

2018 Assembly for the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod, ELCA
Annual Report of the Bishop
The Reverend Erik K.J. Gronberg, PhD



Partners in Mission Together,

In 2016, I outlined five key points of focus for our work together. As we moved through 2017, we observed how these are blending together as we move into new areas of challenge and opportunity. Most critically, we as synod need to fully grasp the vision that we are #InMissionTogether. We are called to work together to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, serve in Christ's name, raise up leaders, and work for justice for our neighbors.

The focus points were 1) to be present with our leaders and congregations, 2) to encourage creative growth, 3) accountability with Latinx/ethnic specific ministries, 4) that investment in Briarwood must pay dividends, and 5) to name privilege and work for justice.

Significant progress towards these goals has been made. We have continued to be present with our congregations and leaders, particularly in transitions. Connecting leaders and congregations is challenging, yet I am proud of my staff, and in particular, the Rev. Kris Totzke, for the effort they have extended in this vital work. Every context is different, yet we have developed systems and capacities to prayerfully work with congregations on their time table and find appropriate candidates. We are NOT plugging holes we are prayerfully seeking leaders.

Our Latinx/Ethnic specific ministries provide us opportunity. In December, I participated in San Gabriel's annual Procession of the Virgin of Guadalupe on horseback! We have actively engaged Walnut Hill, Dallas, in conversation as they sold and now purchased a new facility. Our DEM Irma Bañales has led regular meetings with our historic African-American congregations, and in February, we held a long overdue celebration of NT-NL African-American ministry in NT-NL. Additionally, Pastora Bañales has been engaging our ethnic specific ministries in issues of immigration, grants, and pastoral transition while working with seminary leaders in conversation about next steps for authentic theological education en Español beyond PLMA.

An example of catching the vision of #InMissionTogether is Trinity, Wichita Falls, entering into a contract, with my authorization, with Pastor Christopher Yanker of the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone (ELCSL). A wonderful example of an NT-NL congregation opening themselves to the gifts of our partner church.

Creative growth is not limited to these congregations however. The people of First, Waco, continue their discernment about next steps with our support. Pastor Richard Strait, a United Methodist pastor, is serving as a contract leader with Bethel, Avoca. And on January 6th, Pastor Totzke and I met with 35 leaders from our Bosque County congregations to talk about history, mission, and future relationships in those communities. That meeting has led to other gatherings to explore how these communities can do mission together. The list could go on, and this gives you a sense of the openness we are seeing to the possibilities God has placed in front of us.

Briarwood has continued to try new possibilities, and in 2018, is taking an adaptive and bold step. Despite the hard work of the staff and increasing revenues, 2017 did not achieve the kind of financial results hoped for. Expenses continued to outpace revenues. It is now obvious across the church that traditional camping models are not sustainable. As a result, the Rev. Phil Geleske, in conversation with myself, the board, and staff, has chosen to retire. In the spirit of adaptive change, we will be eliminating the position of Executive Director and focusing on operations and program. Matt Baumhardt, director of operations, has stepped in as acting Director of Briarwood. I am grateful to Phil for his leadership and to the board for engaging this adaptive change.

Briarwood is an asset for our synod, and I am committed to seeking every possible solution to achieving financial sustainability and focusing on leadership development. Everything we do there, from camping with elementary school children to the “young at heart” retreats, must be integrated into a focus on leader development.

We build up leaders, proclaim the gospel, and invite individuals into a relationship with the living Triune God to serve for the life of the world. Working for justice is an essential part of our life. NT-NL congregations respond to these issues of justice in many ways, often focusing on direct service. A step I believe we need to take is in better organizing our advocacy in ways that invite more of our congregations to participate. I was pleased with the attendance at our hearing January 20th for the Women and Justice social statement and the almost 50 participants in March for our confronting racism training event in NT-NL.

The five foci continue to guide our work, along with the priorities I raised up for us in 2017. As I look at our ministry life together in 2018, I see three major areas of attention...

1) Engaging youth and young adults.

This work is being done on the congregational level in many ways. I am privileged to witness it. Synodically, we are focusing by...

- A) First annual young adult Christmas 2017 break leadership retreat. 30 NT-NL young adults (18-25) participated around the theme of being ***Sal y Luz/Salt and Light***. An inspiring time and will be repeated in 2018.
- B) Bishop's Group to 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. 27 youth from 10 congregations are registered. In addition, an all NT-NL youth gathering group retreat will be held in April. To date, over 350 NT-NL youth are registered for the gathering. An increase from 2015.
- C) Engaging NT-NL youth leaders. Pastor Totzke meets regularly with these leaders. As we move forward in synod staffing decisions, youth development will be a priority.
- D) ELCA Fund For Leaders: NT-NL congregations have been invited during Easter to consider a special offering for the ELCA Campaign, specifically for the Fund for Leaders, an endowment fund intended to assist students attending seminary, training to be leaders in the church. The offering from this assembly will also go towards this effort.

PART B

2) Education, Accountability, and Leadership for Lay and Ordained

We must continue to develop leaders in our midst. Congregations and the synod can and must grow in partnership towards this work.

- A) Parish Lay Ministry Academy (PLMA)
 - Pastor Phil Heinz has agreed to take on the Dean role.
 - Registration will be done in house (Synod Office) through our new website.
- B) Secondary School of Latinx Ministry
 - Goal to provide a stepping stone for leaders post-PLMA.
 - Pastors Gus Vinejeras and Edy Santos are representing NT-NL.
 - Working in combination with Wartburg and LSTC.
 - Pastora Bañales is staff lead on this work.
- C) Coaching for rostered and non-rostered leaders.
 - Focus of 2017 Bishop's Convocation and coach launch in February.
 - 2018 NT-NL Leadership Convocation will carry on these themes.
- D) 2017 Assembly goals for reporting from leaders and congregations.
 - Parochial Reports (90%), Mission Support (90%), and Rostered Leader Reporting (75%). Progress but more needed.

3) Recommitting to a healthy relationship with our ELCSL partners.

It is no secret that our relationship with the ELCSL has been quieter. Part of this relates to Bishop Momoh and I getting to know each other more slowly due to distance, tasks, and the refusal of the U.S. Govt. to grant Bishop Momoh a visa for travel. But a bigger part is a change in focus from buildings to people. Bishop Momoh and I are coming into alignment on this focus. In 2018 we will...

- Help fund leadership training for women and lay leaders.
- Work to rebuild the NT-NL companion synod team.
- A small delegation will visit the ELCSL in October to celebrate its 30th anniversary and sign a new relational agreement.

For the trust you have placed in me as your bishop, I am honored. It has been a busy 2017, and I look forward to a productive 2018. Know that you are constantly in my prayers, and I am grateful we are...

In Mission Together,



Bishop Erik K.J. Gronberg