

2009 Bishop's Report

This past year was one of many exciting global travels for me. Following last year's Synod Assembly I was granted a three month Sabbatical that took me both to new places and familiar ones.

In June Marianne and I were the guests of the Pacifica Institute for an 11 day trip to Turkey, where we traveled with a small group of teachers representing Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu traditions, and where we experienced gracious and generous Muslim hospitality.

In July I participated in the Lutheran World Federation's Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, France, where I explored ecumenical spirituality along with young pastors and theologians from Europe, Africa and North America.

Later that month, Marianne and I enjoyed a five day pilgrimage on the island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland, where we traced the steps of the sixth century St Columba, and worshipped with the ecumenical Iona Community.

In early January, Marianne and I joined 43 other ELCA and ELCIC bishops and their spouses for a two week trip to Jordan, Israel and Palestine as a part of the 2009 Bishops Academy. At this year's Spring Conferences I shared some of my perceptions from this trip, which again reminded me of the faithful endurance, witness and service of our brothers and sisters in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land.

In early February I participated in the Asian Lutheran International Conference in Hong Kong, where I visited again with Bishop Nicholas Tai and our Companions in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hong Kong and preached at their new mission congregation in Chung Tung.

And following the Conference, George Tan, Gladys Chow and I were guests of the Taiwan Lutheran Church where we learned of that church's efforts to multiply its ministries and share the good news, including here in the territory of the Southwest California Synod through Truth Lutheran Church in West Covina.

But while all this global travel was personally informative and enriching, it could not replace the many ministries that were happening here in our own Synod.

In 1999, our Synod Assembly adopted seven mission goals for the new millennium. Those seven mission goals, which I've shared with you often are:

1. Intentional outreach to the Diverse Populations of our Communities
2. Intentional outreach to the Ethnic-Specific Populations of our Synod
3. Intentional outreach to Children, Youth and Young Adults
4. The Development of New Congregations
5. The Transformation of Congregations
6. The Re-rooting of Congregations in their Neighborhoods and
7. The Development of an Institute for Ministry in Changing Communities

Since it is now 2009, I thought it might be interesting for us -- especially as we prepare to formulate and adopt a new Synod Strategy hopefully next year--to see how these seven mission goals have both shaped and changed our life together as the Southwest California Synod. So in the remainder of my report, let me share how I think these goals have been lived out over the past decade.

In 1999 our Synod was already one of most diverse in the entire ELCA, and in 2009 it continues to be. We are multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual. On any given Sunday we worship in nine different languages besides English (Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Tagalog, Finnish and American Sign Language) and at Christmastime you can even attend a Swedish Julotta or a German Weihnachten Gottesdienst. Our members include persons in the entertainment industry and the professions, in business and labor. Within our congregations are Ph Ds who oversee the aerospace industry and those who are employed as day laborers. While most of us call ourselves "middle class," within our synod are multi-millionaires and those subsisting on SSI and MediCal sometimes within the same congregation, even in the same pew! We are indeed a diverse people!

And our outreach is equally diverse. Many of us sponsor meal programs or food pantries for the poor and less fortunate. Several congregations allow their facilities to be used as overflow sites for the homeless, and two have provided sanctuary for undocumented immigrants. Many congregations house a wide variety of 12 step programs for persons in recovery, and a growing number are offering support services for persons with special health needs and services. Several congregations are offering job training to the unemployed or underemployed through computer classes and food preparation programs and one has developed a liturgical vestment business. Several congregations offer parenting classes for the moms and dads of those enrolled in their pre-schools, and fifteen RIC Congregations say to gay and lesbian persons and same sex couples “you are welcome here.” Congregation members are visiting the hospitalized, those in nursing homes, and yes, even those in prison to share God’s word with them, to pray and to show the love of Christ.

All of this, in my view, is intentional outreach to the diverse populations in our communities. I know we were doing it ten years ago, but I’d like to believe that by naming this as our first mission goal, that more of us are doing it today, ten years later.

