

**THE REV. ABRAHAM D. ALLENDE
BISHOP'S REPORT
JUNE 9-10, 2017
NORTHEASTERN OHIO SYNOD ASSEMBLY
JOHN S. KNIGHT CENTER
AKRON, OHIO**

We gather today and tomorrow under the theme, “*God’s Word, Our Heritage, Our Hope.*”

For those who may not know this, I was born on October 31. While that may evoke visions of goblins and gremlins for some people, that date is significant for Lutherans. So, I guess I was destined from birth to be Lutheran.

And that begs the question, what does it mean for us to be Lutheran?

It’s a question that I ask each year around the time of Reformation and this year, as we commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, seems like a good time to ponder the question all year long. And I invite you to think about the question as you go through this day and tomorrow at this assembly.

What does it mean for us to be Lutheran?

Being Lutheran does not mean being a follower of Martin Luther, but rather, a follower of Jesus Christ. Being Lutheran means believing, proclaiming, and living, the good news.

The hymn that inspired our theme for this year’s assembly contains this verse:

*God’s word is our great heritage
and shall be ours forever;
to spread its light from age to age
shall be our chief endeavor.*

The hymn was written by Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig, (1783-1872) a Danish Lutheran Pastor who wrote the hymn as the 5th verse to “A Mighty Fortress.”

In the Gospel reading that is assigned each year on Reformation Sunday, from the Gospel according to John, Jesus tells his disciples: *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* [John 8:31-32]

I usually preach on this lesson each Reformation Sunday and I don’t want to launch into a sermon this morning – you can hear me preach tomorrow. But I want to highlight a few points about what it means to be Lutheran from my perspective and what I feel the implications are for our Northeastern Ohio Synod.

We ought to ask ourselves daily what it means to be Lutheran, first, so that we can be clear about our beliefs—but even more, so that, with the Blessed Martin Luther, we can be clear about where we stand, and about what we are to preach and teach, and to what we are to give witness, in our lives as Lutheran Christians.

At the heart of being a follower of Jesus, is to continue to live in God's Word, the Bible. It is worth noting that *this* is where Martin Luther began to find his freedom: in his immersion in Holy Scripture – the Bible.

Luther spent a great deal of time trying to know who God was, and to find ways of expressing what he came to know and believe, so that others would know God too. And that was key for Luther – that others would know God.



Luther was a theological scholar, but when it came to connecting with the people, he used everyday language, he wrote hymns using tunes people knew and recognized. When he wrote his catechism, he used words even his small son could understand. He translated the Bible into the language people spoke. Truth about God and our faith, as complex as it is, should be something we ALL can grasp and wrestle with.

To that end, a network of faithful pastors and laypeople have assembled over the last few months into a Discipling and evangelizing table, which is undertaking the task of bringing people together to foster spiritual growth and the ability for every Christian to tell the story of Jesus. Pastor

Jim Watson of Zion Lutheran Church in Valley City, has taken responsibility for this table, which, in his words, “is in the toddler stage.” They are currently gathering in various locations around the synod, learning what those ministries have done and continue to do to make Christ known on their territory. Pastor Watson will speak to us tomorrow and tell us more about the group. But please feel free to approach him at any time during this assembly.

Related but separate from the Discipling/Evangelizing Table, are the Mission Interpreters. Vice-President Bryan Penvose has taken responsibility for that group, which is learning to share stories of God's action in the world, how we understand our identity as partners of a larger church, and how we can grow stronger in supporting mission.

And on the matter of supporting mission, I mentioned this in my pre-assembly report, but it bears repeating. The Stewardship and Mission Support Table is a group of people working to educate both rostered ministers and lay people in our congregations to increase their knowledge about spiritual principles and best practices relating to faithful stewardship and generous giving. Dick Brenneman, a member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Belleville, along with Synod Resource Specialist Karen Kaufman, are spearheading this table, which grew out of a series of “think tank” conversations over the course of the past year.

What does it mean for us to be Lutheran?



Last year, shortly after our Synod Assembly, I visited South Africa for 10 days to reestablish the relationship between us and our companion synod, the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. I came away from that experience overwhelmed with the depth of faith of the people I met there.

