe impossible things.”

“I dare say you haven't had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice In Wonderland*

Our assembly theme this year, *Life Overflowing*, is about the astounding abundance of God that calls forth the spiritual gift of generosity in us. Writing these words (on April 19) though, this all sounds like something of a stretch—like one of those “six impossible things” the White Queen managed to believe before breakfast.

Surely over the past twelve months we've had plenty of reasons to doubt that ours is an overflowing life, marked more by abundance than by scarcity. Here, we've weathered the worst recession since the Great Depression, two years of spring flooding in our region, a tough growing season for many of our farmers, and widespread unrest in the ELCA over controversial decisions on human sexuality at our 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Most days it seems far easier to chart what we *lack* than what we *have*.

But, really, how surprising is that? Like all the other convictions we hold dear as followers of Jesus Christ, the abundance of God is and always will be an article of *faith*. We confess God's overflowing richness in the face of all sorts of evidence to the contrary. We hear surprising grace notes in the midst of the cacophony of bad news that the 24-hour cable TV news cycle is always plopping down into our laps.

As I offer my synod assembly report to you this year, let me share with you some of the grace notes I'm hearing in the midst of one of the most challenging years of my life. I want to address the following six areas of our common life and witness as the Northwestern Minnesota Synod:

1. A new mission field embraced

Three years ago, soon after I was called to the office of bishop, I checked out a page on the ELCA website that lists “zip codes with potential for starting a new congregation” (see <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Research-and-Evaluation/Synod-Statistics.aspx>) To my utter disappointment, when I clicked on the link the stark message was: “**There were no potential zip codes listed for this synod.**”

If demographics determined our destiny, that would be the end of the story. But fortunately, over the last seven years, folks have been realizing that there's an area around Vergas and Frazee (that includes several

zip codes—so was missed by the demographers) that lacks an ELCA congregation but shows great promise for starting a mission church. When the folks at Immanuel of Osage allowed God to “turn themselves inside out” in mission, an amazing plan came together whereby Pr. Phil Johnson could serve Immanuel half-time while spending half of his time as developer of a new mission start near Frazee-Vergas. Thanks to the generosity of Immanuel congregation and the ELCA program unit for Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission (EOCM), we’ll help launch this new ministry partnership at our assembly on the afternoon of May 14. In addition to the Frazee-Vergas startup we will also hear about exciting EOCM engagement in The Project F-M, the Native American Christian Ministry, and Peoples Church of Bemidji.

None of this would be happening without the active engagement of the ELCA churchwide organization, embodied in guidance, financial grants, and the good work of our Director for Evangelical Mission, Pr. Keith Zeh, along with Assistant to the Bishop, Pr. Steve Peterson and members of three “missional tables” that are spearheading new mission development and renewal in our synod and in our “across-the-river” partners in the Eastern North Dakota Synod. And here’s a factoid for you to share with members of your congregation: **of every \$100 in ELCA mission support that our synod shares with the ELCA churchwide organization, about \$25 (one-fourth of our contribution) “comes back” to our synod, its leaders, congregations and disciples.** In fact, 80% of the mission support dollars that flow from synods to the ELCA churchwide organization move out of the Lutheran Center offices in Chicago—into global missions, seminaries, mission congregations and other ministries throughout the world.

2. Fresh leadership emerging

Over the last few years we’ve observed, more than once, how critical it is for the churches of North America to re-engage with persons aged 18-35, still the most unchurched cohort in our country. Folks in most of our congregations readily express anxiety about our seeming inability to “turn the corner” to reclaim the rich gifts and fertile imaginations of our young adults.

Alongside this apparent mark of scarcity in our midst, however, I also perceive signs of God’s overflowing abundance. Young adults continue to offer their gifts for rostered service in the ELCA as pastors, associates in ministry, diaconal ministers and deaconesses. Our synod candidacy committee, staffed by Assistant to the Bishop, Pr. Laurie Natwick, currently is guiding over 25 members of our synod through seminary and other avenues of formation for service. We have an amazing cadre of young adults already serving in rostered ministries in our own synod!

Moreover, in early March we welcomed the largest group of “first call” candidates assigned to our synod in recent memory—**nine** future pastors, some of whom will be with us during assembly. We are also grateful for six seminary interns serving among us this year. And we rejoice in a new partnership with the “Transition into Ministry” program headquartered at Trinity Lutheran Church of Moorhead that is taking over the planning and sponsorship of the First Call Theological Education (FCTE) program for our synod and the Eastern ND Synod. Many thanks to Pr. John Hulden for his creative, tenacious leadership of this “successor” to the FCTE program formerly sponsored through the CHARIS Ecumenical Center (which concluded its life and mission last year).

All of us on the synod staff were also energized by three church council training events that we led in February. Over 150 lay leaders from across the synod participated in these opportunities to reflect on what it means to be **re-rooted, re-routed, and re-fueled** for leadership in our congregations.

