

Oral Report 2019 Assembly

(Sing “Spirit of Gentleness”)

“You call from tomorrow; you break ancient schemes...With bold new decisions your people arise.”

On the eve of Pentecost, it is easy to sing these words. In our daily lives, it can be much harder to live them out!

As the NJ Synod, we live in that tension – trusting the Spirit of the Risen Christ to breathe new life into us while also wanting to hold onto what we know. We may make bold new decisions but lack the ability to do what it takes to implement them. 2019 has been and will be a time of change – in how we live out our calling to be church together, in the ways we are staffed to serve this church, and in committing to trust God and each other to carry through with bold new decisions.

These beautiful boxes decorating the dais are from your Mission District meetings this spring. They were used to help you think about the theme of our assembly and more importantly, to get you dreaming about ways our congregations are called to Be Bold in serving Christ’s mission.

In areas of worship, stewardship, evangelism, education, witness, and service – you wrote down what you are doing that is bold or what you hope to try in the near future. You talked about ways to work together in bold experiments to make a difference in the lives of the people in your neighborhood. We had fun reading these boxes when they returned to the office and I can’t wait to see how you follow through with these bold dreams – written outside the box!

As a synod, all our congregations walking together, we have been engaged in this type of dreaming and thinking for a long time. We know that the church is changing, fast. What once worked to fill the pews has long since been ineffective. Cocooning ourselves inside the church building means we miss out on what God is already doing in the world around us. Waiting for the “right pastor” to bring in young families (who tithe) isn’t what God is calling you to do – and it negates the truth that you have the gifts and skills already present to be the church you need to be.

In this synod, we have a bit over 12,000 people a week at worship, on average. We have over 50,000 baptized members in our congregations. While that number is fewer than in past years, it is enough to share the grace and mercy of God. It is enough to begin a movement of loving service to our neighbors. It is enough to boldly proclaim Jesus Christ in our word and deeds.

I have been a witness to the bold ways our congregations live out the call to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ. I read your newsletters and stalk your social media posts to celebrate your ministries. I accept invitations to come and see first-hand how the spirit of the Risen Christ is breathing new life into our communities. Together we bear witness that our ministries are not ours alone.

Epiphany, Pleasantville and St. Luke, Dunellen called Spanish speaking pastors to help lead them into their neighborhoods and engage in new ministry ventures. Opening their hearts and their doors to the people God has placed in their lives, these two congregations are taking a chance on something new for them. Knowing that what they’ve always done isn’t what is needed moving forward, they have released financial and emotional resources to follow Jesus into something new. Will this result in sustainable congregations? I don’t know. But I do know that

because of this bold action the gospel will be proclaimed in a language the neighborhood understands and lives will be changed by the power of Christ's redeeming love flowing through the people of Epiphany and St. Luke's.

Several congregations – Calvary, Allendale; Redeemer, Ramsay; Good Shepherd, Glen Rock; Zion, Saddle River – have combined their confirmation classes so the young people have a larger group of peers and the leaders have more collaboration partners, which leads to a fuller and more vibrant ministry. Will this effort suddenly make these congregations grow? I don't know. But I do know that in boldly coming together, the young people and their leaders will experience the love of Christ in new and powerful ways through this partnership.

Cohorts of congregations have come together to experience a variety of congregational vitality emphases: Cultivating Missional Capacity for Sustainability (CMC); Equipping for Vitality (E4V); South Hudson Lutherans; Leadership for Faithful Innovation (LFI); Intentional Redevelopment. Each of these cohorts spends intentional time in bible study, prayer, mutual encouragement, and dreaming. They walk together into new possibilities for the sake of Christ's mission. They are being equipped with resources and share new spiritual practices with other. Will the experience of participating in these cohorts lead to mega-churches? I don't know. But I do know the disciples boldly participating in these cohorts, from 26 congregations, will feel strengthened for mission, whatever shape it takes in the future.

When mold and structural issues became apparent at St. Paul, Teaneck, they made the bold decision to sell their building and relocate their ministry. They are currently worshiping in the Grace, Teaneck building while they do the demographic work of identifying the right community to move into. Leaving their beloved space, knowing it will be torn-down, and asking where God is leading them has not been easy. Will their decisions turn-around their ministry? I don't know. But I do know that in boldly risking everything, they are finding new life.

Christus in Camden has partnered with the Roman Catholic sisters of St. Joseph for neighborhood outreach and programs. The sisters have renovated part of the Christus building in order to provide computer, ESL, and other classes. Together the sisters and members of Christus maintain a community garden and provide a feeding program. Thanks to the relief of some burdens of caring for the building, Christus has been able to begin a music ministry for the neighborhood children. Will this partnership be a long-term solution to sustainability? I don't know. But I do know this bold ecumenical witness is bearing fruit now for the people in the Cramer Hill section of Camden.

Good Shepherd, Florham Park and St. Mark, Morristown have partnered together to share one full-time pastor, Beau Nelson. They are combining financial resources and adjusting their worship times in order to better steward the resources available. Flo-Mo, as our staff lovingly calls this new venture, will be able to spend more time and energy on outreach and less time worrying about paying the bills. Will this new partnership grow the parish? I don't know. But I do know boldly experimenting together can bring a renewed sense of being church for the sake of the world.

