

# Bishop's Assembly Report

2018

The Rev. Richard H. Graham

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Dear friends, it is an honor to stand here this morning and give you the eleventh annual report of my service as your bishop. The year past was an exciting one, exciting in some ways that were really enjoyable and exciting in other ways that were just terrifying. The year ahead promises to be very interesting. Whatever has happened, whatever lies ahead, we know that at all times and in every place we are surrounded by the grace of God and that it is for the sake of sharing this grace that we live.

2017 was the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. You may have heard that someplace along the way. 2017 featured many, many opportunities for us to reflect on the heritage that we carry with us as Lutheran Christians. 2017 provided us the chance to remember where we came from so that we can go forward boldly, with hope and anticipation. For me and many of us, the highpoint of the Reformation celebration was the service on Reformation Sunday in the National Cathedral. I don't think I have ever been more nervous about anything in my life. My wedding day made me very nervous, but this Reformation service may have been worse. There were so many details. And so many of the details kept slipping out from under local control. Our celebration became a big deal for the whole Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presiding Bishop came to preach. Inviting the Presiding Bishop is always easy to do, months ahead. But then as her showing up gets closer and closer, you begin to think, "Oh boy, I better not mess this up."

But as you remember, the service was beautiful, the Cathedral was packed to standing room only, and the music was breathtaking. I realized as the service proceeded that my only contribution to the whole thing had been calling together a gifted group of planners and musicians and then getting out of their way. I was personally so overcome by the experience that I teared up and muffed the words of institution in the communion liturgy. I hope that not every single one of the twenty-two hundred people in attendance noticed that. It was a moving and powerful celebration, one of many

last year. Our synod also hosted, at Reformation Church on Capitol Hill, the ELCA's national webcast on October 31<sup>st</sup>, Reformation Day itself.

In 2017, life also went on as usual in our synod. We worked hard in the synod office to help congregations make plans, find leaders, deal with their problems and embrace their opportunities. We continue to confront the reality that the cultural Christianity we took for granted for so long in this country has passed way, at least in most corners of a big metropolitan area like ours. People don't show up in our churches any more just because they can't think of anything else to do on Sunday morning. In fact, they haven't been showing up like that for years, but in some dangerous ways, we didn't notice. And for many people who do make church homes with us, it will be years before they can make the kind of time commitments and financial commitments we have gotten used to from their grandparents.

But this is also an enormously hopeful time for Christian people, especially for Christian people who live in a place like we do. Our congregations are being renewed by the presence of immigrants and refugees among us. For Lutheran Christians, whose churches have always been made up of immigrants and refugees, we are being offered a whole new lease on life. And we live in a place to which people of all ages continue to come. Our New Connections campaign, about which you'll hear a lot today, grows out of our common belief that of people like us, to whom much has been given, much is expected. We want to raise money, but more important, we want to extend the relationships that knit us together in Christ. In other parts of our ELCA, churches are doing heroic work if they survive from one year to another. But here, we should thrive and grow and we can do that if we will trust the Holy Spirit to make us witnesses, individuals and groups of individuals who are looking for the chance to say a good word for Jesus. Whatever happens in the next few years, I want our new Connections Campaign to flourish and I am praying that it will bear rich fruit.

And we have begun thinking about what happens next. At the Synod Assembly in 2019 we will elect a new bishop. I will make my twelfth and last report to you next year. I have begun pulling together a transition task force, a group to lead all of us in reflecting on what has gone well in the last decade or so, on what has not gone well, on what we still need to do and on what kind of leader we believe God wants for us. I encourage you to begin praying, if you haven't already, for our synod. Pray for us to have a sense of the possibilities that lie before us. Pray that we will be

wise and open-hearted as we think about new leadership. Pray that the potential bishops among us will be able to discern if this call is one that they could accept with joy.

Because being your bishop is a joyful task. It isn't always fun. But you have the best synod staff, the very best, people who are faithful and wise and kind and funny. On my worst days I still look forward to coming to work and sharing the struggle with them. You have superb lay leaders in the synod. I am grateful every time I get to work with them and I'm honored to say that through the years they have become not just my colleagues but my friends. And I am supported in this ministry by a loving family. My wife Nancy Ann has known me since I was 17 or 18 and she still seems to find me at least moderately amusing a least some of the time. I depend on her more than I can say.

So then for the eleventh and almost last time, I submit this report, with gratitude for the chances I have been given to share the Christian life of this synod community. May God bless and keep us all, make us useful in this life, and for Jesus's sake receive us into the life of the world to come. Amen.