

“We Are Called”
Bishop’s Report to the Synod Assembly
Based on 1 Samuel 3

June 7, 2019

By Bishop Wayne Miller

Report begins with a re-telling of the story of Samuel’s call.

I just couldn’t resist telling this one for my last assembly report. It is one of my favorites... although, for most of my life I have strongly identified with the character of Samuel. In these latter days I feel much closer to old Eli. The vision of where this church and this synod need to go next will very soon be in the hands of another.

Nonetheless, it seemed useful to take a few minutes here at the beginning of the assembly to offer a few thoughts on where we are, where we have been, and perhaps some clues about where we might want to go next.

Because like Samuel, we are called. We are each and every one of us called to be someone, to go somewhere, and to do something.

SLIDE #2

So, I begin this year with an appraisal of the state of our synod in the form of what is usually called a SWOT analysis, and start with a remembrance of our strengths:

Financial Assets

We have been entrusted in recent years with the stewardship of some significant gifts and bequests. A gift from our partners at Advocate Aurora Health in the amount of \$1.5 million, has been established now as the base for an endowment for the building of just and sustainable local economies

An additional \$4 million has come to us from a private bequest which has been set aside in endowment structures for Campus Ministries, and Leadership Development.

When combined with the \$5 million already in place as the principle balance of our Fund for Congregational Mission, we now have an endowment base of nearly \$11 million dollars in endowments, which will yield about \$450,000 per year in perpetuity for the support or initiation of creative mission.

Leadership

Over the last 12 years we have brought an astonishing array of young rostered leaders into the synod. Combined with the rich lay leadership resources working here we are positively positioned to become an unstoppable movement for connecting new people to the love of Jesus.

Diversity

We are one of only a handful of synods in the ELCA that actually has a mission field that is a rich and broadly diverse as the ELCA hopes to become someday. And that diversity is also our source of imagination and experience we need to move joyfully and faithfully into the future God is opening before us.

Passion

In spite of all the challenges we face as a church, I continue to find everywhere in this synod a deep commitment and enthusiasm for the mission that has been given to us.

SLIDE #3

The weaknesses that I see in our synod, as is so often the case are mirror images of our strengths:

Underutilized Assets

The congregations of the ELCA, collectively own \$21 BILLION in property assets... which does not include the property assets of our seminaries, social service agencies, synods etc. Those \$21 billion in assets provide gathering space on an average Sunday for about 1 million people.

But we must still maintain them and operate them and that means that the per capita cost for those assets is increasing at an alarming rate... which means that there are fewer and fewer resources available for mission expansion.

As a result, even though the synod is rich in endowment assets, our regular operating cash, and the mission dollars we have available for our mission partners continues to decline. This is a very significant and growing weakness that will need to be addressed in some way.

Age and Size

Although the leadership assets we have are formidable, our leadership pool is getting older and smaller, and this is growing problem in many congregations, where recruiting leaders is often a task of tracking down those who don't know enough to run away.

Lack of Diversity

As a synod, we are one of the most diverse populations in the ELCA. But what about experience of ordinary congregational life? From time to time I have people call me to tell me they will be visiting our synod and want to know where they can find an authentically multi-cultural worship experience. Shall I send them to you?

Weak Evangelical Impulse

I have spent pretty much my whole ministry career trying to figure out how to get my fellow ELCA Lutherans to enjoy and thrive on the enterprise of directly sharing their faith experience with other people and encouraging them to join a faith community.

I think it would be a little harsh to say I have completely failed at this. But the gains are modest. The truth is, we don't like to do it. We don't trust, and we don't want to be like those other "Evangelicals" that we don't like very much. We will work at welcoming those who make the first move to us but we don't like to initiate the conversation. I think this continues to be a serious weakness in our tradition.

SLIDE #4

Threats to our Church and our tradition come from both within and without. Most of these you are familiar with but I will point out a few:

Cultural Rejection

We simply don't know what to do with the fact that no matter what we do the culture in general is rejecting organized religion... if in fact we are organized... It is painful and demoralizing to be seen by more and more people as an expression of the problem rather than as an expression of the solution.

Ethical Complacency

We are living in a social and cultural environment that has normalized greed, dishonesty, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, islamophobia, antisemitism, gun violence to the point where we just shrug.

Of course, we have always had these things with us. But we used to call them SIN. Now they fall under the umbrella of being signs of a return to our former greatness.