Our second mission goal is to do “intentional outreach to the ethnic specific communities of our Synod.” Thirty-seven of our 135 congregations or 28% of our congregations are now ethnic-specific. Thirteen are identified as primarily African American; thirteen as Asian, and 11 as Latino or Hispanic. These last two groups have increased significantly over the past 10 years in large part because of the new ministries that have been planted in our Synod since 1999. But these ethnic-specific congregations aren’t the whole story. Four of our congregations—Cross in Arcadia, Chinese Life in Alhambra, Faith in Canoga Park, and First in Inglewood—added worship in another language in an effort to reach out to the ethnic specific communities in their parishes. But even without these efforts, the vast majority of our congregations are multi-ethnic or multi-racial. For example, 79 congregations—over half—report African American or African descent members. 92 congregations—over two thirds—report having Asian or Pacific Islanders as members. And 96—over 70%—report having Latino members. Most

of this growth in diversity has come as the result of your own hospitality and openness to the variety of peoples in your communities. But I like to think that you have been encouraged and assisted by Synod actions and strategies also. For example, in 1999 we adopted a Latino strategy for outreach, in 2004 we adopted an Asian and Pacific Islander strategy, and in 2005 we adopted the African Descent strategy. In 1999 we added Maria Paiva as our Director for Latino Ministry. In 2002, Pr. George Tan joined our staff as the Assistant for Mission Empowerment with special responsibilities to the Asian communities in our Synod, and in 2008, Pr. Dennis Mims joined us as the Director for African Descent Outreach. And within the past two years, these gifted staff persons have helped establish Academia de Diakonia, the ELM program for our Spanish speakers, the Center for Chinese Ministry for Chinese seminarians or pastors preparing to become ELCA pastors, and the deacon program for our young African Americans. While we still have a long way to go in reflecting the make-up of our five county area, we are now almost 20% persons of color, twice the original ELCA goal of 10% and ten times larger than the actual ELCA numbers.

Our third goal is to do “intentional outreach to children, youth and young adults.” One of the ways our Synod has done this outreach is through our network of schools and pre-schools. Fifteen congregations—five fewer than in 1999—continue to sponsor and operate elementary schools that touch the lives of close to 3,000 young people, most of whom are not members of our congregations. Fifty congregations—three more than 10 years ago—sponsor pre-schools or early education centers. And another twenty congregations lease their facilities to pre-schools, Head Start programs or Montessori schools. That means that during the week, thousands of children and their parents are on over half the campuses of our churches, touched both by the good news proclaimed and taught there and by the love of teachers and staff.

Two years ago we supplemented this outreach to children, through our “One school, one village and one mission” emphasis. Several congregations made connections with the schools in their neighborhoods that have resulted in some amazing new relationships with the children and youth of their communities. Warner grants have assisted several congregations sponsoring Vacation Bible

Schools or After School programs. Thirty congregations now have family life ministers or youth directors on their staff in an effort to reach out to the children, youth and young adults in their communities. And the programs offered through Lutheran Retreats, Camps and Conferences continue to make a difference in the lives of young people from our congregations.

In 2004 we received a generous grant to help us develop some new ministries for the Young Adults in our Synod. These ministries have also connected with one of the Campus Ministries sponsored by our Synod which reaches out to young adults on four campuses including this one—one more than in 1999.

Are we a younger church than we were 10 years ago? Only slightly. Clearly, we need to keep this emphasis on intentional outreach to children, youth and young adults before us as we formulate our Synod strategy.

