

Bishop Gordy's Oral Report

to the 2018 ELCA Southeastern Assembly

Chattanooga, Tennessee

First, some thanks:

A lot of people have been working hard this week and for weeks and months before to make this Assembly happen. The Assembly Committee, and all the Assembly Committees, your synod staff, the staff of the Chattanooga Convention Center and all of you drove for hours to attend to the business of this synod. A lot goes into an Assembly, most of which we don't notice unless it isn't going well. So, thanks to all of you who have worked to make this Assembly work!

In my report is a list of our current synod staff. I'm happier than you can imagine to report that there have been no changes in staff since we met last year!

There are no more dedicated people than these folk. They work many more hours than they should and they are good at what they do. Our synod's flat mission support has meant that again this year, we were not able to address the unreasonable workloads of the staff - a problem our Personnel Committee has pointed out again and again. Nor were we able to offer appropriate increases in salary. Still, these folk remain faithful to the work we have asked them to do. This year let me take the time to recognize them each by name.

First, our office staff who have been more amazing than usual. I don't use that word lightly. Most of you know that we have moved from our old office space of many years, but we had to move early and, since the new space isn't ready yet - in fact when we moved, it wasn't really even begun - your synod staff moved into temporary space at St. John's, Atlanta. That means we moved 11 offices, a reception area, two meeting rooms, a work room, a break room, and several storage rooms into two rooms at St. John's and some temporary storage space. The staff at St. John's has been hospitable and welcoming as we've made their lives more difficult. And our synod staff, working amid boxes and piles in tight quarters - often with a construction noise in the background - has been terrific!

Ms Holly Liersch is our office manager who has done extraordinary work to make all this happen. If you need someone to organize a move, Holly is your person. Although I wouldn't recommend asking her anytime soon.

Deacon Jeanette Burgess, Administrative Liaison for Leadership has managed to keep all those candidacy and mobility records straight and get all that candidacy and mobility paperwork done and move from a paper records system to a digital one in the midst of a lot more disorder than she likes. And she's usually done it with a pleasant voice and a smile.

Ms Carolyn Davis, Executive Assistant to the Bishop and Communications Support Specialist, has kept my life over-scheduled and more or less in order. And, I hope you've noticed, she has managed to keep up the synod eNews and the website even while, in the midst of this office move, we also moved all our digital stuff to a new and much better platform, which

integrates our data base with our web site and a host of other things that we used to have to keep separately. You can imagine how much effort and time that took. Again, this was done while we were moving and living in our temporary quarters. We are grateful to our synod office staff volunteers for their hours of help with data input and the like as well.

And to be clear, I am not the person directing all this movement that's been going on, that would be Assistant to the Bishop and Communications Coordinator Deacon Michelle Angalet. Her title doesn't do justice to her responsibilities, but "runs the synod" sounded a little too casual. To give you some idea of what Michelle does, in addition to working with congregations in Georgia, serving on the LSG Board, working with the candidacy committee, overseeing the Living Lutheran Legacy campaign, working with the Synod Council, managing the Synod Assembly and a host of other things, Michelle is also the synod's administrative director.

She is also leaving for sabbatical in a week, so pray for us.

Pastor Ben Moravitz is the Bishop's Assistant who works with congregations in Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi and sometimes in Georgia, serves on agency boards as the bishop's representative and is the go-to guy when there is conflict to resolve in congregations. Ben spends a lot of time and miles in the synods Ford Fusion Hybrid, and turns up regularly in every corner of this huge synod.

Ms Rachel Alley serves as Assistant to the Bishop for Youth and Young Adult ministries. Rachel is one reason that we have such a vibrant youth program in this synod and that so many young people continue as adult leaders, rostered and lay, in their congregations as adults. Our congregations are not the only ones that recognize her gifts, the ELCA churchwide organization has long recognized her ability in planning and inspiring, asking her to do significant work with the triennial youth gatherings. In her spare time, Rachel works with our global mission teams and occasionally with congregations in the call process.

We have been more than a little blessed over the years by the work of Dr. Sandra Gustavson, our synod fiscal advisor. Sandra is the reason our synod financial processes are the envy of other synods. She is also why I am not worried about the many elections we will have at this Assembly. Sandra works with the elections committee to make sure that our constitution is followed and that our election results reflect our commitment to inclusiveness. It's complicated.

