



Eastern Washington-Idaho

Synod supplement

Gathering to do the church's work

Participants study Jesus' Great Commission during 2007 synod assembly

Text and photos by Elizabeth Luiten

In April, 218 people gathered in Boise to do the synod's business. The theme, "Let Down the Nets," focused the assembly's attention on Jesus' Great Commission and Great Commandment to love our neighbors and go, make disciples. "Let's go fishing!" said Bishop Martin Wells during opening worship.

Our keynoter, Bishop Claude E. Payne of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, spoke three times and preached during closing worship. His easy Texan drawl drew participants in as he outlined a greater vision of miraculous expectation, passionate worship and an enormous sense of call.

"We need 21st-century disciples; we need to reclaim passion; we need to reclaim the great commission with enthusiasm and vigor," said Payne, co-author of *Reclaiming the Great Commission* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

"To have any chance of becoming a missionary church, we [have] to get serious about evangelism," Payne said. One of his main points is that congregations need to work together and think of themselves as mission outposts of the greater church. Doing this breaks down the isolation and shares resources and encouragement. The goal is to be a missionary church, one that creatively reaches out to all sorts of people and brings health and wholeness.

Payne spoke about the changes that happened in his diocese when congregations changed their mindset to a missionary church.

"The vision wasn't really mine," Payne said, "but that of the Holy Spirit. Our people realized intuitively that something needed to change. We stepped out in faith. When you have a holy and godly vision that is focused on Christ and on the needs of the culture, the faith-

ful respond. It's contagious. It brings joy and wellness, confidence and courage.

"Scripture undergirds what I have presented. Jesus was passionate about reaching the lost and the unchurched. Jesus was focused on the glorious and miraculous expectation of transforming lives." He called each of us to expect the miraculous in our congregations.

A quilted banner with the weekend's logo, created by Sandy Stone of Faith Lutheran in Caldwell, Idaho, depicted a net full of fish being pulled in by a family. This was the focal point for the weekend to remind participants of the Great Commission as they worshiped, learned and worked through the business of the church.

The assembly gathered in worship daily. Communion was shared at the opening and closing of the assembly. Voices rang throughout the gathering space accompanied by handbells, praise bands and the assembly choir. Most of the hymns and liturgy came from the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship book.

There were many stories of what Bishop Wells called "miracles of hope," including:

- The Rev. Eric Olsen from Luther Heights Bible Camp told of a boy who was new to the church and had just received the sign of the cross on his forehead. He turned to his friend and said, "If you rub it in, it will last forever."
- Margie Fiedler spoke about the Mission Investment Fund and MissionFuture4Kidz. Fiedler told a story about when her now 15-year-old son was 7, he got his investment state-



Bishop Claude E. Payne of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas in a keynote tells the assembly: "We need to reclaim the Great Commission with enthusiasm and vigor."

Eastern Washington-Idaho



Bishop Martin Wells (right) and Mark Nelson provide the necessary air to blow out the candles on the Lutheran Campus Ministry 100-year celebration cake.

ment in the mail, opened it and said, “Mom! I made 7 cents. And I’m helping to build congregations!” St. John Lutheran, Sprague, Wash., was highlighted as a MissionFuture4Kidz congregation. “It’s a little congregation doing BIG stuff,” Bishop Wells said.

- Gideon Lutheran in Connell, Wash., told about their prison ministry “Room at the Inn,” which helps families of offenders with hotel costs so they can come to visit.

- Tree of Life Lutheran in Terrace Heights, Wash., shared about their growing outreach to the Spanish-speaking people in their area.

- Faith Lutheran in Leavenworth has been offering citizenship classes.

- The group who traveled to Tanzania, our companion synod, shared stories, pictures and video clips of their time there. The group of 13 helped build staff housing at Tumaini School (which translates to Hope School). The group’s goal was to strengthen one another for life and mission in the body of Christ. Mary Reed of Caldwell, Idaho, one of the group members, created a quilt made with

fabric purchased in Tanzania. It was raffled off at the assembly, raising \$2,145 for Tumaini School.

Ministry partners including *The Lutheran* magazine, ELCA colleges and seminaries, and Lutheran Community Services Northwest addressed the assembly. Pastors of the North Idaho cluster challenged synod pastors to wear a pedometer to raise money for World Hunger by getting sponsors for the amount of steps they take.

A birthday cake helped celebrate 100 years of Lutheran Campus Ministry. The assembly sang “Happy Birthday to Us,” recognizing everyone’s part in LCM. The trick candles required much “hot air” to extinguish, so Bishop Wells and the Rev. Mark Nelson, bishop’s assistant, rose to the challenge to participants’ delight.

