

forgiveness she and others in her situation had for those who perpetrated such unspeakable violence and she vowed to live every day working for peace.

On March 24, I joined over 800,000 people in Washington, DC. I rode on one of 5 buses our synod chartered to take 250 youth and adults to participate in the March for Our Lives – many of you were part of that day. The gathering was organized by youth who had witnessed gun violence in their schools, in their communities, and in their homes. It was a public witness to the fact that violence will not have the last word and the idolatry of guns in this country will be stopped. We prayed with our feet as we marched for that day when peace will reign. Children and youth showed us the way forward, a way of acceptance and love., a way of justice and peace.

In Bosnia and Washington DC, I witness God's abundant grace in action – opening hearts, renewing faith, transforming lives.

On February 18, Pastor Michael Gebhart invited me to participate in worship at St. Michael, Cherry Hill. It was an ordinary Sunday in many ways. It was an extraordinary Sunday in another. On that day, 7 people were baptized and welcomed into the family of God. 2 adults, 1 teenager, and 4 babies were washed in the waters of grace and mercy. Water flowed, promises were made, and chaos ensued! The church grew by 7 – not the thousands recorded in scripture, but significant nonetheless. I got to pour, pray, mark, and witness the boundless grace of God in action.

Five weeks after all that water was poured over the heads of these new sisters and brothers in Christ, I was again part of worship that involved getting wet! On Maundy Thursday I participated in the washing of feet at New Visions Homeless Day Shelter in Camden. As the water splashed on tired, achy, sore, and ugly feet, we were all reminded that we are guests cleansed by a servant God. Whether the washer or the washed, the waters of new life connect us one to another. Standing in the sanctuary of a well-maintained and established church and kneeling on the floor of a homeless shelter, I witness God's abundant grace in action – opening hearts, renewing faith, transforming lives.

Throughout the year, I have been invited to join you as you celebrate significant events in your congregations. I have been in congregations observing 50, 100, 125, and 150 years of faithful ministry – looking back at the beginnings and looking ahead to what the future might hold. I have participated in ordinations and installations of new pastors, the welcoming of interim pastors, and the name-change of one of our pastors. While different in each context, all of these celebratory events include joy, hope, anticipation, and usually cake! They are occasions to give thanks for the grace of God that sustains and calls and empowers us to love and serve our neighbors.

On January 21, I participated in the closing worship service of Ascension Lutheran Church in Haddon Heights – an occasion that did not include looking forward with hope, but rather looking back at the past with thankfulness and sitting with the grief of a beloved community coming to its end. Long-time members told stories of weddings, baptisms, confirmations, and communions. The members of Ascension crafted a legacy that will bring new life to a number of ministries across our church. Gathered one last time around bread and wine, we dared to believe there is life after death.

Across our synod in times of celebration and new life as well as at times of death, I witness God's abundant grace in action – opening hearts, renewing faith, transforming lives.

Throughout this assembly, you will learn more about some of the new ventures you are supporting in our synod. Ministries like Morning Star Fellowship in Ridgefield, Misión pan da vida in Passaic, Santa Isabel outreach to the Elizabeth Detention Center, and more. Reaching out in new ways to immigrant populations, those living in poverty or detention, speaking a gospel word of love and mercy – these new ways of being church together are daring experiments that depend on God's grace to give them life.

And we celebrate with some old congregations reaching out in new ways to the communities where they are planted. Places across our synod that have opened their doors and their hearts to provide families of children with special needs a unique worship service, growing gardens to donate fresh produce for the nearby food pantry, gathering in parks and coffee shops for bible study, providing a meal and Christian education on Tuesday nights for the youth of the community, partnering with a neighboring congregation to strengthen their witness. These well-established congregations still listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit to breathe fresh life and new ways of being the church Jesus needs today.

In both new and old communities of faith, I witness God's abundant grace in action – opening hearts, renewing faith, transforming lives.

Part of my call as bishop involves serving in the Conference of Bishops for the ELCA. I have been on the Future Directions Team for a few years, a group that was called together by our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, to listen to God and the church, make some recommendations about priorities for the ELCA, and look at ways of implementing those priorities.

After much prayer, listening and learning across the church, the ELCA church council adopted Future Directions 2025 – 5 goals of the church we are becoming. I hope this is not new information for you! Those 5 goals are:

1. ***A Thriving Church*** --- spreading the gospel and deepening faith for all people. Finding new ways to tell the “old, old story of Jesus and his love”. To spread the gospel, we need to know what it is – so we gather in worship and for learning. We offer ourselves and our whole lives in praise of the one who gave everything for us. We learn the songs of the faith that sustained our ancestors throughout many generations and we learn the songs of a new generation that will speak to our world today. Our communities of faith pulse with the lifeblood of the risen Christ stirring up faith in ways we don't dare dream.

2. ***A Church equipping people to live out their baptismal vocations*** in the world and this church. I was recently at a confirmation class when the kids asked who the most important person in the church is (besides Jesus, of course). Was it the pastor? The musician? The bishop? We know the answer – it is the baptized child of God, walking wet throughout life. How do we equip all the baptized to live their lives as a response to all that God has done? Do we affirm those who live out their calling as school teachers, engineers, janitors, doctors, plumbers, care-givers, parents, neighbors as much as we do those called to be deacons and pastors? Pastor Vaughn has cards she gives out that

quote Martin Luther on one side with the words, “I am baptized! I am baptized!” and on the other side the words found in our baptismal liturgy of the ways we promise to respond to that wonderful gift. Carrying that card around is a daily reminder of the grace of God poured out to each and every one of us (perhaps you can find Pastor Vaughn to get a card of your own and one to give away).

