

Faithful and fruitful—abundance renewed

By Wayne N. Miller, bishop

The following is a brief summary of my report given at this year's synod assembly on Saturday, June 4. A complete video of the report, along with the text and PowerPoint slides used, are available on the synod's website at www.mcselca.org/assembly.

I began with a retelling of the story of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 and then noted: "It had been a long day. First the devastating news that John had met his untimely end at the hands of a vain and corrupt Herod. Then the long day teaching and healing and coping with the bottomless needs of a crowd that wanted everything but that understood nothing. It would not be unreasonable to assume that in this moment, worked half to death and unable to find even a moment of solitude to be restored in prayer—it would not be unreasonable to assume that even Jesus was running on empty.

"It is a well-known feeling in the church of today also, particularly among the leaders, pastors and congregational council members who are trying to work miracles with resources that are few or none. And even if you are still among the fortunate who are drawing the large crowds, the hunger, the need, the expectation, the emptiness that they bring to the table always seems to outpace the capacity to provide.

"But it is worthy to note that Jesus began his famous miracle by changing the perspective of his disciples. He forced them to look at the situation differently by pointing them away from the obvious scarcity toward their unnoticed abundance."

After asking the questions "Where are the signs of abundance?" and "Where are the fears of scarcity?" in our congregations, I asked the assembly: "Can we imagine the territory of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod *blanketed* with Christian disciples joyfully bearing witness to the love and power of Jesus Christ?" Can we imagine this by seeing a creation reconciled to God through Jesus Christ by the way of the cross and realized through the continual generation of local Christian communities that are both *faithful and fruitful*?

Exploring signs of faithfulness, I was reminded that our identity is centered in the shared self-understanding that all we are and all we have comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And we are here, centered in this shared mission to bear witness to the love and power of Jesus, to invite others into the love and power of Jesus,



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and to dismantle barriers that exclude others from the love and power of Jesus.

How, then, are we to live? Centered in the discipline of living with "open hands," growing in confidence that God's grace comes simply by opening our hands to receive it, and growing in the freedom to share God's grace by opening our hands to release it.

I see signs of faithfulness followed by signs of fruitfulness: growth, generosity, courage, collaboration, inclusivity, justice, adaptability and reproduction.

What are signs of faithfulness for you and your congregation? What do you see as signs of fruitfulness?

It is my hope that—together—we can continue to explore these questions as we live out the lives of discipleship to which God calls us all. □

Metropolitan Chicago



Miho Yasukawa (center), a member of St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Naperville, and a master of divinity student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, makes a comment in class as Dan Kerr and Emily Tveite listen.

Synod supports students at LSTC

Metropolitan Chicago Synod congregations are some of the most important partners for the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) and its students. Congregations encourage the next generation of leaders to listen for God’s voice calling them into ministry. They assist in forming students for ministry by welcoming them as Ministry in Context students and interns. They call graduates as pastors and other leaders. And they provide spiritual and financial support for students from the synod.

Last year a dozen synod congregations with students attending LSTC provided them with direct financial assistance.

Five congregations went a step further and affirmed their commitment to students by signing a Covenant of Support. This covenant invites congregations to choose ways to support a seminarian: “pray regularly for our student,” “encourage our student with regular communication from the congregation,” “hold an annual ‘Seminarian Sunday,’” take a special offering

to benefit our student,” and “budget annual support” in a specific amount.

“It is immensely affirming to know that the people who know me well believe in me and God’s work in me as an ordained pastor. That affirmation has been both financial and emotional, and through it God has been generously and graciously revealed,” said Jeanine Reardon, a seminarian and member of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Evanston.

“I don’t think any of them can know how their faithfulness in God’s work has met my uncertainty and sustained me. I know some have thought their financial support to be inadequate, perhaps too small, even an afterthought. I never found it to be too small and am grateful for every word and dollar. I’m reminded that God’s gracious love makes a way, and that our faithfulness to that way and to each other lightens even the heaviest load with God’s help.”

Dorothy Dominiak, director of financial aid and admissions, said, “Every dollar of financial support students receive reduces the need

for students to take out loans to get through seminary.”

LSTC has discovered that those who experience the greatest need are the “first generation” seminarians who are the first in their family to go to seminary.

Mark Van Scharrel, LSTC vice president for advancement, said, “The cost of seminary shouldn’t hold anyone back from answering God’s call. A commitment from their home congregation and other congregations can make a tremendous difference to LSTC students. This is an opportunity for any congregation that cares about visionary leadership for the church to become involved, whether or not they have a student at LSTC.”

To learn more about the Covenant of Support and how your congregation can assist a student, call the LSTC Office for Advancement at **773-256-0712** or visit www.lstc.edu/alumni-friends/giving/ways.php. □

Understanding our Muslim neighbors

Today, the news is filled with stories of conflict between Christianity and Islam. Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Arlington Heights, offered a seven-week series, "Understanding our Muslim Neighbors," as one of its 12 winter 2011 adult education classes.

