

Report of the Bishop
2017 Assembly of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod

Dear sisters and brothers,

It is again my honor and my pleasure to bring a bishop's report to the assembly of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod. This is my tenth such report. God willing, there will be two more. Lutherans tend to keep their bishops for a relatively long time, and they tend to think that this is a good thing (or at least they tell the bishops they think it's a good thing – what people say when the bishops can't hear may be different.) But in the next two years the synod will begin to move toward the election of a new bishop. We'll use some of that time to take stock of where we are and to plan for what might come next. I am very grateful for the chance to have been your bishop. I will also be grateful when it is someone else's turn.

But we gather here today and tomorrow to do our business, to learn some new things and to be reminded of some old things. We sing and pray and celebrate. And we do all this remembering that the last time we were in this place, almost exactly two years ago, we heard just as we gathered that the young man who had killed people inside Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston was a member of a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The shock of realizing that we had ties to such horrible murders nearly crushed us. We asked, how could one of us do such a thing? What did this mean for our beloved churches? Could we do anything about the racism that would produce something like this?

In the face of these murders, and in response to the riots in Baltimore, pastors and lay leaders in the synod came together for a series of conversations. And out of those conversations came the synod's Racial Equity Team. The team had a considerable hand in shaping this assembly. They led the workshop that was offered this afternoon. They encouraged us to invite Dr. Reggie Williams to speak tomorrow morning.

We are not vain enough in our synod to believe that we will eradicate racism, no matter how faithfully we try. Our country was founded with an economic system that depended on the subjugation of people of color. The legacy of that system, and the assumptions that it encouraged people to make about their place in the

world, all this is still with us. But it is the responsibility of Christian people to struggle against the flaws in the culture around them and to acknowledge their own complicity, conscious and unconscious, in what goes wrong in our world.

We made the decision that we would not let what we felt two years ago fade from our memory. We want to continue to struggle to understand what racism means, especially in our local contexts. We want to struggle against what it does to us and to the people around us. We want to be honest in a culture that won't admit its real problems. We want to talk to each other even when the conversation is tense and difficult. We want to be hopeful, because personal and institutional change is hard but it's possible. And, really, what else can we do? After all, aren't people like us, crucifixion and resurrection people, aren't we called to grieve and to be hopeful at the same time every day, as long as we live?

Grieving and being hopeful could also be the theme for another thing that we are hearing about at this assembly. The synod's "New Connections" campaign actually grows out of our boredom with hearing again and again that Christian denominations like ours are shrinking away. Haven't you heard all you need to about how mainline Protestant churches are losing members and money, about how young people don't find us interesting, and about how nobody really likes us anymore? We believe that all of this is likely to be wrong. We think the Jesus is not done with Lutheran Christianity in North America. We think that we cannot continue to let our Christian witness be compromised by low expectations. We want to do something different here, to try some new things, and to let ourselves have some fun.

So we are going to raise 2.25 million dollars. We are going to use this money to start new congregations and to offer all our congregations the chance to learn about the best contemporary models for making contact with new people and for financial management. We want to offer a coach to every rostered leader in the synod. By the end of the campaign we want to have 3,000 new people involved in our ministries. We can do this. We live in a place where every one of our congregations has room to grow. As I say every chance I get, we are surrounded by people for whom the good news of Jesus Christ is actually news. We can make connections with people, we can invite them to feel their way into our communities of faith. We can be stronger ourselves as we draw on the strength of the Holy Spirit for the sake of others.

As part of “New Connections” we will tithe all the money we receive to the ELCA’s “Always Being Made New” campaign. We’ll designate our gift to the part of the ELCA effort that goes toward building new congregations all across the United States. We do this as a sign that we’re not just concerned about ourselves. We do this as a sign of the partnership we share with ELCA brothers and sisters in sixty-four other synods and in churchwide ministries in the U.S. and around the world. To have our Presiding Bishop here with us this weekend is a great thing. I can’t say that her ministry is tireless, because that I have seen her sometimes looking pretty tired. What I can say is that she is the best friend and the strongest supporter that our church has. She honors us with her presence here. She honors the name of Jesus wherever she goes.