Despite poverty, despite lack of those comforts that we enjoy – running water, electricity in some cases – the faith of the people was unwavering. The churches are full, Sunday after Sunday and several days during the week. Many people walk long distances just to get to worship and they are there for several hours on a Sunday. I kept wishing we could somehow transfer their love for God and God’s word into the lives of people in this society.



We had hoped to have the Bishop of our companion synod here, but that didn’t materialize. We have, however, revived our Companion Synod Table and our goal is to continue to develop that relationship with our companion synod. Pastor Chuck Knerem of First, Strongsville, chairs that table.

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As a church, we are also called to speak and act for those who are struggling with hunger, homelessness, poverty and injustice; as well as raise awareness on issues that affect the earth and its environment.

In November, I was part of an eight-day International Human Rights Observation Mission to the border of Guatemala and Mexico. The area is full of gorgeously breathtaking scenery, lush green vegetation, rich in agriculture and natural resources; and those resources are what make it the target of global business enterprises, who want to avail themselves of the territory to establish mines and hydroelectric power plants and large industrial farms. If their plans are successful, they would displace the people of these communities who have lived here and trace their ancestry back to pre-colonial times.



Though some of these enterprises bring progress, they also bring dire consequences – contamination of the



soil, the water sources, and numerous health hazards. The people there have organized resistance groups against those forces that threaten to disrupt the environment and their way of life. But their opposition has come with a cost. That is what we were there to document.

The narratives we heard were heartbreaking. Yet, the people we met have learned to live in the precarious uncertainty of their existence. Some found their strength in their faith, others in the solidarity of their communities, and still others in the hope that they gleaned from our willingness to listen to their stories.



Displacement, along with violence and poverty are factors that force people to leave their homeland to come to the United States as migrants and refugees. We here in the United States fail to understand why a person would pick up and leave his or her country of origin to travel here. To many of us, opportunity is wanting a bigger



house, a more modern car, or a large screen TV. To the migrant, it is wanting to live in safety, have adequate nourishment, and access to those basic needs that enable us to do more than merely survive.

Ms. Julie Rossate, Program Director of Young Adults in Global Mission [YAGM] is with us today, representing the Churchwide Expression of the ELCA and will talk to us later this afternoon about that program and what else the church is doing for the sake of the world.

She will also be preaching at our Eucharist in a while from now. A service that will focus on our young people.

Last year, you may recall, I told you of my experience at the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit. The impact that experience had on me was the motivation to invite the young people to come alongside us for this assembly and give us an opportunity to observe and see first-hand how the generations can work together to fulfill God's purposes.



I have sat in on their planning meetings for this weekend and I came away from those meetings buoyed by confidence that this is going to be one unique assembly.

In addition to leading worship at today's Eucharist, they will also conduct two workshops that will engage adults in exploring together how youngsters can play a meaningful and purposeful role in the church today.

The youngsters have taken this responsibility to heart. They paid attention to every detail. I observed, saying very little, but just taking in the wonder of it all. There was a spirit of excitement and joyfulness around the room. The youth were serious, but not too serious to have a little fun. Those that weren't present, were piped in either by phone or skype.

It drove home a point I've stressed often in the past. We have a lot to learn from our youth. Virtually every one of us is creative as a child, but as we grow older we often lose a sense of that wonder and freedom that comes with creativity. As adults, we get too comfortable with the familiar, and often run the risk of losing the awareness that there are other ways of doing things that are just as valid as the way we do them. So, stick around, you're in for an experience.

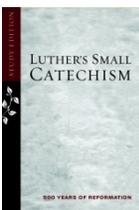
I realize there are lots of active youth groups around our synod and congregations involving and engaging youth in meaningful ways. I am inviting and asking you to bring those to my attention. We want to promote our young people. We want to call attention to those things you are doing in your congregation or in your conference that focus on youth. I would love to visit with you and I welcome your invitation.

Just last Sunday I was at Zion Lutheran Church in Youngstown where for the fifth consecutive year they celebrated a joint confirmation service of several Eastern Conference congregations. Celebrations like these are a wonderful demonstration of congregational cooperation. I've had the privilege now of being a part of this annual event for the three years I've been in this office, as well as the joint celebration that the Southeast cluster in the Cleveland East Conference, which was held this year at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Twinsburg.



What does it mean for us to be Lutheran?