Members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Mount Prospect, accepted the Rev. Dan Hoeger's invitation to Northwest Conference churches to participate and have their own discussion following each presentation.

In planning the series, Chuck Hug, member of the Adult Education Ministry Team, talked with friends at the Islamic Society of the Northwest Suburbs in Rolling Meadows about the idea. Mohammad Salam, former president of the mosque, told Hug that he welcomed this opportunity to dispel misconceptions about Islam

and was very appreciative of these efforts.

Hug also coordinated the program with Hoeger and Sara Trumm of the Center for Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC).

More than 100 people, including participants from other churches and the Rolling Meadows mosque, learned about "The Quran and the Bible, Jesus and Muhammad" with Ghulam-Haider Aasi, visiting professor of Islamic studies at LSTC.

The course also included Mark Swanson and Michael Shelley from the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at LSTC, as well as Michael Trice, ELCA director for ecumenical formation & interreligious relations.

The Islamic Society of the North-

west Suburbs invited the group to hold one of the classes at its mosque. There the group learned about and observed one of the five daily prayers. Members of the mosque also treated the class to dinner as they warmly welcomed the group.

Carol LaHurd, interfaith lecturer at LSTC, and Ayse Arslan, interfaith student at the seminary, presented "Women in Islam: Public and Private Realities" during another session of the series.

Members of Our Saviour's and other participants gave the series high marks and ended with a better understanding of Islam and its relationship to Christianity.

Hoeger explained that the congregation started planning this series with the objective to "love our neighbors as Christ has loved us," but also knew that it's hard to love someone you don't understand. Members concentrated on learning about their Muslim neighbors and now want to keep the door open so they can act like neighbors to each other.

For more information about the Center for Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at LSTC, visit <http://centers.lstc.edu/ccme/> or call 773-256-0708. □



Chuck Hug (left), Mohammad Salam and the Rev. Dan Hoeger discuss parts of the Bible and Quran that are similar.

The Turnaround Synod Initiative supports congregational renewal and revitalization through synod-wide workshops, special support for "Focus Congregations," and an e-newsletter for sharing renewal stories and resources. Read more about TSI at www.mselca.org/what/mission/tsi/about. To add your email address to the newsletter mailing list, send your request to Jeff Drake at jdrake@mselca.org.



The Rev. Fred Nelson, who serves Redeemer Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, stands outside of Stateville Prison, Joliet, where he volunteers.

Nelson named volunteer of the year

Fred Nelson, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, was named Volunteer of the Year for Stateville Prison in Joliet.

Nelson has volunteered at Stateville since 2005. He began by assisting with Bible studies and leading the Alpha Course.

About three years ago, he began taking members of Redeemer along to pray with and distribute Free on the Inside Bibles to newly sentenced prisoners in the Northern Reception Center. Called the “Under the Door Prison Ministry” because the Bibles have to be slid under heavy steel doors, the effort has put more than

6,000 Bibles into prisoners’ hands.

The project has also led Nelson to begin work on a book to go with the Bibles. He has been writing the *Spiritual Survival Guide to Prison (and Beyond)* with input from prisoners and former prisoners, family members and chaplains, and with support from a Metropolitan Chicago Synod Fund for Mission grant.

The survival guide should be available by the end of the year.

If you’re interested in finding out more about becoming part of this ministry, please contact Nelson at fjn113@comcast.net or call the church at 847-823-3634. □

Concert features Mary Beth Carlson

On Oct. 5, at 7 p.m., pianist Mary Beth Carlson will present the first of several statewide “Concerts of Caring” at Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Barrington. The concert will benefit the programs of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI).

Carlson, a composer, performer and recording artist, performs nationally as a pianist and speaker for a wide variety of special events. She was the lead pianist at Nordstrom Mall of America for nearly 15 years.

Much of her original music has been composed in honor of her daughter Jody, who was born with cerebral palsy and autism. She has written and performed music specifically for the International Special Olympics, Arc, Children’s Cancer Research Fund and the Alzheimer’s Association.

Carlson’s concerts feature a wide selection of music to please listeners of all ages. She includes storytelling, occasional accompaniment from world-class musicians and vocalists, and spectacular video presentations that enhance her live piano performance. Her concerts are a heartwarming experience filled with warmth and intimacy and spiced with high-spirited humor and spontaneous musical vignettes. For information on Carlson, visit www.marybethcarlson.com.

Previous LSSI “Concerts of Caring” have featured the voices of Jeralyn Steele, a frequent guest on *A Prairie Home Companion*, and Elisabeth von Trapp, granddaughter of the legendary Maria and Baron von Trapp. For more information, contact Terri Gens at 847-635-4667 or at Terri.Gens@LSSI.org. □