

Bishop's Report

Oregon Synod Assembly, May 10-12, 2019

Present in my mind as I write this report is that we have a bishop election on the agenda this year. Should I be asked to serve another term I will do so eagerly. Both church and society are pivoting into a new way of being. I know how to approach such times and I am ready to do so. It may be, however, that our Assembly will call another into leadership. Either way, the groundwork has been set for the next chapter of our synod's life. This report is intended as a trail guide to where we are and where we have been. May it serve us well as we journey from where we are to where we wish to be.

THE PIVOT:

The change that has come upon us over the last decade is now plain to see.

- American Christianity is a house divided. Some speak the language of protectionism, purity and partisan politics. Others of us proclaim an expansive welcome and hope.
- Statistically American Youth demonstrate that they want no part of this fight. Many, if not most, have unhooked from institutional religion. Yet, our work in Oregon shows people of all ages are eager to be in spiritual, theological dialog and actively seek communities of integrity.
- American Lutherans are increasingly at odds with our own government, significantly in our insistence that immigrants and refugees are children of God whom we are called to receive and care for. In Oregon we are blessed with growing Latino, Asian and Eastern European populations, rich in family values and traditional faith articulations. We ourselves are an immigrant church. We know this story.
- The rural Oregon economy has shifted significantly. Wood products production, farming and fishing require fewer workers at best. These industries are heavily impacted by changing climate and environmental issues, and what used to be local decision making and control in such businesses is now increasingly giving way to outside oversight.

Each of these issues has implications and impacts on congregational life and health. We in Oregon have been leaders in the ELCA in assessing, processing and engaging our ecumenical partners around such change. Over the past year and a half, we have sponsored regional gatherings and, in the past five months, "Phase II" conversations around congregational vitality and sustainability. We know some of us struggle. We are also learning new "best practices" from those who are blazing the way forward. Consider all you are currently doing.

- Our "Phase II" work is interesting and challenging. We are seeking connect more deeply around our shared learning and congregation-based ministry opportunities. Five of six gatherings have taken place with 1,038 participants joining the conversation. You have done this.

- The Synod now has a dynamic Latino Outreach strategy which has birthed Centro Montesinos in Woodburn and engaged congregations from Salem to Eugene in our Mid-Willamette Latino outreach. You have done this.
- Voting to become a “Sanctuary Synod” in 2016, 30 Oregon Synod ministries now stand with over 100 other faith communities forming a state-wide network of concern, education and action for immigrant justice. You have done this.
- Rural and small-town congregations have taken the lead in partnering with Episcopal and Methodist churches. We have ten ecumenical, formally yoked, congregations and others in conversation. Among these are two new ministries which have been conceived as joint Lutheran/Episcopal or Lutheran/Methodist communities from the start. We speak five languages on any given Sunday, and our Lutheran worship focus is increasingly enriched by mid-week ministry and action. You have done this.
- Oregon Synod leaders are creating a new vocabulary for the miracles we experience and the ministry we do. Many now speak of “holding sacred space” for the work of Christ. We are engaging around shared “vulnerabilities.” We name as “accompaniment” so much of what we endeavor to do, and we articulate a renewed reverence for the beauty of Creation around us. You have done this.

LOOKING DEEPER:

Allow me to name names and give specific examples. Nativity Lutheran in Bend has a unique “Wood Lot” ministry. Several years ago, they realized a need for firewood among neighbors who heat their homes exclusively with wood. Last year they supplied 338 cords of firewood to 921 family units. More wonderful yet is that they have created a program through which those who need wood work side by side with church members to help others. *This is the Gospel in action and the kind of partnership that makes a church flourish.*

Twelve congregations around the synod have been working together in a “New Beginnings” cohort putting small grants to work for grand schemes. They are now joyfully into a second year of mutual support, shared learning and companionship. These congregations are sold on working together. *Those who partner in significant ways know it makes a difference.*

And there is so much more. St. Mark’s in Portland is sharing their property with an affordable housing effort. Trinity in Gresham has partnered with a local nurse to help support local foster children. In January Peace Lutheran/St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Burns celebrated their connection to the city’s biomass heating system. All work is God’s work, but these examples show the power of partnerships which are essential to proclaiming the Gospel in this day and age. *What is your story?*

ALL TOGETHER:

You may not know that the synod currently has 15 (!) Domestic Ministry grants from the ELCA. These will bring \$313,000 ministry dollars into the Oregon Synod for 2019.

- Four of these grants support new church starts. (The Flame in Portland, Centro Montesinos in Woodburn, Story Dwelling in Bend and our Mid-Willamette Latino Outreach.)
- Three grants go for renewal programs in existing congregations. (Spirit of Grace in Beaverton, Bethel in Portland and Grace and Mercy in Hermiston.)
- Another four support ethnic specific ministries; (Living Water in Burns and Heavenly Peace, Good Spirit and our Cully ministries in Portland.)
- Three other grants fund experimental engagements, primarily with younger individuals. (These are Living Table, Wilderness Way and Together Lab.)

There is so much to tell here, but I'm not done.