This is a huge threat to us. There is room within faithful Christian community for a very wide range of differences in political opinion. But there is no room in a theology of the cross for calling good evil and evil good. There is no scenario in which the wisdom of the cross allows for perfect fear to cast out love. And there is no circumstance under which the power of the cross exploits the vulnerability of others for personal gain.

Remember who you are and whose you are.

Failure of Nerve

And by this I certainly do NOT mean cowardice. It is simply that whenever people are feeling stressed or threatened or anxious, the capacity to take risks evaporates. It is human nature. But in times like these, times of major adaptive challenge and rapid change, the capacity to take risks for the sake of the Gospel is our only way out of the box. This one takes a lot of patience, persistence and hard work.

Shrinking Imagination

The mission resources that are available to us now are significant. But I find that it is extremely difficult for us to imagine possibilities beyond what we have always seen and always done before. Imagination is a gift... but it is also a skill that can be learned and practiced, if we are willing to work at it.

SLIDE #5

Finally, there are enormous opportunities that are available to us in this time and place:

Huge Mission Field

There are many synods in the Church that are experiencing huge population declines. Their mission fields are fixed, static and shrinking. That is not us. We have virtually limitless possibilities for connecting new people to the love of Jesus.

Ecumenical and Interfaith

We cannot do what we are called to do alone. The rich tapestry of religious perspectives all around us every day is a boundless source of enrichment and partnership.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a term being used more and more commonly to describe the way various oppressed groups overlap with one another. But intersectionality can also be a concept that refers to all kinds of interconnected interests and resources. We have the opportunity here to develop new and better ways for the church to intersect with political leaders, business leaders, first responders, educators, health care providers... all manor of interests, gifts and disciplines that can expand and enrich our vision... IF we are willing to come out of our silo of self-interest and explore the intersections.

Vast Global Networks

Through our various partnerships within and beyond the ELCA we have the entire world at our fingertips... if only we can grow out of our isolation or suspicion or mistrust long enough to explore the networks in front of our eyes.

SLIDE #6

With this as a snapshot of what I see as our current situation, we need to explore the whole treasure of what is old as well as what is new...

Even though the new vision belongs to the new bishop we will call this weekend, it is worth thinking about whether any of the things we have been working on for the last 12 years are likely to continue in some form into the future.

SLIDE #7

And I begin this with a strong belief that congregations, however we define them... essential Christian community... is still the foundation upon which everything else is built.

A synod does many things, but I continue to believe that our primary and distinctive role is to inspire, equip, and extend the reach of congregational mission.

If this is true, then the resources of the synod, whether given or borrowed, will need to be shared exclusively with congregations for building up congregations.

SLIDE #8

This congregational focus also implies to my mind that new communities must be developed by congregations as an extension of their mission with the synod playing the role of mid-wife to congregational initiatives.

The Affiliated Mission Community model we have developed is one approach to this.

It may be useful, or it may not. But either way continued risk and imagination for starting new communities is going to be important for the foreseeable future.

SLIDE #9

This also brings to mind, by the way, something that I think is not working so well any more.

Traditionally we have relied upon program-attractor approaches in hopes that if we can design the most compelling magnet – the biggest Sunday School, the best youth program, the most excellent music and worship, the most engaging sermons – that our magnet will attract all of the seekers looking for the best church to join.

We then put our prospective members through some sort of assimilation program to transform them from outsiders to insiders by showing them the ropes and making them look and act more like us... so that they will be comfortable here in our culture.

I think we will continue to find that this approach has limited value in a world where more and more people are vehemently NOT interested in assimilating into our institutional life.

SLIDE #10

We have done a lot of work in recent years to simplify the by-law structure of our synod but eliminating complicated bureaucratic structures that were impossible to use. I think this is a good thing and that it will continue to serve our synod and our congregations well.

But as we do this, it is important to remember that good bureaucracy is still a good thing. It keeps the organization fair and equally accessible to everyone.

And our constitutional commitments to one another are essential. Your model constitution is not just an arbitrary bureaucratic encumbrance. It is your marriage vow to the other 9000 congregations of this Church. Our word is our bond and our constitutions are our word. And if I cannot even trust you to keep a simple promise like that, why should I believe a single word that ever comes out of your mouth?

It is only when our structures become rigid and complicated that they kill imagination.

SLIDE #11

I think that we need to see our antiracism work as something that is on our minds, in our hearts, and in our work FOREVER.