In Luther's introduction to the Small Catechism he wrote:



"The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatsoever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately, many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching."

Thanks be to God that description does not apply to our pastors today!

We are grateful for those pastors who are serving in their first call. They bring an energy and an enthusiasm and a fresh perspective to ministry that is infectious. They will eventually get tired of hearing me say this, if they haven't already, but their

presence among us gives me a sense of unbridled hope. I'm counting on them to lead us into a brighter future.

At the same time, we continue to work to strengthen the ministry. We provide mentoring from experienced pastors, first-call theological education opportunities, and other resources to help them do their ministry more effectively.

We're also striving to strengthen the ministry of congregations in transition by training those pastors who are engaged in interim ministry. In cooperation with the National Association of Lutheran Interim Pastors, we are in the second year of Interim ministry training with groups of pastors whose role will be to help the congregations focus on their mission and their future as opposed to the past.

Interims are an anxious time for some congregations. What trained interim pastors do is empower the congregation's members to take responsibility for their ministry and prepare for the next full-time pastor. Several of our intentional interims will make a presentation during the first workshop block.

We are, however, mindful that there is clearly a shortage of new seminary graduates to replace retiring pastors. But the problem is much more complex than just student recruitment for seminaries.

The entire support structure for professional ministry is under stress.

Seminaries are facing the challenge of fewer students, which has forced them to make adaptive changes in theological education. Tomorrow, Dr. Elizabeth Paul, President of Capital University will be with us to speak about the reunification of Capital and Trinity Lutheran Seminary and what that means for the two institutions.

However, our traditional leadership development structures are inadequate to fully meet the leadership need. Especially in the smaller congregations, we are going to continue to explore alternate routes to ordination, such as the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries program for those whom a congregation has identified as having the leadership gifts and the sense of call to ordained ministry, who can pursue a theological education without having to give up their current employment.

We currently have one synodically authorized lay minister in our synod who is serving, while working and studying. Here in Region Six, which includes the other two Ohio Synods, Indiana-Kentucky, and Michigan; we are exploring developing a regional site for educating such candidates.

The increased cost to congregations to support pastors combined with declining church membership, means that even though there are many, many congregations that need pastors, there are fewer of them that can support pastors, even though many of them are doing wonderful ministry in their communities.

The Reformation was not and is not a one-time event. The Church is always reforming. We as Christians are always reforming. This synod is always reforming.

Over the past year, the Lutheran Church of the Covenant and Triune Lutheran Church developed a Covenant partnership that enabled them to share a pastor.

On the west side of Cleveland, Faith Lutheran Church in Lakewood and Our Savior Lutheran Church in Rocky River have developed a partnership that is now Good Soil Ministries with the Rev. Mark Rollenhagen serving as pastor.

In Cleveland Heights, Hope Lutheran and Bethlehem have been in conversation for nearly two years and the fruit of those conversations has resulted in a merger of the two congregations into one – which as of October of this year, on Reformation Day, will be known as Peace Lutheran Church.

These are three models that give us reason for hope in Northeastern Ohio. We have more than a dozen such partnerships in our synod.

But the time to begin these conversations and explore creative ways of doing shared ministry is not when a congregation has no other option, but while it still has vitality.

The Rev. Mike Conklin is leading a workshop on shared ministry which is a follow-up to the one which was held last year. I hope you will find time to attend tomorrow morning.

We have a tremendous opportunity during this time that the Rev. Dave Daubert serves as interim Director for Evangelical Mission to lay the groundwork for more such explorations.

As I stated last week in my Monday Musings, each year at Pentecost we hear the reading from Acts when the Holy Spirit descended on each of the faithful gathered on that day as tongues of fire accompanied by the rush of a violent wind.

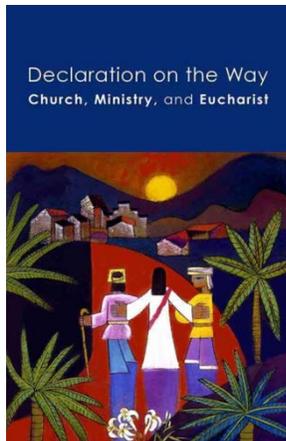
The Spirit's presence is our assurance that, despite all our fears and concerns, the church has a future. God is good and always provides for us, but there are times when we need the rush of a mighty wind to overturn our way of thinking and call us to new ways of action in service to God.