A 15th grant has been awarded to our synod to help the ELCA *as a whole* learn about systemic vitality support. This is called a "Holy Innovations" grant, \$50,000 for 2019 and \$30,000 for 2020. We have been awarded this grant because of the imaginative work that you do. This grant brings together:

- Our dynamic ecumenical work in Latino Ministry Outreach;
- Together Lab; kick starter for five Youth Collectives around the state and that dynamic network of 140 sanctuary/AMMPARO/refugee concerned Oregon ministries mentioned above;
- The Synod's Transformational Leadership Initiative, training congregational teams in adaptive leadership models and supporting ecumenical organizing efforts in Pendleton, McMinnville, Portland and soon – we hope – in your neighborhood; and
- Spiritual Theological Mutual Accompaniment, bringing pastors, priests, lay persons, both Spanish and English speakers, Lutherans, Catholics and unchurched individuals from Oregon, Washington, PLTS, Mexico and Peru into common conversation. Can you believe that?

This is the work that we, as the Oregon Synod, are doing together. You are amazing.

MONEY:

The work we do in the midst of change, cannot be done without resources. This past year our 111 congregations shared \$951,090 in Mission Support. Thank you. This we supplemented with \$119,300 from our synod reserves to fund a basic budget of \$1,248,934. In addition to this, we invested \$195,000 of synod reserves to leverage over \$300,000 in grants from the ELCA for the work just mentioned. This \$300,000, plus the salaries for our two half time Directors of Evangelical Mission (DEMs) which churchwide gives us, means we received more money from our church again this year than we gave them. We are grateful.

Our reserves come from the sale of properties of closed congregations. Mission Support comes from you. These grants come from the ELCA as a whole. Together we are making courageous, faithful decisions for the sake of the Gospel.

LOOKING AHEAD:

At this time, in the midst of what I have come to call a “convergence of opportunity, need and change” your Synod Staff, Synod Council, Deans, Mission Table and others are in constant conversation and prayer. My staff and I have especially invested ourselves in action around next steps.

Last June Rev. Michael Keys, then DEM for Transformational Ministry, took a call to Resurrection Lutheran Church in Portland. He had finished a dynamic piece of work around congregational vitality and wanted to make room for the new. In April Rev. Glenn Chase, DEM for Mission Support and Ethnic Ministries, took a call to Trinity Lutheran Church in Gresham. Our current Latino Strategy is due in large part to him. Assistant to the Bishop Susan Kintner will finish her call with the Synod at the end of July, concluding 12 years of dedicated service. She has had a significant hand in shaping our current community of pastoral leaders. You have probably worked with her. Jan Wierima, my Executive Assistant, will enter what she calls “refirement” also at the end of July. Jan has brought business-oriented sensibilities and skills to the synod office. She has had a mind for process and kept our team organized around new work.

In a similar fashion, Deb Chenoweth is now finishing two terms, 8 years, as our synod Vice President. Her steady leadership, vision, work not only with the synod but the ELCA Church Council, and her active engagement with her own congregation and community, is beyond description. I cannot thank Deb and my staff colleagues enough. These are the leaders who have brought us to this pivotal moment in our synod’s life. Thank you one and all!

CALLING THE QUESTION:

Whether it is I who now moves ahead with you in leadership or another, we know the question has been called. The space we have been holding for the Spirit has bloomed. God is good. The Gospel is true. The future awaits our continued faithfulness.

When I say “the question has been called” this is what I mean:

- The Church of Jesus Christ can no longer be quiet in the midst of the partisan politics we currently experience. We are not called to “choose sides,” but we are called to choose Christ. The integrity of our witness demands that we press forward with those values and commitments we have always voiced. Not to act is to deny the hope that lives within us.
- The Church of Jesus Christ can no longer be disengaged in the midst of climate change. Our world has now missed that window of opportunity where the effects of climate damage could be averted. Oregon forests are already ablaze. The waters off our coast are already acidified and invaded by parasites that no longer allow us to crab or farm oysters as we once did. The Church must be a voice of honesty and alternatives. Not to act is to multiply suffering.

- The Church of Jesus Christ can no longer be exclusive in the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, gender fluid, religiously diverse and economically divergent world we know today. All people are children of God and ours is a proclamation of care, compassion, hope and respect. To dishonor any is to dishonor all.

The list could go on, but my point is simple. God has given the Oregon Synod this time of 'holding sacred space' so that we might watch, listen and learn. Listening and learning are forever integral to our call, but we now know enough about the new to step out with confidence. The integrity of our witness demands this. The needs of a new generation await our love and leadership.

Water also calls the question. Oregon farmers will tell you this. Forest managers and fire fighters will tell you this. And we who baptize in the name of Jesus - we know this. The death and resurrection of Jesus has called the question. We baptize into death and into life.

Some of us will celebrate the conclusion of our congregation's life over the next 5-10 years. Some will, and already are, releasing assets we hold in buildings, land and endowments for new ministry in different places. This may be for food banks, affordable housing, or new congregational starts. Courage is in the air.

Others of us will flourish where and as we are. Ministries we have not yet imagined will, and are, being born. People we have not known are accompanying us in Christ, people in Oregon, in Peru, in Mexico - and people we know in the Episcopal Dioceses of Oregon, and our Methodist neighbors. The days ahead are a gift to be engaged, not something to be feared.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. And then taste and see again. See what Jesus is doing right before our eyes!

With joy and anticipation,

Bp. Dave Brauer-Rieke
Oregon Synod - ELCA