

“A New Heaven and A New Earth”

Bishop’s Report to the Synod Assembly

Based on Acts 9

June 9, 2018

By Bishop Wayne Miller

Report begins with a re-telling of the story of Paul’s Conversion

I have decided to start today with the story of Paul’s conversion as a counterpoint to our usual way of thinking about the coming of the new heaven and the new earth. In the vision from the Revelation of St. John that provides our theme, the new heaven and earth appear to descend from above. But for Paul, the old era and the new era coexisted. While we wait for Jesus to return in fullness...

SLIDE #2

The signs of the new age, the new era, the reign of God, are already among us—hidden in plain sight. It waits only for the scales to fall from our eyes to see what is there.

I certainly will not claim any special revelation concerning the vision that is emerging. But I do see some signs of the what is changing and emerging among us and all around us.

SLIDE #3

So we begin by looking at who we are now. And I want to do that by describing what I would call Congregational Personality Types. Like all typologies this is over-simplified and your congregation may have characteristics of several of them. But it will give you a reference point for how to work into the New Era.

The first congregational personality style is that of a Regional Mission Center. These tend to be larger congregations with a full portfolio of programs, missions and ministries. They gather people from both near and far because people are often willing to travel and to pass by several ELCA congregations between home and church because of the distinctive things this congregation offers. The mission to love and serve the neighbor includes responses to local needs and participation in remote and even global work, but there is a definite commitment to stay connected to the immediate mission field around the congregation and to build relationships in that context.

Commuter Congregations are similar in that they gather people from far away. But they have lost their connection to the immediate mission field. Members will travel long distances because of history, familiarity, loyalty, and attachment. But they do not know the neighborhood any more, even if they grew up there.

As a result, their ministry focuses mostly on meeting the needs of those who gather. They may continue to do meaningful charitable work in the neighborhood, but that work tends to be more on a transactional or exchange model than a relational model.

SLIDE #4

The third congregational personality style is that of a Community Church. These are often congregations with 100-200 people in worship. The people who come to church live and may even work in the neighborhood. So, the congregation focuses on activities that benefit the shared community.

These congregations also participate in global mission work, but largely through their faithful financial support to denominational structures.

Community Churches are in many ways the ideal of the ELCA... medium sized congregations that live in with and under the mission field they serve, but with a deep sense of connection to other congregations in other communities. Our constitutions are written with this type of congregation in mind, and this is the ideal that most of us have in mind when we experience church as a single community with life-long and multi-generational relationships.

SLIDE #5

Although Community Churches will often describe themselves as a “family,” Family-Style Congregations are a different thing altogether. Family Congregations are usually quite small and leadership and volunteerism are dominated by the members of one or two families or clans with a deep history in the congregation. They gather those they have always gathered before, and the ministry is mostly designed to meet the expectations of the dominant families. They usually have limited resources for mission beyond the immediate needs of the congregation itself, and figuring out how to save their building and obtain adequate pastoral leadership tends to dominate their concern.

The final personality type is that of a New Mission Community. Newly starting communities take on many forms. If they see themselves as serving a specific niche demographic, they gather those from that demographic.

If they see themselves becoming a Regional Mission Center they will start to behave as one from the beginning by focusing on broadening their membership to include many types of people and engaging in mission or ministry activities that will be interesting for people from far and near. To do this, they will need a closely connected relationship with an established congregation that can help them launch new creative ministries.

SLIDE #6

The bad news in this typology is that Commuter Congregations and Family-Style Congregations have short futures. And in this synod we have many of each!

Commuter Congregations have a shaky future because the loyalty required to travel long distances to go to the church you used to go to when you were a kid will not transfer easily to the next generation... and because the neighborhood has no particular interest in the congregation one way or the other. These are castle-and-moat churches with the neighborhood swimming in the water around the church and the church members driving in over a draw bridge.

Family Congregations have a shaky future because they are difficult to join and difficult to participate in. The only way I can join your congregation is to join your family. And why would I want to join your dysfunctional family when I have one of my own at home that I can belong to for free?

Healthy mission-driven New Communities, Community Churches, and Regional Mission Centers can all continue to grow, reach out to new people and expand the impact of their work.