This gothic cathedral may seem like an odd photo to associate with antiracism. But the cathedral was a structure that took generations to build.

If a group of masons laid the foundation for a gothic cathedral and worked very hard all their lives and passed the work on to their children... maybe their great grandchildren would get to worship in what they began.

The systems of racial oppression and racial violence that pervade this culture are also structures that were built up and solidified over many generations... and it could take many generations to tear them down and build something else instead. You and I may never live to see that day. But if you do not work on the foundations of dismantling that structure NOW your great grandchildren will never have a chance to live in a better society or a better Church.

SLIDE #12

This synod and the ELCA in general have put a great deal of time and energy into building strong ecumenical and interfaith partnerships. It is one of the principle markers that distinguishes the ELCA from all other Lutheran groups in this country. And there is an important evangelical reason for doing so.

The world that is emerging does not care a hoot about our petty squabbles and doctrinal disputes. They care about how we live.

We may not be saved by our works, but we are certainly known by them.

And we should be able to enter into these relationships joyfully and confidently if we start by knowing who we are and then persistently bringing who we are into respectful relationship with those who are different.

SLIDE #13

So, now, I'd like to offer just a hint of trying to see in the glass dimly what may be opening up in the future... or maybe not.

And I start this by pointing out that we need to be careful about letting our faith answer the questions that people are actually asking. We are pretty good at answering questions that no one is asking. We want to answer the question of how it is that we get right with God.

But increasingly the question out there in our mission field is, "What does it mean to live life well?" And that means ALL of life, not just the part of it I spend in church.

To address that question, I have a hunch that we are going to need to do more work in the interaction between FAITH, WORK and ECONOMICS.

SLIDE #14

What might it look like to have the church live more toward a model in which, instead of seeing economic prosperity as our enemy, Christians live in a way that...

- FAITH is expressed through our many arenas of WORK in the world
- WORK finds fulfillment in working with others to make an ECONOMY
- The ECONOMY is accountable to the values of FAITH by calling it to reinvest its abundance in the wellbeing of the whole community, so that we may all find our true vocation... our sacred calling to love and serve to our neighbor

SLIDE #15

A model like this implies that though the church must always live in the rhythm of both gathering and scattering the faithful, the emphasis may change.

Vital congregations in the future may well be marked by a smaller institutional footprint as the gathered church... but far greater transformational impact as the scattered church.

And even though visions about my personal future are not widespread these days, I have a growing hunch that, in some way, it is going to involve the exploration of congregational models that do just this.

SLIDE #16

...A thought that leads me to conclude my final report to the assembly on a distinctly personal note...

If you have been coming to these assemblies for a while you may have heard me make reference to a time way back in my mid-20's when my life came completely off the rails. It was a very bad patch, and frankly, it felt like my life was going to be over before it began. But in that valley, largely through the community of my church, I felt the voice of God calling me up and saying, "Breathe. I am not done with you yet." I have sometimes said that, imperfect as it has been, my entire life since then has been my best shot at a thank you note to God for THAT moment.

But, oddly enough, last Ash Wednesday I had yet another experience when my life, quite literally, almost ended. And this time it was through the intervention of an expert medical team that God called me back one more time.

So, it seems like a new chapter in my ongoing thank you note is at hand. And, even though it is still too soon to know how I will write this chapter, it seems fitting to begin with some thank yous right here.

I want to say thanks today to the Synod Council of Metropolitan Chicago and its officers for their very diligent work in transforming the culture of that council to one of authentic visionary leadership.

I want to thank the synod staff: Sandie Schlauch, Mary Richardson, Tom Anderson, Jeff Drake, Sarah Stumme, Raymond Legania, and Cynthia Hileman, for their extraordinary friendship, partnership, tireless work and care for what you all do in our congregations.

I want to thank the fine pastors who have been and who will be making themselves available to you to be considered as your next bishop. I can tell you for sure, it is not an easy thing to make yourself vulnerable to this process.

I want to thank my churchwide colleagues, my fellow bishops, and all those who serve in the global network of agencies and institutions that continue to make this a very great Church.

But most of all, I want to thank you, the people of this synod, for allowing me to serve you and the Church as bishop for the last 12 years. Your hospitality, your critical engagement, your faithfulness, your passion, have blessed and honored me beyond measure.

You are truly a called people. God has great things in mind for you. I know it. Today is the day for you to start writing your life as a thank you note for that. And I look forward now, to seeing how you will be making the world's ears tingle with the love of Jesus.