

Report of the Bishop



"SPIRIT LEAD ME WHERE MY TRUST IS WITHOUT BORDERS."

This is a sign that one of my daughters used to have in her bedroom, and I found it just the other day. It seems like an apt way to sum up the last year in the Office of the Bishop and how we are thinking about the future of our ministry together.

I need to start with the financial health of our synod: to be honest, it has been an ongoing challenge the past 3 years. Over these past years, we have been unraveling a long tradition of an overly complicated accounting system – some of which was not sufficiently explained or understood before our accountant of 30 years left the synod offices in October of 2020. We were forced this year to hire a forensic accountant to sort out the system and to pay our auditors more as we unraveled the threads. Please note, we have received a clean audit for fiscal years ending 2020, 2021, and 2022; there has been no malfeasance. Also, it is important to know that your Finance Committee and Treasurer have been working very hard to get everything to a steady state. Last year we had a deficit of nearly \$229,000 (unaudited) which was fueled in no small part by increased audit and accounting expenses. Of course, this sort of deficit cannot be sustained. We continue to work on contingency plans as well as look for revenue streams besides unrestricted mission support to fund the work we do together and on your behalf.

While our congregations continue to be generous, your generosity is not enough to make up for our costs. There is no doubt that the largest expense we have at the synod offices is no different than in your congregation: salaries and benefits. So, we look for great things from those people. And this year we have not been disappointed as your synod staff has worked hard to resource, accompany, and partner with you in the proclamation of the gospel in northeast Ohio.

We did see staff changes within our offices: we said goodbye to four staff members and hello to three new ones. We give thanks for the gifts that Pastor Smith, Pastor Jackson, and Deacon Schwabe lent to our offices. We look forward to the ministry that Pastor Stuftt will do among us. We are blessed with the added capacity for resourcing ministry in lay education and youth and young adult ministries that Deacon Frantz brings to our offices. Sue Tully at the front desk brings joy and laughter to that space and on the phone. Thank you for supporting the work of all these people.

This past year we continued with two previous initiatives: stewardship opportunities and the Dandelion Project. We were pleased to have 8 congregations in which your synod offices invested funds so that they might deepen the stewardship practices of their congregation. We also had 5 congregations participate in Dandelion, Too!, our second iteration of the Dandelion Project. We invested in these congregations as well, helping them to become persistent and prolific proclaimers of the gospel.

Pastor Phillips, Pastor Smith (before she retired), and I listened a lot this past year to congregations and their challenges. To that end, we were able to bring onboard Growing in Faith, our lay school program, for the purpose of empowering and equipping lay people in discipleship. We look forward to the coming year and the ways that this program may be deepened and broadened to equip lay leaders for the priesthood of all believers.

Report of the Bishop Cont'd



A second thing that came out of that listening was a new hypothesis for what God may be doing in the life of the church. We truly believe that God is up to something in Christ's church - that there is a reforming in the making. Our working hypothesis is that congregations are being called together in groups of 4-6 to be the Body of Christ together. These consortiums or collaboratives of congregations would have a shared mission and vision within their communities. They would be served by a staff of at least 2 pastors and potentially a deacon who would help shepherd the life of the consortium. Each congregation would maintain their own building, their own worship - and be led at least in part by a trained lay minister who could effectively and soundly lead worship when one of the pastors or the deacon could not be present.

We tested this hypothesis this spring with groups of people in each conference in events we are calling Project Isaiah 43. These events were very well attended with 45% of our congregations participating. As we collate all the conversation that was engendered at these events, we look towards Synod Assembly when we will go deeper into our findings by furthering conversation among the members of our synod.

The hope of your synod staff is that by the end of the summer we have a proposal for what we think the Holy Spirit is up to in our little corner of God's realm. We do absolutely believe that God is up to something not only in our synod, but in the world. Because that is the nature of our God: a God who is always creating, always renewing. And the nature of Lutheranism has always been a church that is re-forming for the sake of the Gospel.

I would be remiss if I did not thank, with all my heart, the Officers of the Synod and your synod staff. To Bob Emmerich, Treasurer and Kevin Kampfer, Vice President: Thank you for your tireless and thoughtful efforts on behalf of this church. I am so grateful for your gifts, your leadership, and your hours of hard work. To our staff: Thank you for the ways you care for the people of Christ's church and the gifts that you bring to your positions. We would not be where we are today without your gifts and strengths.

And so, Gracious God - may your Spirit lead us where our trust is without borders!

The Rev. Dr. Laura L. H. Barbins
Bishop
Northeastern Ohio Synod