

# *Report of the Bishop – 2009 Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly*

## ***“God’s Work – Our Hands”***

***“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. . . for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”***

***Philippians 1:6; 2:13***

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace and Peace be yours from God our Creator, and from our Savior Jesus who is the Christ. Amen

Last fall, I attended C.L.A.D., the Christ Lutheran Academy for Discipleship event held each year at Christ Lutheran Church in Visalia. At that event, the keynote speaker, Kelly Fryer, offered these words:

***“The Church doesn’t have a mission, God has a mission, and God’s mission has a Church! God is on a loving mission to save and bless the world – to bless, save, reconcile, heal and set free those who are lost. If we really believed that being part of God’s loving mission in the world is THE POINT of our lives as church... what would be different about our congregations?”***

A provocative question – a question that calls us to discern what it means to serve as followers of Jesus who are willing to place ourselves utterly and completely at God’s disposal to fulfill God’s mission in the world – as Paul writes above, *“to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”* What would our synod’s ministry look like, in fact what would all of our ministries look like, how they would be described, for what they would be known, if this question was the first priority we sought to answer in every decision made about our ministries? What would be different about us and our ministries if everything we contributed to the fulfillment of God’s mission was with the thought that it is *God’s work* being done through *our hands*?

There are challenges in how we live into these questions – to be sure. In some instances, we are congregations where deep, pervasive concerns exist about how much longer our congregation may “survive” because of diminished resources or numbers of members or a dearth of “younger members with families.” In some situations, we are reluctant to let go of what is familiar or comfortable or historically “Lutheran,” which impedes progressive notions of outreach and service to communities that presently bear little resemblance to the communities that existed when our congregations were “planted” many years ago.

I wonder if our efforts in evangelism – the call to witness, to provide outreach and to serve in Christ’s name to those who are not yet a part of our communities of faith – I wonder if those efforts have taken on a tone that sounds something like this -- “Come and help us NOT die.” I do not believe this is a very effective witness for a group of Christians who claim that death is a means to new life. It sounds as if we fear death more than we honor the call to die daily with Jesus, and be raised to new life and new witness in the name of the Risen Christ.

We must become better known throughout the territory of our synod for bold, provocative witness that honors the most basic understanding of who we have been called to be as God’s “Easter People” – people who understand the gift of the resurrection because we have not minimized the depths to which God was willing to go to save us. God, in Jesus, died for us and for the world. God, in Jesus, was raised from the dead for us and for the world. It is our trust and faith in God’s power over death which calls us to be willing to die in service to others, trusting that God will honor all such endeavors in raising us to new life again.

It is my prayer that our ministries will be known in the communities where they have been planted for living fully into a witness that is based on Christ’s call to ministry in Matthew 25. Our call to witness and service can best be described not by a fear of dying, but by living into the boldest faith credo which the world has ever known -- “Come and help us learn what it means to truly die as we love and serve others in Christ’s name.” I believe this can be accomplished, perhaps especially so, in our congregations which are the most vulnerable as they look to their future.

I have been asked any number of times what my role as bishop might be in assuring the future of congregations where there are 40 or 50 people worshipping per week, and where most of membership is nearing or over retirement age. My answer has consistently been – “absolutely nothing.” I now freely admit that this answer was wrong – because praying for our congregations isn’t “absolutely nothing.” It is everything.

My prayer for any of our congregations which are fearful about their future is that there will be a concerted effort -- led first and throughout by prayer -- to reach out to the community leaders where you live with the following question – “We have forty or fifty people worshipping every week, some whom are retired and have time and gifts to share – what does this city or town or neighborhood need from a community of faith that is willing to be Christ for their neighbors, or to die trying?” I am firmly resolved to offer my personal and prayerful support to any and all of our congregations that are willing to live fully into bold witness to our belief that it is in dying that we are given new life.

During the past eleven months, synod staff members have had the opportunity to visit over half of our 205 congregations, attend 18 conference gatherings, work with our ministry partners (PLTS, LSS, CLU, Campus Ministries, Mt. Cross, LAMN, LOPP), to connect with other ELCA leaders in our region and to travel to two of our companion synods – the Lutheran Church of Rwanda and the Lutheran Church of Taiwan. In those travels, we have discovered the vitality of congregations witnessing to Christ, ministries

which trust their survival is secondary to the work of dying to Christ for the sake of the communities are called to serve. Here are a few examples of the ministries that are being carried out on behalf of all of us that are truly making a difference:

+ Lutheran Church of the Cross, Berkeley – which nightly becomes a safe haven for homeless teens and young adults who find warm food, acceptance, safety and encouragement; a daytime respite is offered for life away from the streets -- the fellowship hall is literally transformed into the welcoming arms of Christ for all who enter.

