

From the Bishop

“So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Two big trips are on the bishop’s calendar in the coming weeks. I will be in Houston the end of June along with 600 youth and adult leaders from this synod as we gather with over 30,000 others for the triennial Youth Gathering. “This Changes Everything” is the theme of the gathering. While there will be lots of singing and servant events and loads of youthful energy, the gathering is really about faith formation. The leaders spell it out this way: *“We want youth to understand the fierce love that God has for them, just as they are, and that by grace, through faith, they have been saved. When young people truly understand this...this changes everything.”*

I imagine that after the gathering, as has been the case in the past, there will be youth and young adults who say it was a life-transforming experience.

The second trip is in early July to our companion synod, the Western Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa. Forty-six (46!) people from this synod will leave on July 4 for two weeks in South Africa. We will visit the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg and begin to learn what it meant for white and black people to have lived for generations with racism codified in the very structures of society. We will hear the stories of struggle and about the leadership of Nelson Mandela. We will travel to Rustenburg where our hosts will meet us. Our travelers will disperse to the congregations and homes of people throughout the diocese. We will build relationships, hear stories, pray and worship and sing songs. Anita and I also are traveling to South Africa and will be hosted by Bishop Ubane and his wife.

The purpose of these companion synod visits is to deepen relationships with our brothers and sisters around the world. They help us to comprehend what we confess in the creed, that we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Each ELCA synod has at least one companion synod relationship. These relationships help us to understand more fully the catholicity of the Church. They remind us of the global dimension of the Body of Christ. So we will learn about the Church in South Africa; we learn about the lives of our brothers and sisters in their work and leisure, in their families and communities. We will also learn about ourselves as we experience life in a different culture and are able to look at our own with some new perspective.

And I imagine that after two weeks of travel, besides being tired and feeling enriched, some among us will say the experience has been life-transforming.

Bishop Eaton and the ELCA Church Council has lifted up Leadership and Congregational Vitality as two primary emphases in our life together. Congregational Vitality is about life-transforming relationships. All of our life is to be centered in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God meets us with grace and mercy. God’s steadfast love forgives and heals and creates new life. We want our congregations to be places of faith, life, and vitality. That is we want them to be fostering life-transforming relationships with God, with one another and with the world around us.

Have you heard people say that their participation in the life of your congregation has been a life-transforming experience? I hope so. And I hope we can find ways to encourage one another in our life and faith together. I hope we can learn from one another. We want all our congregations to be places where the Good News of Jesus Christ is nurtured and people experience their lives transformed in powerful ways.

As the youth gathering says, “this changes everything.”