

**For the 2014 Assembly of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

The Report of the Bishop

Dear friends,

Once again it is my duty and my honor to write you about the life of our synod. I do this with a profound sense of the challenges and struggles we face. And I do this with the deepest sense of joy and of gratitude, too. For all our challenges and struggles, we are people richly blessed and knit together in God's love.

In some ways, little in our synod has changed since this time last year. We are still in the business together of sharing the gospel of the Lord Jesus with the communities around us, and of caring for those in need close to us and far away. This part of our life is never really different from day to day. The cycles of worship, of teaching, of serving go on among us according to Lutheran traditions and folkways that we treasure and love.

But in other ways, we see evidence that many things are changing and that our life in the Lord is different now than was even a short time ago. If you want proof of this, look at the person who was elected and called to be the Presiding Bishop of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America last summer. Bishop Elizabeth Eaton is, well, a woman. Her place as the senior leader in our denomination signals that we are ready to move beyond some of the old-fashioned ways we imagined church bodies should look. Her energy, her excitement, and her wit have already made a mark on the way we do our church business.

And the election of a new Presiding Bishop reminded us that a leadership transition is underway all across our church. In our synod, for instance, some recent pastors' retirements have meant change in congregations where there is no memory of such a leadership transition before. We miss those pastors who have retired. We will miss some others who plan to retire soon. They were giants of the faith and what they helped to build is the life we all share. But God is raising up new pastors, and in the synod office we spend an increasing amount of time seeking for those leaders who seem to be the best fit for our ministries. This is one of the ways that we believe the synod staff can be the best help to congregations and we give it the most careful attention.

We are also aware that lay leadership is changing in the congregations of our synod. When I attend meetings out in the synod, I still encounter charter members of established congregations who have served in every congregational office and who seem to have life tenure on their congregational councils. But more and more I also meet newer members of the congregation, for whom service on the council is both exciting and confusing. Not knowing why so many things have to be done in certain established ways, new comers ask unsettling questions and see things with new eyes. And since some of them are actually new Christians, they bring gifts and long for encouragement in ways that we all need to be able to anticipate.

Congregational finances are a constant concern in the synod office. For reasons I can't quite explain, this past year saw several congregations pushed to the edge of financial viability by events no one anticipated. Some of our congregations have very large mortgage payments to make every month. Some of our congregations found their health insurance costs to be much higher for 2014 (though the ELCA's Portico coverage is promised to be still the best investment for most of us). Whatever the reason, money seems very tight in many corners of the synod just now. We also offer all the help we can from the synod office when we are asked to help people think about congregational stewardship and mission planning.

I should report, though, that the synod itself finished 2013 with a very small financial surplus. We kept our spending tightly controlled and we found ourselves grateful beneficiaries of the generous support of congregations which honored their mission support commitments, and in some cases added additional payments for the synod. We continue to share 50% of all the mission support we receive with ELCA churchwide ministries. With the help of several very generous individuals, and with lots of encouragement from congregations all over the synod, we have exceeded our initial pledge to the ELCA Malaria Campaign. This is a real source of pride and a sign of what we can do when we know our action matters.

Beginning late this year, we will begin to make decisions about the synod's work to support of *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*. This campaign, with a total goal of almost \$200 million, will provide funds to support a whole variety of mission efforts. We hope in our synod to focus attention on raising money for new congregations and we expect that planning work will focus on ministries serving a variety of contexts in a variety of styles.

We are blessed to live in a place where there are lots of new people and where every congregation is a sort of mission outpost. Our neighbors are, as we always say, people for whom the Good News of Jesus Christ is often actually news. We want to be living, breathing evangelists wherever we go. We want our congregations to be places where evangelists are trained and sustained and fortified for their ministries out in God's world.

One more thing about this coming year: We expect to have the Shape of the Synod Task Force up and running all over our synod in the coming months. Visiting congregational councils and pastors and asking what we can do together that will be better than what we do alone, we want to make sure that congregations have all the support that we can offer as they do their work. We want to make sure that no one feels lost or lonely in his or her ministry if we can help it. We think that we can do greater things if we share ourselves and our ideas and our resources.

It is not always easy to be your bishop. I often work hard in on tasks that don't end up bearing fruit. I learn some things that I wish I didn't know. I find myself embroiled in heart-breaking conflicts I think could have been avoided.

And yet some days are just glorious. And no matter what, I am sustained by the other people in the synod office. The half dozen or so of us working around 305 E Street are blessed to be a small community of like-minded Christians, people who care for each other and who complement each other. I believe that though there are a bunch of separate minds in your synod office, there is really only one heart. It is a joy to be part of this.

And I am blessed to be able to share the work that so many of the Lord's servants carry out through our congregations and our ministries and through the synod's own structures. The fact that we have so much to do is a blessing, and not a burden. In our individual lives, in our families and all our relationships, in our congregations and in every institution, we are the hands of God reaching out to bless and to rescue and to serve. We have not been left to our own devices in God's world, but we have been filled with the Holy Spirit and connected to one another. Thanks and praise to God, who is making all things new and who is leading us toward glory. And peace to you all,

In Jesus,

Dick

The Rev. Richard H. Graham, Bishop