3. Disciples being formed

Though most of the meat-and-potatoes work of planting and nourishing faith happens in our homes and congregations, we see signs through our synodical connections of how our Lord is forming and deepening the faithful lives of disciples in our corner of Minnesota. With the leadership of Assistant to the Bishop, Mr. Erin Anderson, our synod over the past year has

- Sent nearly 1000 youth and adult leaders to the *Jesus, Justice and Jazz* national ELCA youth gathering in New Orleans last July;
- Hosted major gatherings for over 1200 junior high youth, senior high youth and adult advisers this past autumn;
- Engaged with and elected a nearly all-new LYO Board (with thanks to nine of our conference youth representatives fulfilling their elected roles on the Board). The LYO developed the theme REFLECT and planned the ministry and mission focus of our autumn youth gatherings;
- Sponsored a Passing on Vibrant Faith conference that featured Dr. David Anderson, in December at Dilworth Lutheran Church;
- Sustained the ongoing work of the Hunger Task Force, chaired by Pr. Phil Holtan of Calvary, Perham;
- Formed a *Book of Faith* team, chaired by Pr. Kate Bruns of Fergus Falls;
- Initiated a weekly e-devotion, “*Wednesday’s at the Well*,” slated to start up the Wednesday after synod assembly (you may join other pastors and lay leaders in contributing devotional essays based on your encounter with God’s Word by contacting Pr. Kate Bruns at pastorkate@prtcl.com);
- Offered School of Lay Ministry courses in *Old Testament* in October, with Frederick Gaiser, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary --- *Worship* in February, with Mons Teig, Professor Emeritus of Worship at Luther Seminary – *Pastoral Care* in April, with Rev. Dr. Stephen Streed of Eventide Senior Living Communities; and
- Supported the work of charitable gift planner, Mr. Bill Elmstrom, who has led congregational workshops and assisted donors in remembering ELCA and synodical ministries in their estate plans.

4. Companion Synod connections renewed

Our synod has had a global companion relationship with the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC) in southern India since the early 1990s. In my first two years as bishop, due to other challenges that were pressing in upon us, we didn’t do much to tend this companion synod relationship.

However, last year the AELC elected a new bishop, and we felt a new urgency to re-connect with our sisters and brothers in Christ in India. Accordingly, last November Professor Hank Tkachuk of Concordia College joined with my wife Joy and me, as we made a pilgrimage to our companion synod. We visited the people, pastors, lay leaders and congregations of the AELC from November 5 through the 17th and were able to get to know the AELC’s new bishop, Dr. Suneel Bhanu Busi and his wife Grace. (Suneel was a member of the delegation from the AELC that visited our synod in 2007.)

This trip, though taxing and physically challenging (I came home with a lower back spasm that took about a month to heal), was filled with “grace notes”—relationships formed, insights gained, and a deep appreciation for what these disciples of Christ are doing to serve God’s mission half a world away. Joy and I have created a PowerPoint slide presentation on our journey to India which we are available to present, ideally in conference gatherings, multi-congregational meetings and cluster gatherings of WELCA. Just contact me at Wohlraabe@cord.edu or call 218.299.3019 to arrange a date/time. We hope to use last November’s trip as a jumping-off-point for re-engaging with our companion synod. Professor Tkachuk has consented to chairing this effort.

5. Tensions within our fellowship

Since the Churchwide Assembly ended last August I have been spending roughly a third of my time dealing with the aftermath of the decisions on human sexuality—especially the changes in ministry policies that have opened the door to persons in same-sex committed relationships serving as rostered leaders in congregations that choose to call them. By my count I have led or participated in 33 meetings and forums on the topic across the synod; other members of the synod pastoral staff along with synod council members and conference deans have led or participated in such forums, as well. Although the opinions expressed within our synod are as diverse as one can find anywhere in the ELCA (we have many ELCA members in our synod who support these decisions!)-congregations struggling with the issue have demanded most of my attention.

These congregations are expressing their disagreement in a variety of ways:

- Eight congregations have passed formal “declarations,” stating that they will not call partnered gay or lesbian persons into rostered ministry;
- Sixteen congregations are withholding all ELCA/synod mission support giving through the synod.
- Another eighteen congregations are designating their benevolence for the NW MN Synod Fund for Mission (with no dollars going toward the ELCA churchwide organization);
- Fourteen congregations have taken a “first vote” to disaffiliate from the ELCA, with ten of these congregations passing such votes;
- One of these ten congregations has taken a successful “second vote” to disaffiliate, and on March 21 we said farewell to our sisters and brothers in Christ of Bethlehem/West Elbow Lake Lutheran Church, Elbow Lake.

I must confess that during the eight months since the Churchwide Assembly, it has often been hard to hear the grace notes of God’s abundance in this intra-church debate. Still, often in the most unexpected times and places, God’s overflowing life has sustained me:

- In the places where ELCA members have been truly open to learning about the Churchwide Assembly actions, while pondering the implications of these actions for their own mission and ministry;
- In the good conversations, renewed study of the scriptures about human sexuality issues, and the determination in most of our congregations to keep walking together in God’s mission;
- In the words of support and encouragement that so many have shared with me.

