

“Into the World”
Bishop’s Report to the Synod Assembly
Based on Acts 10:1-11:18

June 4, 2010

By Bishop Wayne Miller

Report begins with a re-telling of the story of the Conversion of Cornelius... (9:45 – 9:53)

In a world like our own, where most of us feel deeply inconvenienced by the idea of actually having to get up out of our chair to change the view through our electronic, high-def, blue-ray, 3-D, Plasma-screen windows to the world... for those of us who live in this world, it is hard to imagine how motivated Peter and his friends would have needed to be to leave their comfortable lodging in the house of Simon the Tanner to walk for two days and 40 miles in the blistering sun, up the Mediterranean coast through the long lowland Plain of Sharon from Joppa to the dangerously worldly city of Caesarea, all in order to respond as quickly as possible to... someone they had never met... asking them to do... something or other.

SLIDE #2

So it seems like a good place to start today to ask you to take a very short and effortless interior journey imagining that you and some friends from your church Bible Study sailing off to some far-away village on a “mission trip” of some kind. And upon arriving, one of the locals comes up to your group and asks those two simple but profound questions:

Who are you?
What are you here for?

So I invite you now to turn to someone near you for just a few minutes and to answer those questions as clearly and simply as possible. (9:57- 10:00)

Even though the specifics you shared just now will vary, being able to answer these questions in some meaningful way is of the greatest possible importance. Because I have come to believe that the greatest single challenge facing the ELCA in this time is that we are not at all sure who we are. And if we ever knew, we have largely forgotten what we are here for.

And since I consider it a primary task of leadership continually to remind the community of who we are and what we are here for, I have decided to take a stab at this today, but considering the example of this man called, “Peter...” This fisherman who had learned through his long list of failures, misunderstandings, errors, and even public denial to depend upon grace alone...

This Peter who had known what it felt like to respond in faith to a call to step out of the boat and walk on top of the sea and to keep on going even while he felt himself sinking up to his neck... This Peter who in spite of it all had been able to look at Jesus and confess him as the Christ and the son of the living God... (10:04)

SLIDE #3

I would suggest to you that in the image of this man called Peter, “who we are”, especially as Lutheran Christians, is a people who know to the marrow of our bones that all that we have and all that we are comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone!

It is not just an idea. It is an identity that requires us to know at the core of our being that:

SLIDE #4

Grace is:

The love of God accepting us as we are AND
The love of God calling us to be more than we have ever been before.

You need both parts and they have to be in that order because God’s acceptance is what motivates the change. A love that accepts without expecting is cheap grace and a love that expects us to change ourselves to become acceptable is a Christ-less moralism.

It is an identity that requires us to know that:

Faith is:

A relationship based on surrender of ego to the love and power of a God I cannot fully comprehend.

“Not my will but thine be done.” To live by faith is to walk the way of the cross.

And it is an identity that requires us to know that:

Christ is:

Both the path to God and the fullness of God – both the destination and the journey

We cannot know who we are unless we are able to confess with certainty that you cannot get to God by doing an end run around Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. It is this conviction that opens us to the answer to the second question: (10:10)

SLIDE #5

After working his way through a good deal of confusion about this, Peter finally came to realize that what he was there for was:

- To bear witness to the love and power of Jesus
- To call others into the embrace of the love and power of Jesus
- To dismantle the barriers that prevented others from being embraced by the love and power of Jesus

In Peter's case, of course, the barrier that needed dismantling was some combination of fear, habit, and racial exclusiveness... and that might not be a bad place to start looking at the barriers to Christ's love that need dismantling in our own time.

This confessional identity... this certainty about who we are does not change. Our evangelical mission – what we are here for – stands firm at the center. They are the same whether we are in the first century or the 21st, whether we are in Joppa or Caesarea, in Naperville or Robbins, in Edgebrook or Englewood. Everything else that we may think we are or that others say that we are... everything that we do or say is measured with respect to this identity and this mission.

We engage with this mission first by: (10:14)

SLIDE #6

Building authentic life-giving, life-saving, life-changing Christian community. This is the "ministry" part of our work that I have spoken of in other places. And it is worth noting here that Christianity only exists in community. Biblically speaking, there is no such thing as an individual Christian. Jesus promised to be present when 2 or more are gathered in his name, the Holy Spirit calls and gathers before she enlightens, sanctifies and preserves, and even Peter did not leave his comfortable penthouse in Joppa without taking along an entourage of the faithful.

By extension, there is no such thing as an individual Christian congregation. The only time that Christianity has ever existed as a single community was in the time before the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

But from that moment on, the Church, in fact, became a Network of Communities serving as resources in relationship with each other.