At Zion, Barnegat Light (less than a block to the beach), Pastor Bill McGowan noticed a number of people out walking early on Sunday mornings. Some headed to the beach for the day, others out for a morning stroll before the day's activities. He decided to set up chairs outside the church building and invite these early morning walkers to gather for a brief communion service. What began as a couple of people stopping by has grown to become a worshipping community giving witness to those who pass by. Will this worship venture transform the congregation? I don't

know. But I do know by boldly offering this opportunity to gather for word and sacrament, people that would not otherwise step into the church are impacted by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Six congregations have closed since our last assembly. I am sure these will not be the last six to close. It may seem odd to name these closings when I am talking about congregations doing bold things – but making the decision to bring a congregation's ministry to a close is a bold decision. These congregations were able to celebrate their ministries and make recommendations for their assets to become legacies for other ministries. As hard as these decisions were, these congregations knew that staying open and squandering resources they didn't have was unfaithful. Their legacies will impact numerous congregations, agencies, institutions, and ministries far beyond what they were able to do in their diminished capacities. How many congregations will close in the next year? I don't know. But I do know in making this bold decision, these congregations bear witness to the truth that we are Resurrection people, who know when something dies, God will birth something new!

I could go on and on and on and on with specific examples (but that was last night's song!). All of this is to say that, together, we are making bold decisions in order to remain faithful to our call as people of God. Just as we witness this new life in our congregations, your synod staff is experiencing similar changes and challenges. We have spent time already discussing some of them. But I want to talk about three in particular.

First, this synod has been committed to advocacy since before the formation of the ELCA. We were one of the first synods to have a full-time director of governmental ministry (Deacon Carol Kasabach). For many years we were able continue this full-time funding, allowing Pastors Bruce Davidson and then Sara Lilja to serve in an almost single-minded way. But for the past couple of years, Pastor Lilja has been nimble in putting together a partnership with the Episcopal Church and the two dioceses located in our state. When that partnership wasn't able to be sustained, she began to dream dreams of what might be next. During this past year, she has worked tirelessly with small groups of stakeholders, including seminaries located in NJ, to bring to fruition a new organization – one that will depend on emerging leaders and the commitment of many partners. It is not fully fleshed out yet, but knowing Pastor Lilja, it will be. Will it be the same as what it was? By no means. Will it continue to provide a vehicle for us to live our faith out loud? Absolutely. While this ministry will change, we will not abandon our commitment to advocate for God's justice.

Second, we have already acknowledged that Pastor Scott Schantzenbach is leaving the staff and retiring at the end of June. Actually his last day of work will be June 20. He has been a faithful partner in ministry for a long time. Most of you have personally experienced his ministry. With his retirement, I need to ask for your grace over the summer as we plan for and bring on a new assistant to the bishop. I anticipate we will not be able to have someone in place until at least September. So we will call on our mission cluster counselors and deans a little more, we will practice patience with each other, and we will embody our core values as we move ahead.

Third, the reality of our financial situation, which you know well, means we can no longer support a full-time youth ministry specialist and another full-time assistant to the bishop. We have made cuts in other areas in order to hold onto this youth ministry position as long as we could. In conversations with our ad-hoc team, this became clear fairly quickly. It is also true that if we could, we would add staff in the area of communications and perhaps senior ministry. But that is not where we find ourselves. So the question becomes, how do we honor our commitment to walk with the young people of our synod without a full-time dedicated staff person?

This question will be answered in partnership with the Youth Ministry Mission Team, Cross Roads Camp, the synod council, and the current staff. We have models in other synods that can help us in this conversation. We have gifted people in our synod who have worked with youth ministry for a long time and have ideas already. While a number of our congregations lament the lack of young people, our immigrant communities are a resource in how to engage the larger numbers of youth we see present in those congregations.

This change is scheduled to begin in February 2020. We have time to dream together and plan for the future. When the time is right, we will celebrate the ministry of Jason Reed who has served faithfully and well as the youth ministry specialist since January 1999. And we trust that God will, in fact, do a bold new thing in this synod in regard to our youth ministry.

In addition to these three staff people, Sara, Scott, and Jason, please join me in thanking the other folks who make up our team: LuAnn Barnes, my executive administrative assistant; Dawn Roberts, our administrative assistant for mission and ministry; Lois Parrett, our director of operations and accountant; Pastor Kimberly Vaughn, assistant to the bishop, and, Pastor Maristela Freiberg (who's not really ours but we claim her), deployed Director for Evangelical Mission.

We have several part-time and contract staff – Pastor Mark David Johnson coordinates our supply pastors, Pastor Becky Resch coordinates our candidacy work, the Sapon family cares for our building and grounds, Matt McDevitt and Bob Poole serve as property managers. There are many volunteers who enable us to carry out our ministry – these include our mission cluster counselors and deans, our synod council and the officers – Arundel Clarke, vice-president, Cassandra Mack, secretary, and Jim Harris, treasurer, and countless committee and team members.

Finally, I want to thank my family and hope you will as well – my husband Dan Whitener, our daughter and son-in-law Olivia Whitener and Kurt Houwen, our son and his girlfriend, Ethan Whitener and Kate Jewson – they keep me grounded and model God's unconditional love for me every day. Without their support and encouragement, I am not sure I could serve in this role.

This work – being the church God calls us to be -- is hard and joyful and messy and heartbreaking and life-giving and fun – all at the same time. There are many times when I respond, "I don't know" when asked about the future. But what I do know is this – the future is not behind us – it is not about returning or retreating to some historic glory days but about following Jesus into the abundant life God has in store for us. It is stepping out in faith and boldly proclaiming that we trust the one who holds us all. It is dreaming dreams and seeing visions and arising to walk together in Jesus' name.

(Sing again last verse of hymn)