SLIDE #7

For the synod, this implies 3 primary mission priorities:

- To do what we can to help Commuter Congregations and Family Congregations transform into Community Churches
- To help Community Churches grow toward becoming Regional Mission Centers
- To help Regional Mission Centers or Growing Community Churches generate New Mission Communities.

If you are a Family Church that likes being a Family Church or if you are a Commuter Congregation that is satisfied with staying a Commuter Congregation, I am going to do everything in my power to love you and care for you all the same, but the future of our mission resides somewhere else, and we must invest in the future.

SLIDE #8

I think you will see that this strategy has already been in place for us for some time and continues to be developed and refined as we go.

The Turnaround Synod Initiative focuses on helping congregations become stronger Community Churches or Regional Mission Centers. We have largely done this through partnership grants for professional coaching, mission planning, stewardship development, leadership development, and healing or conflict-resolution. But we are growing in our ability to resource one another on some of these questions in addition to hiring outside resources. For example:

- If you are a Commuter Congregation trying to figure out how to reconnect with your neighborhood, maybe part of the problem is that the neighborhood is more racially or culturally diverse than it used to be. Maybe you need to use our synod Antiracism Team to help you with systemic racism or cultural competency issues so that you can break through the barriers.
- If you are trying to connect in new ways with the young adult population to start new ministries or grow existing ones, we have a group of extraordinary leaders in our 3 campus ministries that would LOVE to come share their experience in connecting with emerging adult populations.
- If you are thinking about starting New Mission Communities, we now have a very active Church Planters Network in our synod to help you think through what is involved in this kind of growth strategy.

...A point that leads me to our Affiliated Mission Community initiative, specifically designed to help Community Churches and Regional Mission Centers start New Mission Communities...

And, as some of you may recall from my last report to the assembly, we are also growing in our ability to capitalize all of these creative initiatives with an expanding Mission Endowment Structure, specifically designed to convert the assets of closed congregations or major bequests into mission capital to support our strategic priorities.

SLIDE #9

Now, let me take a few minutes more to point your attention toward some of the marks of congregations that I think are preparing to move into the New Era... the new heaven and earth, as it were.

The first marker I would live up is a capacity for RISK! There are no Bible stories I can find that measure “faithfulness” by the ability to avoid risk. We need to embrace risk as a necessary dimension of faithful living. And it is hard. Because many people come to church specifically seeking refuge from a world that feels too risky as it is!

Risk comes to us in two ways. There is the risk of adventure; of trying something you have never tried before or reaching further than you ever expected to reach...

And there is the risk of letting go of something precious that you cannot keep but that you cannot bear to part with.

SLIDE #10

The capacity for healthy calculated risk taking must be cultivated gradually in congregations. It does not happen by itself. It involves designing risks and taking them, then learning from both your successes and failures as quickly as possible so that you can adapt and prepare to take another risk.

You need to work on generating a spirit of playfulness and celebrating rather than judging missteps and failures

SLIDE #11

I also think that New Era congregations will need to develop comfort with “impermanence.” Once again, this is hard for us. Lutherans build for eternity with bricks and stones and great wooden timbers.

But we live and work in a world with less and less permanence. Neighborhoods change faster than we can plant a church in them. Kids grow up and move far away.

And the culture loves innovation as a process more than it loves the product of our innovation. Innovation is the end, not the means. We create, then we let go then we create again.

What will it mean for us to create ephemeral expressions of the church rather than permanent establishments? What if when we start a New Mission Community we start it with a 5-year life expectancy and celebrate what it does in 5 years, instead of starting with an expectation of eternal establishment and lamenting our failure if it closes someday?

SLIDE #12

Another shift we will need to adjust to as we transition from the Old Era to the New Era is the method we use for mission expansion.

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.

SLIDE #13

But the days when we can expect this approach to adequately lead us into the future are numbered.

- The newcomer must take the initiative and incur the emotional risk
- Program attraction is weakening in a culture not looking for church and feeling over-programmed already
- It requires cultural homogeneity and devalues cultural diversity in a society that is particalizing into like-minded micro-communities.

There are, of course, many places in our synod where ministry programs are a key component of congregational life. But program-attractors still work best when the programs are intentionally designed to form new relational communities among the people participating in the program.

