



BISHOP'S REPORT 2008

Our assembly theme, *God's Work, Our Hands*, reminds us that the work of salvation belongs to God, and that we are invited to be a part of God's mission to make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them and teaching them all that has been entrusted to us by Jesus. *God's Work, Our Hands!* During this assembly, we will hear wonderful testimonies to God's work in our congregations and in the world. And during these days together, we will be invited and encouraged to participate more fully in the mission that God has given to us: the mission of *sharing Christ, making disciples and doing justice in the world!*

SHARING CHRIST!

God calls us to be an evangelizing Church! We have been entrusted with the pearl of great price: the Good News that in Christ Jesus, God reconciles the world unto Himself. God loves all people. It is God's will that all should come to know the forgiveness and salvation made possible in Christ. We, as God's people in this place, are joyfully sent into the world for the sake of the world! We must understand the urgency of our mission.

I invite every congregation of our synod to move outside of itself and rediscover the community in which God has planted it. I call upon you, the congregations and rostered leaders of this synod, to re-imagine what it means to be the people of God in the Florida-Bahamas Synod, and what it means to be sent into the world for the sake of others. It is not about us. It is about the women and men and children of all cultures and backgrounds who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The most common self-description that a congregation gives regarding its self-image is that it is a "friendly church." We enjoy being with one another. Yet, I fear that we often deceive ourselves about how welcoming we are to those who visit our churches, and especially to those who are different than us. It takes courage for the unchurched seekers to visit our churches and we need to move out of ourselves to be hospitable to them. It is no secret that church membership in mainline denominations is on the decline. And yet, who here would deny that the potential for the growth of God's Church is all around us? I challenge you and the people of this synod to become an "inviting and welcoming" synod.

Empowered by God's Holy Spirit, we are bold to move out of our sanctuaries into the mission fields that surround our worshipping centers. Every congregation is a mission congregation. I am committed, along with my staff, to assist conferences, congregations, and lay & rostered leaders in responding to God's call to be a part of God's work in the world.

At our 2007 assembly, we approved a Stepping Out in Mission capital campaign for the purpose of raising additional funds for planting new congregations, redeveloping congregations that have potential to be viable, and placing significant resources into recruiting, training, and empowering missional leadership among our clergy and our lay leaders. We want to provide assistance, mentors, resources and guidance to congregations and leaders who want to make a difference in the world for the sake of Jesus Christ.

In a few moments we will hear the exciting report of our Outreach Committee. Much is happening around our synod in the area of evangelical outreach. There is much more to do. Our outreach ministry is not limited to the territory of our synod, but is national and global, as well. As a sign of our continued support of the mission of our whole church, I am pleased to share that our synod has grown the percent of Mission Support shared with the churchwide expression of the ELCA to 51%. That means of every dollar shared from the offering plates of our congregations for Mission Support, we pass 51-cents along for churchwide and worldwide mission. We also practice *first fruits* giving. When mission support arrives at the synod office, 51% of that is immediately sent along to churchwide. I encourage our congregations to model this same practice of *first fruits* giving for their members.

We continue to be blessed by our five companion synods of Haiti, Guyana, Suriname, Cuba and Jamaica. We are privileged to have Pr. Stenio Capre, President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti, and Pr. Michel Stewart from Suriname attending our assembly this year. They are outstanding examples of missional leadership and they have much to teach us about mission and ministry. I hope you will extend a warm welcome to them.

MAKING DISCIPLES!

I celebrate that we are a community of faith deeply rooted in Christ and firmly grounded in Word and Sacrament! Our Lutheran heritage strengthens us for mission in an ever changing world that opens to us new opportunities for making disciples and nurturing others in their faith formation. Increasingly, those who join our congregations may have little or no Christian background. They do not have the benefit of years of Sunday school and Christian education. “Lutheran” may well be an unfamiliar word to them. We have the joyous privilege of welcoming such persons into the family of God. But, we also have the responsibility to provide them with significant instruction and formation in the faith.

Martin Luther met with similar challenges in his own day. He wrote in his introduction to the Small Catechism: *“The ordinary person... knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith... yet they often bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the creed, or the ten commandments. Therefore, I beg all of you for God’s sake... to have pity on your people who are entrusted to you, and to help bring the catechism to the people, especially the young.”* Those familiar with Luther’s writings will know that I have skipped a few choice words!

We must reclaim our teaching ministry! It is critical that we get back to the basics of Bible study and pastor’s classes that teach the theology of our church. I am thrilled with the Book of Faith initiative that was approved by our ELCA last year in churchwide assembly, and appreciate that our keynote speaker this year is Dr. Diane Jacobson who directs this initiative. I look forward to the Lutheran Study Bible that will be published next year. Let us take seriously our calling to equip the saints for ministry.