“There’s a spirit of enthusiasm here. I can feel it,” said Christina Jackson-Skelton, ELCA treasurer and churchwide representative. She shared a video with Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson who spoke about growing in evangelical outreach and becoming a faithful, welcoming congregation.

“We will only be successful when each of us is ready to invite our neighbors to church,” he said.

Synod council members were commissioned during closing worship. They are: Susan Berg, vice president; Marilyn Rounds, secretary; Tami McHugh, treasurer; Albert Hanson, lay member-at-large; Eric Dull, clergy-at-large; Ron Jetter, clergy-at-large; Robert Kenyon, clergy-at-large; Derek McMains, youth position; Patricia Cowen, lay member-at-large; Wayne Stevens, lay cluster representative; Carol Nelson, clergy cluster representative; David Haven, clergy cluster representative; and Paula Kenney, lay cluster representative.

Thank-yous were given to those members going off the synod council, including a special one to Ray Boyd who has served for 20 years. The outgoing members also received “servant towels” for their service to the synod.

Alex Bryant, a high school senior, received the bishop’s scholarship to Trinity Lutheran College, Issaquah, Wash. Bryant, the youth representative on the synod council for two years, plans to study early childhood education or worship and music.

The synod budget included a 3 percent increase and congregations must also increase their benevolence by 3 percent to meet this budget. The budget passed.

As the assembly came to a close, Laura Stembridge, 24, from Trinity Lutheran, Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, looked on in disbelief. New to the church, she decided to see what it’s all about. “It’s unbelievable. It’s an emotional rollercoaster,” she said. “I came as an observer because I had a burgeoning interest in the church. ... It’s helpful. It’s just good.” □

Elizabeth Luiten is a family and youth ministry director at Immanuel Lutheran, Moses Lake, Wash.

Seven resolutions

For the first time, all voting delegates used hand-held, electronic voting machines. After many practice rounds and much laughter, this method proved efficient and a convenient way to count votes. For full texts of the resolutions, go to www.ewaisynod.org.

Resolution 1: “Tanzania Sabbatical Teaching Opportunity” asks pastors to prayerfully consider teaching at the Tanzania Bible School in Tanzania during their time of sabbatical. Passed.

Resolution 2: “A Memorial to Respond to the Decision of the Discipline Hearing Committee” asks the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to amend two documents, including *Definitions and Guidelines* and *Vision and Expectations*, to change current policy regarding people who are in same-gender relationships. Failed.

Resolution 3: “A Memorial to Encourage Refraining from Discipline” asks the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to refrain from disciplining rostered leaders and candidates for rostered service who are in same-gender relationships. Failed.

Resolution 4: “A Resolution Concerning Term Limits for the Office of Bishop” would delete “the bishop may be reelected only once, limiting the number of years in office to 12” from the bylaws.” Failed.

Resolution 5: “Look Back, Moving Forward 100 Years of Lutheran Campus Ministry” urged support for students and ministries. Passed.

Resolution 6: “2007 Reaffirmation for Mission” called for congregations to recommit to the Great Commission. Passed.

Resolution 7: “Resolution of Solidarity with Victims of Sexual Abuse and with the Spokane Diocese” pledged to give \$1,000 a year for five years to the diocese. Passed.

‘Lifting our vision’

We are a church on the road together (in Greek, *synodus*)—encountering life and eager to respond to God’s love. God is calling us to be a Great Commission and a Great Commandment ministry in response to the good news we have received (Matthew 22:37-40, 25:31-46 and 28:18-20).

Lifting our eyes, we see the stunning natural beauty where we live. We see as well a cussed independence and parched spirit in this place. Many are afraid. God has told us we need not be afraid for death is conquered. Our new life is in following Jesus as disciples.

We are a church that is neither hierarchical nor congregational. We see congregations and leaders bound together for mission and sharing the unique gifts of each on behalf of the whole. We are this body of Christ, as individual believers and as congregations of great diversity; one church, many gifts.

Jesus!

Our effort is all about Jesus. In him we have been drawn to the deepest trust of our lives. We want to follow him, in word and service. This “man for others” calls us to be “the church for others.”

Gratitude, gratitude

Our power source is gratitude for the life we have been given and regiven in Jesus. We are servants of this gratitude; servants to all. This is the way the Spirit gives us breath, hope and calm when it all spins so fast. We pray to remember how to breathe, for God’s inspiration and to calm our hearts.

No fear! Transformation

Many are afraid because the world is changing so fast. We are not afraid because Jesus and his life anchor us in confidence. Together we seek the transformation that is God’s constant will (Romans 12:2). Our anchor holds true in Jesus and we wonder where he is leading us.