+ Peace Lutheran Church, Grass Valley – In a time when state budget cutbacks have forced local public schools to cut back on music and performing arts programs, Peace Lutheran began a community children's chorus, offering high quality music education for young people.

+ Good Shepherd South Asian Ministry, Fremont – located across the street from an elementary school -- the members of GSSAM started an interfaith/ecumenical after school learning center, to help children with their homework, receive mentoring, engage in social interaction, promote recreation and sports activities, as well as providing a nutritious after school meal.

+ When a levee failed and flood waters covered portions of the town of Fernley, Nevada, the pastor and members of Gift of Grace Lutheran Church mobilized to offer aid and assistance to the community, and to coordinate relief efforts for those most afflicted. They also offer a holistic small group ministry to the people of Fernley.

+ Congregations/Ministries of the Fresno area participating in Fresno Metro Ministry – many of our SPS congregations have joined with other congregations to advocate for the safety and well-being of the people of Fresno, as we will learn during the course of this Assembly.

+ The San Francisco Night Ministry and The Welcome Ministry – a team of staff and volunteers working through the Night Ministry reach out to people who live on the streets of San Francisco with prayer, referrals, conversation, presence and the peace of Christ, and a crisis phone line. The Welcome Ministry provides a faithful response to homelessness and to improve the quality of life for homeless people by providing hospitality, food, and referrals for housing, health care and drug and alcohol treatment.

These are many more ways in which “God’s Work, Our Hands” is being lived out in the Sierra Pacific Synod. I hope our stories will be shared at all of our conference, district and synod gatherings - each time we come together to give glory to God and seek to be encouraged by the Spirit’s creating and inspiring leadership. I hope these stories are also the way we become better known in the communities we serve, along with quality worship and preaching, Bible study, and education and advocacy programs about Christian responses to issues confronting our world today. Bishop Mattheis reminded us several years ago that in spite of all the challenges that the world was facing at that time, he was comforted by this thought – God was trusting us with each of those

challenges. As daunting as issues such as world hunger, disease, homelessness, war, human sexuality and the current economic crisis may be, I too am comforted by the thought that God is trusting us and equipping us with every grace and gift the Spirit can provide that will enable us to be authentically present with those who suffer. There a variety of ways in which we have chosen to listen to the Spirit's calling, including ministries that are being extended through intentional outreach to those who are Gay, Lesbian, Trans-gendered or Bisexual, and those that offer outreach to the poor, homeless or recently unemployed.

During the last two years, when our synod was discerning questions of leadership for the office of bishop, many expressed a deep desire for a new day in how that leadership is offered. Long before that, I had begun working with Pr. Nancy Feniuk Nelson on the Leadership Discipling Team, where similar questions were being pondered about pastoral leadership at the congregational level. I was continually blessed and challenged by Nancy's willingness and ability to enunciate visions for that leadership that were based on paradigms which were new, and sometimes challenging for me to understand or embrace. Bishop's Associate Pr. Nancy Feniuk Nelson's wisdom, experience, humor, grace and spirit have been an invaluable asset to me in re-thinking not only my role as a pastoral leader at that time, but in this first year of my ministry as bishop. It was a "no-brainer" for me to ask if she would be willing to leave a ministry in Half Moon Bay that I know she cherished to join me in the work of helping to transform our synod's ministry, and to have those risks and challenges be an example and encouragement to all of the congregations of our synod as they discern their future. Nancy serves as Chief of Staff, Vice-Bishop and Counselor, whose gifts for ministry have proven again and again to be a blessing to me and to those with whom she works; I repose a great deal of trust in her, and ask you to do the same as we continually discern new paradigms for leadership in the office of the bishop. As our staff configuration changes, I expect Nancy's role will expand to other areas of oversight for the staff and ministries in our synod. I am daily thankful to God for the gift of the collaborative manner in which she and I work as members of the synod staff in service to all of you.

During the course of this Assembly, and in the coming months, you will hear more about a number of initiatives that I believe respond to questions and hopes for our synod's ministry which surfaced as a result of the Synod Profile used in last year's election process, the Synod Audit conducted by the E.L.C.A. and the Listening Post process conducted by the Leadership Discipling Team. Among these initiatives:

- + The Synod Transition Team, led by Bishop's Associate Nancy Feniuk Nelson and Pr. Jeff Thiemann as Transition Team Coordinator, is addressing issues of synod staffing and the location of synod offices that will best support the work of ministries in our synod.
- + The Racial and Ethnic Ministries Working Group, which will be developing strategies of ethnic outreach ministries, cultural competency and training in anti-racism at all levels of our synod's ministry.

+ Conversations regarding implementation of the proposed Sexuality Statement and Report and Recommendations of the Task Force, leading up to, during and following the Churchwide Assembly in August.

