

2025 Synod Assembly Bishop's Spoken Report

For some reason, the words that I would say to you at this Assembly have been hard to come by. The sermon that I recorded for congregations to use tomorrow (or whenever), and the slightly expanded version that I will preach this afternoon just alluded me until the last possible moment.

My written report that you can find beginning on page 19 of the Pre-Assembly Reports booklet, was turned in two weeks late, just two or three days before it was sent out.

I started this report four different times looking for a way in before I absolutely had to put something on paper yesterday afternoon.

The truth is, there is a lot that we need to talk about. There are a lot of rumors that need to be put to rest. There is a lot of data that should be shared. There are things to grieve and things to celebrate. There are plans that should be worked on. There are prayers to be said, songs to be sung, relationships to be reconciled. There is so much.

Even if we had an entire week,
I don't think we would be able to get through it all.

So let me start here: Thank you.

Thank you for giving your time and energy to be here today.

Thank you for whatever time you put into reading the pages and pages of information that came with being a voting member.

Thank you for your commitment to the people of your congregation and your neighboring congregations across Northeastern Iowa and the whole ELCA.

Thank you for the ways you are the body of Christ in the world. The wonderful and varied ways that you live out the connection you have to the True Vine, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the worship opportunities you provide, the proclamations of God's grace that you make, the Bible studies, Confirmation, and Sunday School classes that you offer.

Thank you for the visits you make, the quilts you sew, the kits you create, the meals you serve, the clothes you distribute, the letters you write in support of policies that provide needed care to most vulnerable among us.

Thank you.

These are the ways we tend to the connections that sustain us. These are the ways we abide and dwell in the presence of Christ.

These are methods of tending to spiritual and neighborly connections that we have done for a long time here in Northeastern Iowa. But now they seem a bit more laborious. It seems a bit harder to get excited about them. Resources are more difficult to come by.

The same is true for Synod ministry. The policies and programs that helped us form the ELCA in the late 80's and through the 90's are, in some cases, stumbling blocks to ministry now. Shifts in the ways people give money to non-profits threaten the ability of the Synod to support the staff in its current configuration and do the work we are called to do.

In March, the Synod Council participated in an exercise initiated by our Vice President, Linda Groe, in which they listed the work of the Synod staff under the three categories in our mission statement. Their work is listed in my report on pages 21-22 of the Pre-Assembly Reports booklet. So, if anyone ever asks, "What does the Synod do?" you can show them this two-page list and say, "Let's start with this."

We finished the 2024-25 fiscal year with close to \$30,000 less given to mission support than the previous year. We can't continue to bring in less money and do the same amount of work.

But I'm not up here to tell you to give more. I believe in all honesty that you are doing the best you can. I know that giving to congregations is flat, or down, in a lot of places. I also know that expenses are up. I will ask that you work with your council to do your best to give what you did last year so that we don't continue to trend downwards.

So what are we to do about these things?

I want to share two things that I am excited to try.

First, you may have read in the latest edition of the STAR that Pr. Liz Bell is leaving the Synod office. Let me be very clear that is not what I am excited about. However, her departure has given us the opportunity to reimagine that position with a greater emphasis on developing new gifts and revenue streams. We are currently in negotiations with someone who has over eight years of higher education and church fund raising experience. I believe we can reimagine the way we fund Synod level ministry. It will be a bold experiment, but one that I believe we need to attempt in order to serve the people and congregations of Northeastern Iowa.

Second, the Synod Council has approved the disbursement of up to \$70,000 per year in grants for new ministry projects in our Synod for ten years. Pr. Kristin Corr Rod is putting together a Mission Table to oversee the policies and grant distribution as she mentions in her report. We are looking for a

few entrepreneurial, innovative people to help congregations think creatively about new ministries. The grants will be seed money to get them started. I want the Synod to invest money in you and the ministries you do.

The work of the church is most effective at the local level, in our congregations. I believe the ministry of the Synod is to resource and support the ministries you do; to support the rostered leaders; to provide what assistance we can for congregations in transition between pastors; and to encourage you to step out in faith where you live.

The last thing I want to share is the work that has been done at the Synod office. Over the decades, as the building, equipment, and furnishings depreciated on our account sheets, the Synod Council put money aside every year.

In the past two years we have upgraded computer and phone technology to connect with people better.

The past six or seven months, the staff has worked through renovations that had us move out of our offices and back in twice. We worked through sawdust, carpet dust, paint fumes, ladders, cardboard covered floors, stacked boxes and furniture arranged in the middle of our offices. Soon, there will be new furniture in the Conference Room, Library, and reception area. Not only does this provide a better place to meet and work, it also makes the building more valuable if we should ever want to sell it and move to a different Synod office model.

And it has increased the energy efficiency of the building and will lower energy costs, following the resolution you passed in 2023.

Here is a short video of the upgrades you will find at the Synod office:

SHOW VIDEO

I want to thank Jan Glaspie, Gary Lindgren, and Alison Pettit for their incredible work on this project. I also want to thank the entire staff for their patience and dedication through it as well.

I am also grateful for the partnership we have with the Synod Council. The wisdom and faithfulness they bring to the table is a blessing to my ministry and to the whole Synod.

And again, I want to thank you and all the people of the Northeastern Iowa congregations for all the ways you dwell and abide in the connections we have through Christ our Lord.

Thank you.