3. An inviting and welcoming church that reflects and embraces the diversity of our communities and the gifts and opportunities that diversity brings. We’ve been working on this one a long time! We can’t keep waiting for people to flock into our doors just because we’re nice people or have a good musician or we like our pastor. Inviting people to meet the living Lord is an awesome task. Inviting people who look and think differently than you is an opportunity to meet angels unaware. Letting God’s boundless grace lead you out your doors and into the community can be life-changing. But we know it isn’t easy. How can we help each other be more intentional in that invitation? What needs to die or change in us so the boundaries we put up are knocked down and doors are not only opened but we actually work through them into our neighborhoods?

4. A visible church deeply committed to working ecumenically and with other people of faith for justice, peace and reconciliation in communities and around the world. A justice-oriented and partnered church is something we know about in NJ. We work to make a positive difference in the lives of those around us because that’s who we are created to be – “repairers of the breach” to use biblical words. And it starts in our own households – loving our closest neighbors so together we can love those farther away. Our commitment to work for justice comes from our deep understanding that in Jesus Christ, we have received what we don’t deserve and have not earned. Trusting this grace, we reach out in Jesus’ name to eradicate racism, end hunger and its root causes, ensure a just and sustainable livelihood for all, and enact legislation that works for the whole people of God.

5. A well-governed, connected, and sustainable church. A well-governed church – which includes having the right staff, the best leaders possible, and being good stewards of our resources. Being a well-governed church means we sometimes need to make difficult decisions that affect real people – decisions not always embraced by everyone but necessary for the sake of the whole ministry. We continually listen for God’s voice in our decision making knowing that a well-governed church is one that is nimble and responsive to our calling to be the body of Christ in the world.

These goals, while adopted for the churchwide expression of the ELCA, serve our synod as well. They describe the church we hope to be – a church that depends on and lives by the boundless grace of Jesus Christ. These 5 goals connect us to each other and to the world God so desperately loves. They commit us to being church together and to looking forward into a future God holds. They describe a church, a synod, grounded in Christ and alive with the Holy Spirit.

But living into these goals means we dare to listen – to God, our neighbors, and each other. We will need to make some difficult decisions about the future of some of our congregations. I asked a group of pastors to dream about what it would mean to have 100 vital, strong congregations with an additional 150 satellites, outposts, or preaching points. How would that strengthen the gospel witness in NJ? What kind of leadership is needed to re-think the way we’ve always done church in order to be the church Jesus needs us to be? What would we give up? What would we take on?

In those conversations, some of the pastors got hung up on the numbers – which wasn't the point! Others dared to express imaginative and creative ideas of partnering with the community, sharing staff, letting go and taking on for the sake of introducing people to the love and grace of a living savior.

However we think about the future – becoming the church God is calling us to be will mean death and resurrection. I trust God will provide the way forward. I trust we will be church for the sake of our neighbors. But death is hard. Letting go of what we have known and treasured causes anxiety and grief. While change is a core value for us, we are still slow to embrace it.

Yet we are a resurrection church – being surprised again and again that our companion on this journey is, in fact, the risen Christ – leading us, teaching us, holding us, and breaking open a new future.

[I have been talking for a while. So now it's your turn – where have you seen God's boundless grace alive and active? What are your hopes and fears for the future of this church? You congregation? Our synod? (Take a few minutes to talk to your neighbors)]

As we come back together, I want to conclude with thank you.

First, to your synod council and officers – they are volunteers whom you elected to serve in between synod assemblies. They come together for day-long and overnight meetings throughout the year to hear reports, think strategically, approve actions, and listen for where God is calling our synod. So thank you, synod council and officers.

Second, thank you to your synod staff. While fewer in number, they continue to provide support and encouragement for all our leaders and congregations. I will call them by name so you can thank them individually when you see them – we have part-time, contract staff which includes Bob Baer our statistician; the Sapon family who cleans the synod office and takes care of the grounds; Pastor Mark Johnson who coordinates the supply pastors for vacant congregations; and Pastor Carol Petersen who is the candidacy coordinator.

Your pastoral staff consists of Pastors Scott Schantzenbach, Kimberly Vaughn, and Maristela Freiberg (who is deployed from the ELCA as our Director of Evangelical Mission). Jason Reed continues as your youth ministry specialist and global mission coordinator; Pastor Sara Lilja is the Director of LEAMNJ.

In the office, Dawn Roberts serves as administrative assistant to all the staff except me and is the registrar for assembly; Lois Parrett is our director of operations and accountant and first-time manager of the assembly; and LuAnn Barnes is my excellent Executive Administrative Assistant. These are the voices you hear answering your phone calls and your questions. They work hard to live out our mission as a synod and do so joyfully and gracefully. Please thank your synod staff. Third, I say thank you to my family who keeps me grounded, loves me even when I am not so lovable and embodies God's grace for me every day. To my partner, Dan Whitener, my daughter and son-in-law, Olivia and Kurt; and my son Ethan and his girlfriend, Kate – thank you.

Finally, when I started in this office 5 years ago, people often asked me what was the biggest surprise of the office? My answer was always that I was surprised how much people want the church to do well and how many people pray for me and our common work. That took me by surprise my first year serving as bishop. I am not so surprised by that anymore because I have heard it so often – “Bishop, I pray for you every day or our congregation prays for you every Sunday.” So while this doesn’t surprise me anymore, it is something I cherish. Your prayers are yet another sign of the boundless grace of God I experience every day in this call. I hope you know how much I need those prayers and how thankful I am to serve as bishop in such a great synod. Grace abounds, my friends, grace abounds.

Following the report, Bishop Bartholomew, assisted by Vice President Arundel Clarke, presided at Holy Communion, which concluded Plenary Session #3. The Assembly was in recess until the opening of Plenary Session #4 at 9:00 AM.