+ Disaster preparedness strategies, which as we have learned from synods in the Midwest and along the Gulf and East Coasts, is of vital importance if we hope to effectively serve those who are affected by disasters such as earthquakes, flooding or catastrophic fires; all very real threats in our region.

+ Continuing to strengthen ties with our Companion Synods in Rwanda, El Salvador and Taiwan through awareness, accompaniment and advocacy – mutually beneficial relationships which foster growth, understanding and greater faith.

+ Holding fall conference gatherings by electoral districts, which would allow for nominations and district caucuses to be held on the same day, as well as to provide greater opportunities for fellowship and programmatic resources for these gatherings.

These and other conversations will be carried out with the help of synod staff, the Synod Council, Discipling Teams, the Council of Deans and our synod as a whole. I pray God will be “in, with and under” all of these conversations, and more work that will come in the years ahead, as we seek to be molded, transformed, and empowered for ministry.

I wish to take an opportunity now to thank a number of other people who work very hard, often behind the scenes, to contribute to the success of our synod’s ministry –

+ Bishop Emeritus David Mullen for his grace and wisdom and counsel during this year of a steep learning curve and sometimes dizzying orientation into the work of serving as your bishop. I also wish to thank and acknowledge Bishop’s Assistants Pr. Noreen Meginness, Chuck Ruthroff and Pr. Bill Wong for their years of faithful service to this synod and for their help and assistance in the transition of synod administrations.

+ Vice President Larry Moeller, Synod Secretary Pat Cash, and Synod Treasurer Pr. Mark Price, along with the members of the Executive Committee and the Synod Council, whose names are listed immediately after the Assembly Agenda. Thank you for your partnership and leadership on behalf of all of us.

+ Discipling Team Chairs Margaret McLean, Pr. Jim Goldsmith and Ann Watkins and the members of the Leadership, Witness and Service and Word and Sacrament Discipling Teams.

+ Steve Krefting, who has offered a great deal of assistance in organizing files and records needed to complete the audit of our finances, as well as to clarify financial holdings and accounts.

+ Karen Idler, who has provided significant assistance to Bishop’s Associate Nancy Nelson in the work of the Candidacy Committee.

+ Pr. Bruce Johnson and Pr. Dale Sollom-Brotherton, who work with the Interim Ministry Steering Committee. And Pr. David Baker, who helps coordinate meetings of the Council of Deans, and who was very helpful in the scheduling of last fall's Conference Gatherings.

+ Synod Office Support Staff Barbara Nelson, Mary Brown and Suzanne Bruce, whose willingness to serve our synod's ministry has been remarkable. Barbara has served our synod's ministry before, and brings many gifts which have been a blessing to me and to Nancy in this year of transition. Mary Brown has been given many extra tasks this year, including a great deal of time and effort to help with the audit of our finances, all while taking on new responsibilities in her ongoing work of keeping our synod's finances in order. Suzanne Bruce began working on a very temporary basis to help us re-organize the synod office and fearlessly (and some would say ruthlessly) clear away some of the "clutter" that has accumulated over the years; she now become an important part of our support staff. All three have worked very hard to help the Assembly planning committee and others bring this Assembly into reality. Like all of those who work in staff support positions in our congregations and ministries, there work is often unseen, and they deserve far more thanks than a one-day excuse to sell Hallmark cards for their spirit, dedication and commitment to live out of their gifts. Suzanne, Mary and Barbara are tireless in their efforts to serve the people and congregations of our synod, as well as the needs of the executive staff. They truly make the synod office a place to which I look forward to coming to work, whenever I actually happen to be there....

+ Director for Mission Pr. Harvey Blomberg, who continues in his service with our synod, working with the department of Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission of the E.L.C.A. Harvey provides a great deal of assistance in developing and implementing mission strategies for our synod's ministry. He has also become in this past year a much more integrated part of the work of our executive staff – which will soon be joined by a Director for Mission Support, who will work closely with Harvey, Nancy and me in our work to further the work of God's Mission in central and northern California and northern Nevada.

+ Finally, a word of thanks to my wife, Debbi, whose love, prayers, support and encouragement makes a great deal of difference in my life every day. She travels with me when her work as the principal of a large public high school allows her to do so, and feels a deep sense of call to help create a network of support and encouragement to the spouses and partners of our called leaders. I am blessed to have her as a partner in faith, in marriage, in parenting and in life. She is truly the reason I know Christ's love and forgiveness are cherished gifts of God in our lives.

During my installation service last July, I left you with a charge – I asked you to "surprise me" with all of the creative energies with which the Spirit imbues us to do God's work in the world. Thank you for the many ways you are responding to the Spirit's "nudges" to reveal the risen Christ through your ministries – I pray we will never stop being surprised by all the ways God is calling us to do God's work with our hands. Amen