6. Responding to the financial crunch

As we ended our 2009 fiscal year (FY), it became apparent that mission support giving from congregations fell short of anticipated income by around \$145,000. Even with under-spending the budgeted expenses, the synod ended FY 2009 with a \$90,000 deficit. Covering this deficit reduced our budgetary reserve fund to around \$120,000. (The deficit would have been worse had we not lost one staff person due to relocation last September—Linnae Grabner-Hegg of the support staff, whose position the synod council decided not to refill.)

Moreover, Statements of Intent for the 2010 fiscal year came in over \$250,000 below the level of mission support that was anticipated in our 2010 budget approved at last year's synod assembly. Accordingly, the synod finance and executive committees have been working diligently over the last few months to come up with ways to address this severe budgetary shortfall and rebuild the budgetary reserve fund to acceptable levels.

In an attempt to stave off cuts in synod staff positions, the synod executive committee made an appeal to over 700 individuals, identified as friends of the synod. This pre-Easter appeal brought in over \$35,000 in gifts—a wonderful outpouring of support, but not enough to keep the synod staff team intact.

Accordingly, at their April 10 meeting members of the synod council approved a proposal to rectify the financial situation, reduce the synod staff by two full-time positions, and propose both a revised 2010 budget and a fiscal proposal for 2011. With deep regret, the synod council eliminated the assistant to the bishop for discipleship position (currently held by Erin Anderson) and the communications director position (currently held by Michael Stein).

Erin and Michael have both given themselves to their work with care, creativity and commitment. They have been wonderful colleagues, and we on the synod staff shall miss them dearly. Members of the synod assembly will have an opportunity to thank Erin and Michael during the Friday evening “Splashing in the Spirit” program, and at a reception to follow that program in the Knutson Center atrium.

The synod council has asked that we have a time of “committee of the whole” discussion of the synod's mission priorities in light of our financial condition; approximately 30 minutes will be devoted to this discussion during the Saturday morning plenary session.

Even in the pain that has marked these discussions of our synod budget, we have continued to perceive God's overflowing grace:

- In the earnest soul-searching and imaginative thinking that has been triggered by our synod's financial condition--pondering how we might be faithful and effective in a time of diminished financial resources;
- In the willingness of our whole synod staff team to keep “soldiering on” in their ministries, during a period when they knew staff positions might need to be eliminated;
- In the generosity of over 175 donors who contributed “extra mile” gifts in response to the synod executive committee's pre-Easter appeal letter—including **fifty** of our *retired* rostered leaders and **nine** of our *youngest* rostered leaders serving in their first calls—amazing!

“Satisfies you with good as long as you live...”

Looking ahead, we do so as people who know the name of the One who owns the future: Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord, who has death behind him. Usually, my “default” position is to forge ahead, in hope, to where God is calling us to go. The events of the past year have brought a “pause” in our forward momentum, however. We’ve needed to care for one another within that part of the Body of Christ called the ELCA. This has been a purposeful pause, so that we might tend the ties that bind us to one another—serving the unity that is God’s gift to us, all for the sake of the good work to which God calls us.

But how long shall we pause? Right now I’m mindful of the over 80% of our congregations that have *not* expressed any formal dissent from the Churchwide Assembly actions—congregations that seem poised to move beyond this time of contention over human sexuality issues. As we move into the future, let us continue tending those in the Body who are hurting...but not at the expense of encouraging those in the Body who are eager to move ahead in mission and ministry. Our living Lord calls and equips us to believe impossible things and to practice the Resurrection in God’s world.

This is the “dance” to which God seems to be calling me (and I was born with a dancing defect!)-- a little two-step that will still involve ***tending the hurting*** (but probably *not* continuing to spend a third of my time on that)...while ***leading the eager***, to live more deeply into the reality that we belong to a God who “satisfies you with good as long as you live” (Psalm 103:5). Please pray that God will show us all how best to enter this dance in the faith, hope and love of Jesus.

In closing, I need to pay tribute to our synod’s other officers: Vice President Becky Cusey, Secretary John Martinson (retiring from this office after eight years of faithful service), and Treasurer Wayne Drewes; at-large members of the executive committee: Eric Lemonholm, Dennis Minks and Tara Ulrich; all the members of our synod council; and the wonderful staff team who have rendered extraordinary service under trying conditions: Erin Anderson, Linnae Grabner-Hegg (who left our staff last September in order to move to the Glenwood, MN area), Marsha Hendrickson, Bob Larson, Laurie Natwick, Steve Peterson, Michael Stein, Shirleen Wyland, Cheryl Zeh and Keith Zeh. And thank you, the people of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, for all the ways you are partners with us as we serve Christ and tend God’s mission in our corner of the creation.

In Christ,



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