LEADERSHIP

To guide our congregations in dynamic and vibrant ministries, we need healthy and dedicated spiritual leaders, both clergy and lay. Every pastor and congregation is charged with the responsibility and privilege of seeking out and encouraging qualified persons to prepare for rostered or lay leadership in our church. Our synod’s candidacy committee works closely with our candidates, our congregations, and our seminaries to form and train new leaders for the church.

Later this month, our first class of lay members who have completed the diakonia program will graduate. This is the largest first graduating class of any of the synods that participate in this program. The diakonia program is a two-year process of spiritual formation and theological education for lay members of our congregations our synod. This program helps to better equip lay persons for daily ministry and unlocks their gifts for mission.

Our synod is committed to youth and young adult leadership in the church. Yesterday, we celebrated the participation of greater numbers of youth and young adults in the decision making of our synod assemblies. The involvement of youth and young adults more fully in every aspect of our mission and ministry as God’s people is our focus. It is our joy to install the new executive director of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries of Florida, Jim Schmidt, at our closing worship celebration tomorrow. Your support is needed to strengthen our outdoor ministry programs and our outreach to campus ministry.

DOING JUSTICE IN THE WORLD!

The prophet Micah declares to the people: *“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* As a synod we are discovering our voice as a people of God who are bold to speak to the justice issues that exist in our communities and the world. I am excited that a growing number of congregations are getting involved in faith-based community organizing. Working ecumenically with other congregations in their communities, they are speaking out against what is unjust and unfair. We are making a difference in lives of those we serve!

We have outstanding partners in the Lutheran Services Florida and the Lutheran Social Services of Northeast Florida for our ministry to the poor and needy, and our advocacy on their behalf. We welcome Sam Sipes as the new executive director of Lutheran Services Florida. I ask that you support these ministries of our church and partner with them to more effectively address our mission to assist the elderly, the young, the poor, the needy, the homeless, the refugee, the immigrant and the sojourner in our midst.

God calls us to be a public church that engages our society and world in conversations and actions that address human rights issues and care for those in need. Jesus reminds us, “*As you do it unto the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you do it unto me.*” We represent promise and hope for our communities and the world.

ROSTER AND LEADERSHIP CHANGES

During the last year, calls were issued to 27 rostered leaders! Of the 24 pastors receiving new calls, 9 are pastors who moved to new call situations within our synod, 11 are pastors who came to the Florida-Bahamas Synod from other synods, and 4 were newly ordained. Three of our pastors retired last year. Five pastors and one AIM accepted calls to positions in other synods. Four retired rostered leaders transferred into our synod, and 8 retired rostered leaders transferred out. Ten rostered leaders died in the past year and joined the Church Triumphant.

Five seminary seniors assigned to the Florida-Bahamas Synod are presently in call processes and will be ordained upon receiving a call.

SYNOD STAFF

I am blessed, as is our synod, with an incredibly gifted staff team.

Assistants to the bishop are Mr. Ken Aicher, Administration; Pr. Rita Gardner Tweed, Southwest Mission District; Pr. Bob Schaefer, North Mission District; Pr. Paul O. Lutze, Southeast Mission District; and Pr. Lenny Gallardo, Hispanic Ministry. Pr. Wally Meyer serves as my coordinator for German ministry.

Synod Specialists include: Irene Flynn, Resources and Training; Adam Bost, Communications; and Joyce Cain, Stewardship. The Youth & Young Adult Ministries specialist position is now posted and we hope to fill the position by the end of the summer.

Our Administrative Assistants are Ileana Sardinias (bishop’s office, candidacy and mobility), Annette Washington-Woods (administration and controller), Val Neuhart (leadership and event coordination), Galey Priska (receptionist), and Yuliet Garcia (mission outreach).

ELCA deployed staff serving in our synod include: Pr. Jerry Wahl, ELCA Mission Director; Karen Sumner, Building Consultant for Mission Investment Fund; Pr. Paul Summer, ELCA Foundation and Planned Giving specialist; and Mr. Jerry Johnson, Area Representative of Mission Investment Fund.

I give thanks to God for my wife Linda and my family who stand beside me in this ministry. Their love and understanding surrounds me each day as I seek to fulfill this call to be your bishop.

And I thank God for you, and for this synod. May God continue to shape us into *a community of faith deeply rooted in Christ, firmly grounded in Word and Sacrament, and joyfully sent for the sake of the world!*

In Christ and His Love,

Edward R. Benoway, Bishop
Florida-Bahamas Synod, ELCA