

*The church of Christ, in every age
beset by change, but Spirit led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship #729)*

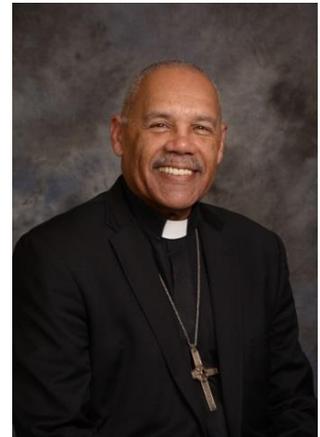
Dear people of God of the Northeastern Ohio Synod and sisters and brothers in Christ,

The recent death of the evangelist Billy Graham at the age of 99 evoked a flood of personal memories. I recalled, for example, how my father would listen intently to any broadcast that featured the Rev. Graham and hung on to every word he said. I remembered how our family was commanded to gather around the radio and listen to "The Hour of Decision," his weekly radio program of the early 1950's. A few years later, when the show moved over to television, it likewise became our household ritual. One can imagine how I, as a fidgety youngster, reacted to what I considered the cruel and inhuman punishment of being forced to sit attentively for a half-hour that seemed like an eternity.

On a more serious note, Graham had a spellbinding ability to communicate the message of the gospel, which made him a household name in just about every home in America, or so it seemed. His massive crusades filled stadiums beyond capacity in major cities throughout the nation.

Though he was not without his critics, he was undoubtedly one of the most significant religious leaders of our time. His public image was, for the most part, untarnished by any political, religious, or social controversies. Graham was insistent early on in his ministry that his crusades be integrated, even inviting the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to deliver a prayer at a rally in Madison Square Garden in

1957. "There is no room for segregation at the foot of the cross," Graham said at the time. It was a statement that would endear him to many, including me, who felt marginalized, to varying degrees, by society. Sadly, Graham eventually broke with King the over the issue of civil rights and the Viet Nam War.



In today's intense and fragmented world, religious leaders are incapable of rising to Graham's level of influence. Not even Pope Francis, perhaps the best-known of this century, can hold sway over a society as Graham did in his time.

Most of us have been raised in homes where Christianity was taken for granted or at least where there was no outward animosity toward Christian believers. Yet the church no longer holds the position of authority it once did in American culture. For more than a few of us, Christ has become simply one more competing factor in the top priorities of our living, rather than the source and the inspiration of our faith.

I think about this as our church continues to struggle with decline. It is always the chief topic of conversation at our semiannual Conference of Bishops in Chicago. I dedicated an entire column to this same topic a year ago.

The churchwide organization of our ELCA, has developed its strategic plan for the coming year and it highlights one noticeable change in

language from congregational “growth,” to congregational “vitality.”

The definition of vital congregations, as developed by our Domestic Mission Unit, is as follows: “Communities of Jesus where there are life-changing relationships with God, one another, and the world.”

This is not just antics with semantics. Some of the most vibrant congregations in our synod are among the smallest. The difference is that they are engaged and connected with God in such a way that overcomes the obstacles that normally keep a church mired in sluggishness and apathy.

Relationships matter. Congregations with relational barriers aren't able to fully engage and therefore aren't transformed until those barriers are removed.

The good news is that this is not a permanent condition. Transformation has happened in congregations that were once mired in conflict.

A lot of that transformation takes place by listening – listening to God, listening to each other, listening to our neighbors.

Of these three great listenings, listening to God is perhaps the most challenging for many. It involves becoming more engaged in Scripture and prayer. Who we are as the church cannot be separated from who God is and what God's son, Jesus, means for us.

One place I would recommend beginning is in the book of Acts, which we will hear read during the Easter season as part of our weekly lectionary. The book of Acts recounts the early development on the Christian church and how the disciples were transformed from a cowardly and inept bunch of bumbling into a force for history.

One significant lesson we learn is found in Acts 2:42, where the author tells us that the first converts, “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*”

The family of faith – the church – lives and grows by having its life ordered around worship, preaching, and teaching. When the worship, preaching, and teaching ministry of the church is a high priority there is a sense of a lively encounter with God in the life of the church.

Our worship resource, *Sundays and Seasons*, suggests that we need to hear these stories from the book of Acts more than ever as we work out our own anxiety around the relevance of the church today. We need to be reminded that the same Spirit who enlightened and empowered these first witnesses of the resurrection has also been given to us in baptism. We too have “power from on high” to live as a countercultural communion of faith, bound together not by social or ethnic bonds but by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, as you prepare for the Easter season, I invite you to engage with scripture in a new and meaningful way, and as you do, encourage others in your congregation to do so, as well as those in your surrounding community. The results may surprise you.

Easter blessings,



The Rev. Abraham D. Allende,
Bishop