Finally, our Directors for Evangelical Mission, Mr. Wayne Fell and Pastor Ron Bonner. Both these men have the mission of Christ's church in their bones. While this synod has always had more than its share of mission starts and explorations, Wayne and Ron have brought real focus and extraordinary care and appropriate accountability to this increasingly complex and difficult work.

Please join me in thanking your synod staff.

Our deans - all seventeen of them - extend the ministry of the Office of the Bishop by providing pastoral care and tending to communications in their deaneries and help with conflict and call processes. This year, due to retirements or health issues or moves, we have

had to bid farewell to five of our deans: Pr. Tom Kenny, Pr. Eric Murray, Pr. Steve Plonk, Pr. Katie Pasch, Pr. Jill Henning. We welcome new deans, Pastors Fritz Wiese, Christ Our Shepherd, Peachtree City, GA, Rick Ohsiek, St. Paul, Maryville, TN, Jason Talsness, Messiah, Savannah, GA, Patti Axel, Nativity, Bethlehem, GA, and Chris Hermansen, Epiphany Suwanee, GA. I am happy to report that Pr. Henning, although she has resigned her role as a dean in the Magi conference, has agreed to stay on as Coordinator of the Deans.

These days, in this synod, these faithful leaders do their job without financial compensation. We are grateful to them and to their congregations who allow them this time to serve in this way. At Friday's Eucharist, we'll be installing two of these new deans.

Would all you deans stand and let us thank you for your work.

Before moving on to our theme, let me make a request. Tomorrow we will have table conversations about the future and about the electing of a new bishop a year from now. There is some material that it will be helpful for you to have read before then. It is Exhibit J in your Assembly material. So, take a look at it this evening or sometime between now and tomorrow's plenary.

Now, on to the theme!

Reformation 500 . . . Now what?

Last year the world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the year in which a Saxon monk, priest, and university professor named Martin Luther began a reformation in the church which has continued to have impact on theology and ecclesiology around the world to this day. There were Lutheran-Roman Catholic worship services in the dioceses of Mobile, Savannah and Atlanta as well as gatherings in many other parts of the synod.

Our theme this year reminds us again to look ahead to where that reforming Spirit may be compelling us to go today and into the future. The church today here in the West, anyway, is facing challenging times. Enormous changes have already taken place in the church around the world. Did you know that there are more Lutheran Christians of African and Asian descent in the Lutheran World Federation than there are Lutherans of European descent?

And while the church in the West is shrinking as a percentage of the population, and more than 1 out of 4 young adults in the U.S. professes no religious affiliation at all, in Africa and Asia, church membership is booming. Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the world.

Five hundred years after the beginning of the Reformation, in the midst of great changes in the culture and in the church, we ask ourselves, where are we Lutheran Christians in the ELCA Southeastern Synod, we people of the good news, being called?

As I mentioned earlier, later in this Assembly, we have built in some time to talk about that question and related questions in light of the election a year from now of a new bishop. The Synod Council hopes that this conversation will kick off a year of thoughtful, communal deliberation before we gather here in Chattanooga next year.

We will take a look at the demographics of the Southeastern Synod, at our challenges and opportunities.

Those statistics that show what is happening in the congregations of this synod cause most of us more than a little concern. Membership, worship attendance - are going down in many places, and while giving to our congregations, taken together, has not declined in the past few years and has even in many cases gone up, that giving is coming from fewer and fewer people and more and more of it is being used locally.

The care and feeding of the institution - keeping our buildings repaired, keeping our pastors and staffs paid and insured, and keeping the lights on can take up most of our money and, if we aren't careful, all of our focus.

A common response to all this change is nostalgia. Ah! For the Good Old Days of the 1950s when church pews were filled and Sunday Schools were overflowing and congregations were growing. But, historically, that period was a fluke of history following two 20th Century world wars.

In 1776, none of the thirteen original states of the new nation had even 10% of people affiliated with any religion. It may be that those colonial days, not the 1950s, may be the "good ole days" we are returning to.

In the face of all this, among those of us who love the church, especially among us so-called mainline Protestants, something like a communal depression has set in.