Our fourth mission goal is the development of new congregations. Since 1999 our Synod in partnership with the Churchwide ELCA has planted ten new congregations. In 1999 we planted All People's Church in Phillips Ranch, which now is located in Chino Hills in Pacifica Synod. In 2000 it was Iglesia Luterana Mesias in Pasadena. In 2001, Iglesia Luterana Santa Cruz in Santa Maria. In 2003, we planted both Iglesia Luterana Pueblo de Dios in Compton and Iglesia Luterana San Pablo in North Hollywood. In 2004, it was Agape Lutheran Church, now located in San Gabriel. In 2005, the Thai Christian Fellowship in North Hollywood. In 2007, in conjunction with the Taiwan Lutheran Church, Truth Lutheran Church in West Covina. And already in 2009, we have planted two new Mandarin speaking ministries: Glory Lutheran Church in Torrance and Abundant Life Lutheran Church in Diamond Bar. Ten years, ten new worshipping communities! We give thanks for all those whose Mission Support and Mission Partner dollars have helped make these ministries possible.

During this same time, however, six congregations made the decision to disband and to complete the ministries that God had accomplished through them. In 2001 San Marcos in Compton disbanded. In 2002, Valley in North Hollywood. In 2006, First, Los Angeles. In 2007, Shepherd of the Valley, West Covina. And

earlier this year, both Spirit of Christ, Lake Los Angeles, and Mount Olivet, Lakewood celebrated their final worship services. In all instances, the capital resources the Synod received or will receive from these disbanded congregations have benefited both the new congregations we have planted over the past decade and many other congregations, institutions and agencies of the Synod as well through the grants awarded from the First Lutheran Los Angeles Fund and from the Mission and Ministry Endowment Fund.

In the years ahead, we will continue to develop new congregations and worshiping communities, both those that are ethnic-specific and those that are truly multi-cultural right from the beginning. Even now our Evangelical Outreach Mission Team is developing a list of the communities and places in the territory of our Synod that could be served through an ELCA presence. Because of the current economic recession, whether or not we are able to maintain the pace of planting new congregations remains to be seen. But as an evangelical church—a church committed to sharing the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ with all others—we have no option.

The Fifth Mission Goal we adopted back in 1999 was the Transformation of Congregations. Early in 2002 our Synod set up a Transformational Ministry Team with the express purpose of helping the congregations of our Synod to look at their health and vitality for mission. In 2004 we received a sizeable grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans which enabled us to introduce the concepts of Natural Church Development in each of our Synod's nine conferences. Following those introductions, sixty-nine of our congregations or 51% engaged members of the Transformational Ministry Team to help them take the health assessment and to identify their "minimum factors." Of the eight indicators of a healthy congregation, most of the 69 in our Synod identified "Passionate Spirituality" as their minimum factor. As a result local teams with pastoral involvement devoted themselves to pursuing activities that would deepen their sense of "passionate spirituality" or any one of the other seven staves that measure a congregation's effectiveness in attracting and retaining new members. The new Book of Faith emphasis that the ELCA has launched and which we introduced this past year, I'm sure, will deepen our congregation's involvement with the Scriptures, which is

always the source of our renewal and transformation. A handful of congregations have sought to be redeveloped with Churchwide and Synodical support. One of the most successful of these has been First Lutheran/Iglesia Luterana Mi Salvador in Inglewood, and our Evangelical Outreach Mission Team is preparing to work with others as they move from declining congregations to those that are growing and changing in their witness and service. A key to this change is always both mission minded pastors and visionary lay persons willing to explore new ways for outreach, service and worship.

The sixth Mission Goal is closely related to the Fifth, and that is the “Re-rooting of Congregations in their Neighborhoods.” In an urban area such as ours that experiences rapid demographic change, congregations can quickly discover that most of their members no longer live in the neighborhood, and that they have little connection with their new neighborhoods. This goal has been a call to “Grow Where You’re Planted.” Since 2002, fifty-four of our congregations have experienced pastoral transitions, and as a part of the transition process each has formed a Mission Exploration Team that has worked with Synod staff to discover up to three new mission opportunities within their communities. They have looked at their surrounding neighborhoods and asked “What do the people of this community need from our congregation?” and “How can we share the good news of the gospel to address those needs?” Some surprising things have happened because of these MET teams, and when new pastors arrive, they discover congregational members willing to see mission not simply as caring for those who are already members, but as reaching out to neighbors and to welcome them into the community of faith.