Mentioning Bishop Eaton gives me the opportunity to speak about the events planned for this 2017 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Scholars tell us that it isn’t actually clear whether Martin Luther really posted his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. What is clear is that those theses began a movement which changed the Church and the world, a movement of which we are heirs today. This anniversary year is being celebrated with deep piety, with serious debate, and with a certain amount of silliness, too. Our synod helped sponsor several weeks ago an academic conference at Catholic University in Washington which featured participants from Rome and from Germany and which was also sponsored, and largely funded, by the German embassy. And for the event, the Germans provided a four-foot tall blow-up replica of the Playmobil block figure of Martin Luther which has been the fastest selling Playmobil figure ever. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, that’s probably a good thing. Anyway, the silliest picture of me I have ever seen, ever, was taken in the conference room at Catholic University where I stood next to the blow-up Playmobil Luther.

But I said it was mentioning Bishop Eaton that gave me the opportunity to speak about the Reformation anniversary. Bishop Eaton will be the preacher for our Reformation Sunday service, on October 29 in the National Cathedral. We want to pack the place. The Roanoke College Choir will sing. We will celebrate holy communion, which we have not done in the cathedral for several years. And we will be very grateful again that our Presiding Bishop, with all the demands she has on her time, would come here. And Bishop Eaton will be staying around in

Washington, because on Reformation Day itself, Tuesday the 31st of October, she will lead a webcast from the Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill to be called “Looking Back and Called Forward: ELCA 500.” We anticipate great interest in this webcast, about which lots more information is forthcoming.

Out of all you have heard about and will hear about, let me mention two more things related to the 500th anniversary. First, rostered leaders will be receiving soon a position paper and list of resources that Pastor Annabllle Markey prepared to address Lutheran-Jewish issues. You know that Martin Luther’s writings about the Jews continue to be painful. We discovered in conversations with local rabbis last winter that Jews mostly believe that we accept all of Luther’s writings as equally valuable and even equally binding on us. Pastor Markey’s material, prepared as a part of the effort of our 500th Anniversary Team, provides the resources for local conversations that change these perceptions. If nothing else, if local meetings or gatherings are too hard, if a joint local Lutheran-Jewish study group would be too difficult to organize, at least every rostered leader should call the nearest local rabbi to say that we have repudiated Luther’s anti-Jewish writings.

I also want to mention the great opportunity we have on the Sunday before Reformation Sunday, on the evening of October 22, when the National Lutheran Choir will be in town from the Twin Cities to sing at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. If you hadn’t already figured this out, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is a great center of Roman Catholic piety and history. The chance to have the National Lutheran Choir sing there is wonderful. The fact that this concert will be co-sponsored by our synod, by Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area, and by the Southeastern District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is going to make this evening special indeed. Again, more information will be forthcoming.

Anyway, I have used up most of my time and I haven’t told you anything about the day-to-day life and work of the synod office. I will simply say that in the synod office you are served by the strongest, kindest, smartest people with whom I have ever worked, people of deep Christian faith who love the nitty-gritty life of the Church very much. Like everyone, I suppose, I have mornings when I wonder if it’s going to be worthwhile getting out of bed. But then I think about going into the office and seeing people and laughing and crying with them, and I always seem to make it

downtown. When you encounter your synod staff, thank them and thank God for them. I do.

And I thank you. Nancy Ann and I have learned to love coming to these assemblies, seeing people who have found a way to give the synod a couple of days, connecting with old friends and making new ones. Nancy Ann and I are grateful for the kindness you show us. And I am grateful for the witness the Synod Assembly makes as we focus together on what will build up the Body of Christ and lift up the work of the Holy Spirit in this glorious, painfully divided and confused metropolitan area where we live and work. Thank you again, in Jesus name, for the opportunity to be your bishop.