Two gifts the Spirit brought the church that day of Pentecost were, a sense of unity and a sense of purpose or mission. That same Holy Spirit is still very much alive today and at work in us.

What does it mean for us to be Lutheran?

As we commemorate and remember our history in this 500th Anniversary year, we should also make time to reexamine our faith.



At last summer's ELCA Churchwide Assembly, the document, "*Declaration on the Way*," was overwhelmingly accepted. This document paves the way toward greater unity between Catholics and Lutherans. Basically, it lists 32 points of agreement between the two church bodies, declaring that some issues that once separated Lutherans and Roman Catholics are no longer considered divisive. Of course, there are still 15 or so significant differences that remain. They are centered around ordained ministry, communion, and the mission of the church.

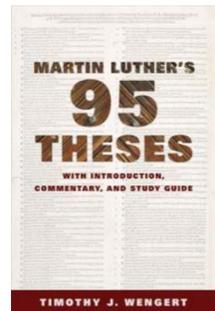
I would encourage anyone who is interested in ecumenical church relations to read it.

For this entire century, the Northeastern Ohio Synod and both the Youngstown Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church have shared a Covenant relationship. The Covenant professes a common Confession of Faith and dedicates the Diocese and the Synod to pray, study, and act for Christian unity.

To implement the Covenant, a Commission was created, made up of Lutheran and Catholic lay and clergy representatives. This Commission meets bimonthly to discuss ecumenical issues and to take Action Plan initiatives. You can learn more about the Commission on their website: <http://lccovenant.weebly.com/>

You can learn more about the Covenant and what all is taking place this year as we commemorate the Reformation in 2017 from our Covenant Commission members, who will be leading a workshop entitled: *Growing Together in Christian Unity: Lutheran-Catholic Covenant*.

I hope you will also take advantage of another Reformation related workshops we offer today. Pastor Dan Caruso will lead a discussion on *the 95 Theses*. What I hope you will take away from the study of that historic document is that the message of the Reformation is God's love for us. It is a love that frees us and redefines us as people of God and as members of the whole body of Christ. Thesis number 62 states it best: *The true treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.*



What it means to be Lutheran is that we unceasingly *proclaim* this good news, and *live* this good news—not that other Christians aren't right there with us—but we continue to be Lutheran, that there might be, in the church catholic, at least one denomination, one community within the Body of Christ, that keeps bringing this up, persistently if need be, that the just live by faith; that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; that we are saved by grace, as a gift, through faith in Jesus, and not by human works, or accomplishments or obedience.

What does it mean for us to be Lutheran?

Today, we seem to continue to think of Lutheranism in cultural terms, and ethnic terms, rather than in Biblical, theological terms—which get at the heart, indeed, of what it means to be Lutheran.

Being Lutheran means that we talk together as Christians about tough, cultural issues. We need each other, even when it is painful to stay engaged with each other. God's word, the Holy Gospel, informs us that Jesus does not avoid anyone because of their ethnicity. Jesus does not avoid anyone because of their religious belief, different as they may be. Jesus does not avoid anyone because of whatever danger or perception of danger they may pose to him. After all, he went to the cross; so, what more danger could he have feared.

The harmful, incessant problem of racism in our world and in our society, is woven into virtually every expression of anger, violence, and the narrow-mindedness of our current polarized political climate. I caution you not to ignore or minimize the importance of this.

Last year we introduced a group that has been gathering on a regular basis for several months now to engage in these discussions. They are once again offering you an opportunity to do the same in our second workshop block. I pray you will take advantage of this opportunity to begin conversations with someone who is different from you, whether racially, politically, ethnically or religiously.

With a deep history of interfaith dialogue and engagement, we are in a unique position to transform the world in a positive way on Christ's behalf. Let us forge ahead into this assembly and into this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation with a sense of authenticity and confidence about who we are, combined with compassion, curiosity, and respect for those who are different.

My prayer is that, with God's Word as our Heritage and Hope, we will be set free in this world to discover in a new way what it means to be a Lutheran Christian yesterday, today, and forever.

Thank you.

+Bishop Abraham Allende