During the past decade, the number of coalitions and parishes in which congregations work together in witness and service has also increased. New City Parish has grown from six congregations to nine. The Pasadena Area Lutheran Parish continues to bring five congregations together for joint witness and service. In Santa Barbara, four congregations—three ELCA and one Missouri Synod—have formed SALT Serving as Lutherans Together. In the Palmdale

Lancaster area, four congregations have formed the Antelope Valley Lutheran Parish to coordinate their witness and to plan for new opportunities for outreach and new mission development. And in the San Fernando Valley, at least seven congregations regularly meet together to support each other in ministry and to explore new ways for serving the changing population of their communities. And just last month, Los Angeles CLUE (Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice) graduated 16 persons from New City Parish congregations who had completed a six month program in Faith Based Community Organizing, and now are eager to help their congregations address the needs of those around them and so re-root in their neighborhoods.

The seventh Mission Goal approved back in 1999 was the Development of an Institute for Ministry in Changing Communities. The staff of Bishop Egertson made a good start in establishing such a school, but in 2002, thanks again to another grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, we launched our School for Equipping Leaders for Mission or ELM Program to fulfill the spirit of this goal. In the seven years that this program has been operating, we have hosted eight two year schools: two at the Lutheran Center in Glendale, two at Trinity in Santa Barbara, one in the South Bay at First in Torrance, one in the Central Coast at Mt Carmel, San Luis Obispo and St John, Arroyo Grande, one in the San Fernando Valley at St Stephens in Granada Hills, and one our Academia de Diakonia at the Latino congregations in south Los Angeles. These eight schools have attracted well over 200 participants, and when on Sunday we graduate the 20 students who have completed Academia de Diakonia and the who have completed the ELM program at St Stephens, we will have almost 170 graduates from 74 congregations in our Synod, equipped and serving as catechists, evangelists and deacons in over half the congregations of our Synod. My special thanks both to the Synod Staff who have guided this venture, to the professors who have taught our core courses, and to the many pastors who have given their time and expertise in teaching the track courses. Our ELM program couldn't happen without your willingness to serve. This fall we will launch both our second Academia de Diaconia for persons from our Spanish speaking congregations, and

our Greater Long Beach Conference site at Our Saviour's. We already know that eleven men and women identified by our African American congregations as deacons will be participating in this program, and I urge those of you from congregations within reasonable driving distance from Our Saviour's to consider enrolling. My goal still is to train 400 persons one percent of our members through this program, and we're well on our way to seeing it happen. One of the unintended but happy results of this program has been how the Holy Spirit has used it to call persons to the rostered ministries of our church. Four ELM graduates—all of them women—have gone on to seminary to prepare to become either a pastor, an associate in ministry or a diaconal minister, and I look forward to the day when they will be ordained, commissioned or consecrated for ministry in the church. And I know that as we continue, there will also be more.

Well, there they are: the seven Mission Goals that have guided us for the past 10 years. Are we yet the Church we had hoped to be back in 1999? No. Our Synod still has many more congregations declining in members than growing, we still are giving the same amount in Mission Support we did 20 years ago, and we still have a long way to go to increase our diversity and to gather and keep the young. But because of these goals, I think we have made progress, and we are different—yes, in some ways, even better—than we were at the end of the last century. We are beginning to see the shape of a new Synod Strategy that will build on these goals and carry us into the second decade of this twenty-first century. We know that we need to grow in our evangelical witness and to increase our service to our communities. We know that we need to coach and equip our rostered leaders, and to empower our laity by grounding them in the Word. And we know that we need to grow our capacity for giving so that the mission of Christ can grow, both here in our Synod and around the world.

My thanks to all of you who have made a difference and who will make a difference in the years to come. My thanks to the Staff without whom none of what has been accomplished would have happened. My thanks to my wife and

family for standing by me and encouraging me in this ministry of oversight. But most of all, thanks to God who has blessed me immensely in this call as your bishop.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone the glory.