

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. [Hebrews 10:23-25]*

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

A portion of my parish visitations are to celebrate church anniversaries.

I would guess that in any given year in our synod, a half-dozen churches celebrate significant anniversaries. This fall alone, I've witnessed two 150-year celebrations and a 200-year anniversary, while my colleagues in the synod office are also asked to be present at others.

One of the things I like to do whenever I prepare to preach at an anniversary celebration is research the history of the church. It gives me insights into the community, the people, their experiences of joy and pain, and how they always work together to become who they are.

They go through many changes – in pastors, locations, language, and even ethnic background. The people who gather to worship each Sunday now are much different from the ones who first established the congregation, no matter how recently or far back they began.

But in the things that really matter, most congregations basically remain the same.

The gospel continues to be proclaimed and Christ is made know in that community. That in itself is also a challenge, because the church no longer occupies the

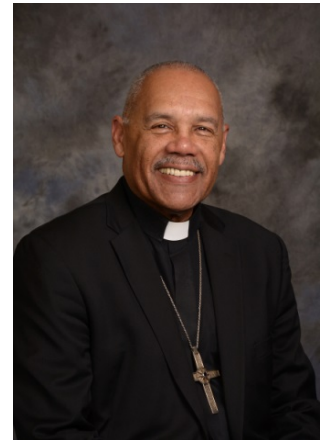
position of authority it once had in our American society. The church has been fighting a constant battle against those who do not believe. That battle has intensified in recent years.

According to a statistic in *The Parish Paper*, three out of every thousand congregations close their doors each year. Ironically, younger congregations have a greater mortality risk than long-established ones [TheParishPaper.com, November, 2014].

Remembering a congregation's history is helpful, but it is not enough to merely look back. An anniversary is a time to look forward and make renewed commitments for the new circumstances of the future.

In my March/April newsletter article, I introduced the ELCA's Vital Congregations initiative and I will merely say here that you'll hear about it more frequently in the months to come.

Regardless of how many changes are in store, God is faithful throughout human history. The circumstances may change, yet the mission and ministry, the essential task



of the Christian community remains the same. We mark an anniversary through remembering God's faithfulness, understanding our identity before God, and rededicating ourselves to God's continuing work.

One thing I consistently tell congregations is that the most important experience that happens in any church building is worship. It is from your gathering together each week that all ministry flows. It is where you are fed with the word and sacrament and are sent out into the world to make the name of Christ known to others by your words and by your deeds.

Worship can make us an incredible witness. When you and I worship, we have no idea how we might be making a difference in the lives of others.

The key words in the introductory verses above, in my opinion, are: *"not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some."*

When we do not neglect to meet together to gladly hear and learn the Word of God, we are promised in Word and Sacrament the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

When we do not neglect to meet together, we are able to confess the truth about ourselves that we are yet sinners in need of that Faithful Redeemer who alone can deliver us from all the temptation, empty promises and twisted logic that the world has to offer.

When we do not neglect to meet together, we become bearers of the Word of God,

free to do ministry in Jesus' name and to the Glory of God without seeking self-glorification.

When we do not neglect to meet together, we hold fast to our confession of hope without wavering. Because when Christ made that single sacrifice for sin once and for all, He made it possible that we might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

People who live as God's people see things differently. So especially in this day and age it is important to remember that who the church is cannot be separated from who Jesus is. God has promised to be present with God's Church even to the end of the age. And for that we say, "Thanks be to God!"

Peace and blessings!



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende