



Boldly living out Christ's mission by engaging leaders, equipping congregations and serving in God's world...

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

John 21

We are living in a special time. Jesus continues to call us to feed his sheep and love his lambs.

In the last couple of weeks, I have been reading a book about "vibrant faith." It has been a blessing in this season of economic uncertainty. As we live through the questions after our churchwide assembly, it has also been a strong reminder of what we are called to do as Christ's church and as baptized children of God. Our calling is to feed Christ's sheep through our personal, congregational and synodical ministry and mission while continuing to be fed by the means of grace ourselves. It is easy to lose focus and perspective in the storms of our personal and communal spiritual lives, but Jesus repeatedly reminds us to "Feed my lambs." Jesus' questions and commands for Peter send us, as well, in mission to share the Good News. God can use broken people like Peter, you and me to do God's work of sharing the Good News. The Good News for us is that God continues to find ways to "tend" his sheep even now. He continues to turn us around and set us free to live by faith.

People are starving for the Good News we know in Christ! Jesus is our crucified and resurrected Lord. The world needs to know God's grace. We are living in a special time. Since the economic bust of October 2008, we have been living in a stormy time of uncertainty. This economic uncertainty has been impacting our personal lives, congregations, institutions, synod and denomination. The economic damage is impacting our country, state and community. In the months that followed the October 2008 crash, we witnessed a doubling of frequency of congregational conflict and it seemed like a doubling of intensity, as well. While the worst of the economic storm may have passed, we continue to live in uncertainty.

Into this context our bi-annual churchwide assembly met and made decisions. Some were exciting, like the full communion agreement with the United Methodists, participation in a Malaria and HIV/AIDS initiative, as well as broadening of our Book of Faith project. Others have been controversial like the decisions on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* Social Statement and the recommendations regarding gay and lesbian people in intimate relationships who serve as rostered leaders. Some rejoice in these decisions. Others are deeply angry, hurt and disoriented by our church body's decision. Others are still working to see "What does this mean?" People are interested in their church body and how it works in a way I have not seen before. It is an opportunity to teach the faith, explore reading Scripture as Lutherans, and also to invite people into a deeper understanding of how we do church. God is up to something.

What should we do? I would suggest going back to the sources. This has been a principle of the Lutheran movement since its birth. In our time God is calling us back into the scriptures, the fountain of God's living Word, whether you are reading the Bible in personal devotions, small group Bible studies or listening. God's living Word continues to speak a word of challenging law that puts your self-righteousness to death, while also speaking a word of gracious Gospel that raises you from whatever little graves of sin and broken-ness you have fallen into. In this coming year, I also want to challenge you and your congregation to re-engagement with Luther's Small Catechism and other confessional writings. These documents remind us of the powerful wisdom of God's work in our reforming tradition. They provide a source of stability in these times that are full of storms of many kinds so we remember + sola gratia (grace alone) + sola fides (faith alone) + solus Christus (Christ alone).

Living in Christ's Mission: Engaging Leaders

Our synod encourages people to discover their gifts, deepen their abilities while serving faithfully and fruitfully. We are thankful for the partnership we have with Luther Seminary. While it has always been the seminary closest to our synod, the seminary continues to reform itself to serve in new ways. No part of our denomination has changed as swiftly as our seminaries in recent years as they prepare pastors. For example, last week I met with three candidates who are drawing closer to the end of the distributed learning path to ordained ministry. They have been in the first group to do this six-year journey through seminary, while continuing to serve in their current ministry positions or jobs. Much of the work is done online or in

focused retreats. I wish you could have heard them talk about how powerful it was to be serving in God's church and then attending seminary in a group. God is up to something.

In the coming days, we are excited about our renewed **Faith Builders School: *Equipping the Community of Believers***. Faith Builders classes aim at developing lay leaders. "Our mission is to provide learning opportunities for the faith development of individuals and leadership skills within congregations in an informal, non-credit format." The goal is to deepen the understanding and abilities of our lay leaders. I want to thank the Faith Builders leaders. We will provide opportunities to grow in a variety of ways. Classes will be offered to grow as worship leaders, evangelists, understanding the Lutheran Confessions, technology for worship, stewardship for rural congregations, and community outreach. God is up to something.

Living in Christ's Mission: Equipping Congregations

Our synod equips congregational leaders to serve the Gospel. One of the joys of the year has been the arrival of Pr. Larry Streng, Director for Evangelical Outreach and Mission. Larry is available to help your congregation deepen its work of reaching out beyond your walls to invite the growing numbers of new neighbors and un-churched people in our neighborhoods into the Good News of Jesus and the community that bears his name. Larry has been out training pastors and congregational leaders so that they can actually reach out. I am writing this on the Sunday before Christmas. It was sweet to hear the excitement in the voices of the folks from the Prairie Land Parish talking about how they had gone to knock on neighbors' doors and invite them to come to their Christmas worship service in the barn. It was an example of what a synod is good for. We help local congregations and leaders deepen their ministry and mission in all kinds of ways.

A few weeks ago we had many of the youth and family ministry directors gathered in our synod office. It was a great day as they shared ideas and got to know one another. Youth and family ministry is not only the calling of specialists who serve in large congregations or parishes, but we also need to encourage and support parents and grandparents and sponsors to share and pass on their faith. Congregations need to support families and parents so they can share the faith in the "first church, the home." Small-membership congregations are well positioned to love and support and encourage youth as they become the people God is calling them to be. We are all called to be youth and family ministers. It is one example of how we are "equipping the saints."

Living in Christ's Mission: Serving in God's World

Our synod is in the business of deepening people's service in God's name. God sends us into God's world to use the gifts God has given us to live out our many callings. This year our assembly is built around the theme of service, "God's work. Our hands." We are thankful for all the different ways God is working in our church and sending us beyond to serve our God and to love our neighbor. I am thankful for the work of our colleges, our campus ministries, Lutheran Social Service, our camping ministries and more in this ministry we share together. But I am equally thankful for how people serve God as they care for children, teach, farm the land, serve in businesses, serve in government, and work to protect the environment. In the past we have thought of our mission as something we do far away, like our Partner Synod in South Africa or with direct missionary support in other countries, but we know that it is also local and happens in our neighborhoods, communities and region. May God bless your serving in Jesus' name wherever you are called to serve.

Ministry of Reconciliation

In these days I invite you to remember the congregations and leaders who are working to discern their future relationship to our synod and denomination. I also remember those congregations that are withholding their mission support in protest of the decisions. We pray for healing and for reconciliation in these congregations and relationships.

Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God would change our world, our congregations, and our lives. When we pray, "Thy will be done...thy kingdom come," we are asking God to stir us up and call us into God's future. So we pray,

"Gracious Father, we pray for your holy Church. Fill it with all truth and peace. where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen."

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

Philippians 1