Miracles of hope

We confess we have lost or forgotten our capacity for hope in miracles. We have forgotten that God invites us to personal transformation. We pray God will open our eyes, lift our vision, restore our hope. Rekindle in us the power to move mountains. Remove our lesser loyalties and our fears. We will be people of miraculous expectation and personal transformation!

Yes, everyone come!

Ours is a geography in transition, racially, economically and culturally. Maintenance of our ministries has led us to dig in and try to hide from these challenges. Our vision is one body, one church in many languages and colors, gifted by all. We will be the church of Pentecost!

Come, Lord Jesus!

Finally, it is not our effort. It is not our vision. It is God calling to us to enact and incarnate the kingdom of God now. We are all ministers of this vision. It is our calling and vocation. This vision shapes our courage. We are not afraid to fail in this trust. Come, Lord Jesus!

—Bishop Martin Wells



Eastern Washington-Idaho

'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed ...'

By the Rev. Erik Samuelson

In many ways, Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Spokane was a typical ELCA congregation: small and struggling, pews (partly) filled with mostly older folks, facing a future that didn't look particularly bright. Just the sort of congregations that new seminary graduates such as myself are being called to serve.

Dreaming of youth, enthusiasm, energy and young families, small churches across the ELCA wait with anticipation for their new, young pastor to turn things around.

And yet, as I met the people of Bethlehem in my last months at seminary, I began quickly to get the sense that something else was going on, a glimmer of hope that could only be the working of the Spirit.

They sensed a call from God for something more—for a future of mission and ministry from this place, a future that God had in store for them but that they couldn't yet imagine. It started with a divine bait-and-switch.

The God who comes to us in our darkest hour with the free gift of grace showed up at Bethlehem in the form of a big pile of money, a three-year Transformational Ministry grant from the Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission unit of the ELCA.

I call it "bait-and-switch" because what we thought we were getting was not exactly what the Spirit had in store for us.

What began as a building up of our bottom-line has transformed into a building up of mission and ministry.

The grant was the first of many small miracles that are gradually transforming us from asking, "How will we survive?" to instead asking, "What is God calling us to do? Who is God calling us to be?"

For a while, our leaders have been freed to focus again on mission, on our purpose in God's dream for us and for the world. We've remembered that "Hey, there is more to being the church of Christ than just keeping on keeping on!"

Part of the grant was to send the pastor and a team of lay people to a Transformational Ministry Conference. We were expecting a conference full of ideas, programs and strategies. Here was the Spirit's second bait-and-switch.

Rather than tips and tricks for us to bring home, the conference was, itself, a transformational experience. We weren't prepared for what would happen to us.

As we read the book of Acts together we, with others from congregations all over the Pacific Northwest, began to hear the word of God, guiding us in finding new vision, sense of purpose and understanding that we are a part of God's mission to love and bless the world and that God has a part for each of us.

We were gathered, fed and then sent into unknown neighborhoods for "evangelism training"—enough to cause panic in any Lutheran. But instead of "winning souls for Jesus" our task was to look, listen and ask, "What is God already doing in this place?" Then we were to come together to dream about how we could be a part of it.

Little by little the Spirit began to stir among us.

What was shocking was just how Lutheran all of this "mission talk" actually is: reading the Bible to listen for the living word that God means for you; listening for God's call and living out that vocation as people and

as communities; focusing on prayer and worship in word and sacrament as God's communication to us; and trusting not in our own actions but in God revealed in Christ through the Spirit.

Also: not simply taking things as they are but weighing everything against God's word alone; seeing the structure of the church not as an perfect and holy institution but as a tool for God's work in the world; and seeking to be *ecclesia semper reformanda*, "the always-being-reformed Church."

These were the very things that began to transform the church 500 years ago. But in the comfort of Christendom, we've forgotten just how central they are to our life of faith.

I wish I could say that ever since the transformation conference all of Bethlehem's troubles have simply vanished. We still struggle to know what God is calling us to do.

But that's a much more interesting, fun and life-giving question to wrestle with than how to keep the doors open and the lights on.

So we're turning to the Bible, to prayer, to looking for God at work, to seeing miracles among us, to reclaiming vocations for everyone, to reconnecting to our neighborhood and to trying to be a church engaged in God's mission.

Through it all, the Spirit is giving us little tastes of new life—new ministries, new connections, a new sense of God's presence among us.

Now we're looking forward to taking part in the mission God has for our little corner of the world.

I invite you to check up on us from time to time to see what God has been up to by visiting www.bethlehemspokane.org. □