SLIDE #7

So as we build this network, we weave together a great seamless garment... lowered like a sheet, stretching toward the far corners of the earth...

SLIDE #8

Blanketing the world with Christian disciples, joyfully bearing witness to the love and power of Jesus.

No holes in the blanket... no rips or tears in the sheet being lowered from heaven before our eyes. As Peter discovered to his amazement, all God's creatures have a place at this table.

SLIDE #9

Leaving us with a mission that is global in its scope, relational in its partnerships, and at the same time distinctly local in its connection to the mission field.

(10:20)

Which brings us to a critical point. For the last 20 years in urban metropolitan synods the conversation has been dominated by the problem of too many congregations in a small geographic area working the same mission field.

That conversation is over. In the next 10 years we are going to see more very small congregations forced to consider ending their work as they have known it... not because they are doing anything wrong, but because the traditional small congregation is becoming an unsustainable business model in the changing conditions of the mission field. This is not a vision, a plan, or a strategy. It is a fact. And if we do not find creative, imaginative ways to evangelize or re-evangelize our mission field, the sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners over the territory of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, is going to look like a thin slice of Swiss cheese instead of a blanket.

I don't know yet, the solution to this challenge. We are going to have to work it out experimentally together. But I am convinced that congregational missions that thrive are going to need to look and work like this:

SLIDE #10

In this picture, I want you to visualize the center line as the wall of your church building separating the gathered community within from the world scattered without and the distinct evangelical problem of how to get that wall out of the way.

A door needs to open, which often, though not always, happens through some experience of CONVERSION. Now I realize, of course, that for most Lutherans the very mention of the word, “conversion” makes our walls come up rather than coming down.

Nonetheless, conversion happens, and it is not so scary when you realize that conversion is simply something... a word, a gesture, an insight... or perhaps something like Cornelius’ dream that opens the human heart to a possibility that it was not open to before and that now invites that heart into relationship with the community and into a process of FORMATION

In formation our minds are opened and then shaped through learning, worship, community life and the basic disciplines of stewardship. Formation makes converts into disciples.

But disciples who stay asleep on the roof of the house are not much use in fulfilling what we are here for until they have been called into ACTION, which opens the hands and the lips to reach out again through the wall in the work of justice and service as the community scattered back out in the world.

Because it is through the work of our hands – God’s Work. Our hands – it is through the work of our hands and the sharing of life and story that the world outside the wall experiences a TRANSFORMATION. Cornelius and his household are changed by Peter’s action.

But we dare not forget that Cornelius is not the only one transformed. Peter and his cohorts are every bit as transformed by this interaction as Cornelius and the Italian Cohort are.

Which means that at the very same moment that Cornelius is converted, Peter cycles back inside with the power of REFORMATION to change the inside through its engagement with the outside, and to prepare it for its next launch ever further out... until the whole world is blanketed with Christian disciples joyfully bearing witness to the love and power of Jesus! (10:28)

SLIDE #11

Oh, I can make it all sound so easy!! But because we are a network, of course, none of us needs to do this or can do it alone. A global vision calls us to imagine relationships with partners and resources beyond our own.

So I would like to ask you to take a few minutes with your conversation partner now, to recall some of the resources that are available to you in this network for each of the 5 elements in my little evangelical whirlwind. (10:34)

My guess, or perhaps, my hope is that you were able to readily identify resources for helping your congregation with discipleship formation... mechanisms for acting in the world for justice, peace, and mercy... community partnerships that transform communities and lives.

SLIDE #12

But the bottom line is that there are no short cuts. As a synod staff and a churchwide organization, we can put tools in your hand through things like our Turnaround Synod Initiative, the Koinonia Leadership Training, our new witnessing community vision team, our various ethnic strategy teams, an anti-racism team working tirelessly to dismantle the social structures of privilege and race that stand as a great concrete wall between us, a new comprehensive approach to stewardship development, better communication resources...

We can put learning and teaching tools in your hands from the Book of Faith Initiative and connect you with community organizing skills. All of this synodical, national and global structures of the Church can do...

But the gestures that open hearts and the openness to have your own heart transformed and reformed in the process... these, I’m afraid are things that belong to each of you in a very unique and distinctive way. (10:41)

Which, by the way, brings me to one last critical question to add to the first two... Once we know who we are and what we are here for, we still need to know how we are doing at it.

SLIDE #13

And for this we need stories... stories of growth and transformation... stories that open hearts again in a new way... the stories of our very own book of Acts to inspire each other and to call us out of our sealed rooms, on fire with the Spirit. Because, we are the stewards of a church that grew into being by following voices and dreams to strange unknown lands. And we are not quite done yet...

SLIDE #14

There is still too much empty space on the sheet.

Assembly sings, “We’ve Come This Far By Faith”