SLIDE #14

I believe that the congregations that will thrive best in the New Era will be congregations that are not just incrementally growing a single community or culture... they will instead be “bubble churches” – congregations that are continually generating new communities and cultures within themselves and beyond themselves. Some of them bubbles that last a long time – others that pop after a few years of great mission work.

SLIDE #15

One more shift from the Old Era to the New Era involves the balance between the gathering and scattering functions of the church.

Most of our congregations are feeling some measure of anxiety about institutional contraction. Attendance is lower, offering plates are smaller, people are drifting away or dying faster than we can bring new people in.

So more and more of our energy on how to gather a bigger congregation. But whose issue is that?

SLIDE #16

We know from very reliable research that most people in our society are not really asking the question of how to build bigger churches. They are not even asking the question of what they must do to “get right with God”

They are asking what it means to LIVE LIFE WELL. That means ALL of their life; not just the teeny little part of their life they spend in church.

This suggests that churches of the New Era are going to need to spend more time thinking about how we are helping people scatter back into the world in the many and various arenas of their life when they are NOT gathered at church.

SLIDE #17

This shift in balance from gathering to scattering has significant implications for this thing we are now calling “Public Church,” in the ELCA. Some of you know that I have some difficulty with the term. Because from my point of view the Church is, by its very nature a public organization. What part of church is NOT public? There is no such thing as a private church.

Nonetheless, when I hear people using this term, it sounds to me like a strategy for how to take the church that gathers inside the building and regather it on the front lawn... to create an organization with enough gathered people and enough gathered money to impose our value system on the rest of society.

It is a fine thing to try. But its limitation is that it is still essentially a gathering strategy... We are still trying to bake the biggest loaf of bread... it is still an expression of institutional Christendom, and it is a gathering strategy that requires an enormous amount of institutional power at a time when the ELCA is losing institutional size at a rate of one synod per year.

So maybe, instead of baking the biggest loaf, we should be putting some energy in how to scatter the most yeast into every single corner of society...

SLIDE #18

And this, I think would require a renewed emphasis on the good old Lutheran notion of Christian Vocation... which emerges from the intersection of a faith that informs our work, that informs our participation in a larger economy, and that calls us to employ all that we are and all that we have to love and serve our neighbor.

SLIDE #19

There is one more essential dimension to all of this that is probably self-evident, but that should not be taken for granted.

Congregations living into the New Era, will still need leaders on every level: Pastors, Deacons, Congregational Volunteer Leaders, and... a new Bishop from time to time... Leaders who are equipped with the vision and skill, dedication and faithfulness to grab hold of the New Heaven and the New Earth that are hidden in plain sight...

SLIDE #20

So I want to take a few minutes, as I close, to express a special word of thanks for the layers and layers of leadership that are working now to bring us a bit closer to what God is opening before us.

I want to take a moment to thank our colleagues working in the ELCA Churchwide Office. We don't often take the opportunity to do this. But here, in Metropolitan Chicago especially, we enjoy the extraordinary blessing of having so many gifted Churchwide staff members working along with us in an official capacity, and also as members of our congregations. If there are any churchwide staff members with us today will you stand so that we can thank you?

And then, I also want to call attention to and give thanks for the members of our Synod Council. This group of people is often invisible to the rest of the synod. But I can tell you that their thoughtfulness and dedication is something that I have come to depend upon profoundly in my own leadership and decision-making. Will the members of our council stand for a moment?

And then, there is our synod staff. Many of you have had the benefit of working with members of this staff in various capacities. But this year, in a special way, the staff has had a rough spell in these last months, adjusting to the loss of our friend and colleague, Steve Homberg. But their resilience and flexibility, their willingness to stretch and to step up to make sure that things continue to run in an orderly way, is an inspiration. Will the staff members in the room stand for a minute? And among them, a special shout out to Laura Wilhelm who has come in from her retirement to help us with financial administration challenges in this time.

And finally, there are all of you, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders who so faithfully engage with the many challenges and opportunities of this season we are in.

Being with you this weekend is a reminder that the Gospel and the Church are in very good hands. And I am confident that as we enter this year of prayer and discernment concerning the call of a new bishop, we will emerge stronger, more energized, and a little more ready for the New Heaven and Earth before us.