

Bishop's Spoken Report

2023 NEIA Synod Assembly

My written report can be found on page 20-21 in the pre-assembly material that was sent out. That report touches on items lifted up last year and the work that we continue to do in regard to those items. In my report today I want to touch on some additional realities affecting the Synod.

A couple weeks ago someone came in and dropped off an armload of printed documents that they didn't feel comfortable recycling. One of the documents was the very first edition of the Northeastern Star, our synod newsletter, dated February 5, 1988.

Beyond the dot matrix computer print, mimeograph reproduction, and lack of a single picture or graphic, this, perhaps not so random coincidence, has had me thinking about the life of the ELCA and the Northeastern Iowa Synod.

When the ELCA first brought three predecessor church bodies together, it formed the largest Lutheran denomination in North America. It was intended to be a sign of unity to the outside world. Large, corporate structures were believed to be better stewards of resources and to have greater sway and influence in the world. This new church was supposed to be the foundation of a body committed to sharing the Gospel of Jesus, caring for people in the world, that would grow ever larger as it aged.

35 years later, we find ourselves still committed to sharing the Good News of Jesus and caring for people in the world. But what happened to the growth? How did we go from a church of over five million to a church of three million?

There are those who claim that the ELCA has been unfaithful in our call and ministry. The lack of growth is directly related, they say, to this unfaithfulness. They point to the congregations and members who left the ELCA after the Social Statement on Sexuality was approved in 2009. Today we are seeing some additional congregations talking about disaffiliation here in NEIA and in other synods for similar reasons.

To be sure, our numbers have decreased somewhat due to disaffiliation. What this theory doesn't take into account, however, is the number of congregations and members that would have left had we not approved that Social Statement and made space in our church for congregations to welcome and affirm those in the LGBTQIA+ community and approve them for leadership. Nor does it take into account the increasing number of people we see joining ELCA congregations because of the way we have made space in the ELCA for people who read and interpret the scriptures around this issue differently from one another.

I am committed to helping congregations discern the Holy Spirit's guidance when it comes to affiliation. At the same time, I am learning that affiliating with another denomination won't solve the conflict in

these congregations. The truth is, we have people in all of our congregations who have opposing viewpoints. Switching to a different denomination only changes which group is comfortable and which group is unhappy. But I digress.

There are other forces that need to be accounted for when we talk about growth and membership in our church and in all mainline denominations right now.

The average age of an ELCA worship attender is 72. That means that for every single 5-year-old in worship, there are eight people who are at least 80 years old. Very few of our congregations are going to escape the need to address the consequences of this top-heavy demographic distribution in the next 15 years.

When I am out visiting congregations, the laments I hear almost everywhere have to do with so few people in worship, especially children, youth, and young adults. Well, there are actually a number of reasons that church attendance has changed from days past:

- First, the masses of young people that used to fill the church have grown older. I used to be one of the young people in church, but I'm not anymore. The Baby Boom generation that forced congregations to build Sunday School additions to ease overcrowded church basements in the 50's and 60's is well into retirement today.
- We are also seeing a marked uptick in the number of funerals. I talked to one pastor who had to fill out a special form for the IRS because of the additional honoraria they received for so many funerals last year.
- Another factor is that most of the counties in NEIA are at their lowest population since their peak in the 1880's; since right after the Civil War when the largest farm was 160 acres and every family had 8 or more children. Neither of those are the norm these days. There are just fewer people in most of our communities.
- Then, beginning in 2007, there has been a 20% decline in the birth rate in Iowa, matching the decline across the United States. So not only are there fewer people to have children in most of our communities, but those of child-bearing age are having fewer children. This is something that our church colleges have been aware of for years. Yet we haven't thought about what that means for our congregations.

These demographic realities have a lot to do with the lower numbers of people in worship. They don't tell the whole story, but they certainly play a significant part.

It's also part of why we have communities that are looking at end of life options for their congregation. Like all of us, congregations have a limited life and when they have completed the ministry they were called to do, it might be difficult to say good-bye, but it can be a blessing too. We need to be able to see these as faithful finishes, not failures. At the Synod office we have a number of resources to help such congregations. The sooner we can start a conversation, the more options we can bring to be explored.

Committed to sharing the Gospel of Christ and caring for people in the world, we need to be able to see growth in more ways than worship attendance or engagement in our programs. We understand that

people can grow closer together in relationships. We also know that individuals can grow up, maturing not only physically, but maturing spiritually and in wisdom as well.

I believe that we are now being called collectively by God to grow closer together and to grow up, to mature in spirit and wisdom. Discovering and creating opportunities to partner in ministry where we used to compete with one another is essential for the days and years ahead.

For example: As we move to holding Synod Assemblies every two years, we need to create ways for ministry to move forward without having to wait for resolutions to come to the Assembly. I want to partner with people, conferences, and networks that can do ministry right now. Why can't Synod ministries get started like they do in congregations? With a conversation. With a determination of whether or not it falls in the identified priorities for ministry. With an exploration of resources that can be shared and put in place? If we need input beyond my office, we can bring the Synod council into the conversation. If people are unsatisfied by the response they have received in those two places, or if we need authorization from the whole Assembly, that is the time to bring a resolution. I will be working with the Synod Council this fall to create a process that we can share with all of our stakeholders in the Synod to set them free from spending their time writing resolutions and memorials and get on with the work of ministry.

The last thing I want to lift up in my report is the ongoing and growing partnership we have with the Southeastern Iowa and Western Iowa Synods. We continue to work together to support ministry for youth and young adults through our Outdoor Camping ministries and our College Campus ministries. Currently we have a task group, along with the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, to develop a lay training program for worship and ministry leadership. I am hopeful that we will have everything in place to begin the program sometime in 2024.

Six weeks from now, Bishop Current, Bishop Halaas, and I will join 20,000 or so of our closest friends for a bike ride across Iowa. Our goal is to raise \$50,000 for ELCA World Hunger and to lift up anti-hunger ministries of our church across the state, just like the one you heard this morning. We have committed to ride 50 miles each day, but I am training to do the whole ride – all 500 miles. I logged over 350 miles on my bike in the past month and am on target to have over 800 miles behind me before RAGBRAI begins.

This isn't about which Synod or which Bishop can raise the most money. This is about all three Iowa Synods working together to raise awareness and money to feed hungry people in the name of Jesus. If there is one thing Iowa Lutherans can unite around, it's feeding hungry people. Please use the donation card you received in your registration packet for a personal donation, to donate with a group of friends, or after a special offering in your congregation. And I hope you use this to highlight the anti-hunger programs in your congregation and community.

Special thanks to your amazing and dedicated synod staff whose heart and prayers and creativity are with you continuously. I am grateful for their partnership and for growing with me in this call.

Friends, we have this treasure, the gift of salvation through Jesus. Committed to share this good news, and caring for the people in this time and place, let us also be committed to one another; growing together in faith, hope, and love. Amen.