Add to that the aging of our congregations. Would you believe that when I visit congregations in this synod, I'm often among the younger people in the room. And I haven't been young in a while!

So our theme: Reformation 500...now what? "Now what?" can sound a bit desperate, can't it? Now what! Now what?...

But we don't need to feel desperate and we don't have any reason to be depressed. Truth is, this is not a bad time to be the church. Really! And I'm not kidding. I've been saying this for a while, but I don't think it's catching on.

Consider this: maybe in these times of change and anxiety and downward mobility, we are being invited by the Spirit to some excitement, maybe we are being reminded of who we are as Christ's church, maybe we are being nudged into some renewed clarity about our mission. Not just as the church, but as THIS church, this ELCA, this Southeastern Synod, and your congregation.

Presiding Bishop Eaton has this to say about who we could be in this church and what our role could be in this changing American religious landscape: "We can be the alternative face of Christianity in today's culture. When the world sees the church only as judging, condemning, and excluding, we can show the way of God's love and mercy that are meant for all people."

The South is still the most religious part of the country. St. Flannery O'Connor called it "Christ-haunted." But the dominant religion, while it calls itself Evangelical, isn't much about good news at all. It's a lot about law and condemnation, and keeping the rules and living right - narrowly and individually defined. It's about you should and you'd better or else. So when people hear or encounter the great good news as we Lutherans insist on it, that God loves the world period, all of it, with no strings attached, that there's nothing that you can or need to do to earn God's eternal love, they are amazed.

Here is our Lutheran witness to the gospel: God loves us first. That's why we baptize babies! And just as a mother loves her newborn with inexplicable ferocity and intensity, so God loves you and me, no matter who we are, no matter where we live, no matter what we've done. You don't have to earn your way into God's good graces any more than a child has to earn a mother's love.

God loves the world. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn it but to save it! It's that simple and that radical and that rare. Grace alone. We Lutherans say. That's our witness, our peculiar Lutheran witness in this divided and angry world.

A lot of you are here at this Assembly today because, like me, you heard that gospel witness first and loudest from your Lutheran neighbors. And, especially here in the South, it still needs to be heard and seen as a counter-witness to that exclusion and judgment and condemnation that folks have come to think of as Christianity.

I wonder if we've been so busy worrying about our survival that we haven't paid enough attention to our mission to be God's good news for the world? I wonder if in the blush of Christendom we forgot that we are a gospel movement in the world before we are the institution that supports that movement.

So, maybe our current downward mobility might serve to remind us of who we are and what our mission is. The church has always done a better job at being the body of Christ in the world when it was under pressure, put upon, and even persecuted. Those are the times when the church has seen most clearly its particular mission to welcome the unwelcome, to be good news to those who have known too much bad news, to love those who are seen as unlovable by the "right kind of people."

This message of the church, this gospel, this good news of God's love for the whole world is not about us or our success or our favored status in the culture. It is about God's love shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and it is about our baptismal calling to get over ourselves and be the body of Christ in this world God loves, a world that needs the great, radical, good news that is the gospel as much as ever, even if it doesn't know it and doesn't value it.

Five hundred years after the Reformation ... Now what? We ask and answer that question certain that we are still as much as ever Christ's church. And because we are Christ's church, whatever our status or our situation, we carry within us the light of Christ, the extraordinary power of the gospel, the great good news that God loves the world to death.

So be of good cheer, Friends. In spite of what you may have heard, these are good days to

be the church. Opportunities to Christ for our neighbors abound in this world in which our neighbors are lonely and disconnected from community, a world in which refugees are turned away for the borders of wealth nations and hearts are hardened against those looking for asylum, a world in which the poor are losing access to health care and nutrition in the world's richest nation, a world in which race determines too much how people are treated by the law and by institutions and by you and me, a time in which hateful language in high places is a daily occurrence and sword rattling is ascendant, a time in which those claiming evangelical Christianity lead the chorus of condemnation -- in this world, in this Southeast, We can be, we are called to be "the alternative face of Christianity... to show the way of God's love and mercy that are meant for all people."

Now what? Living and proclaiming and being the good news of Jesus is what. That's the mission to which we've always been called. It's the mission we get to be part of now, here in the Christ-haunted South and around the world.