

NT-NL Vice President's Report
NT-NL Assembly
March 27, 2020

Connecting In Mission Together

I hope everyone is safe and healthy as we are currently instructed to stay at home as much as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of these orders many churches within our NT-NL synod have adapted our weekly Sunday and Lenten services to meet online through various technical means such as Facebook, Skype, Zoom, and others. Some of our NT-NL Conferences have had Zoom calls through our Synod Office. The Bishop and the Synod staff have been doing an amazing job reaching out and connecting with worship and lay leaders from congregations, the synod, and churchwide, and holding a weekly prayer check-in to remind folks we are not alone and that we are In Mission together.

Personally, I am close to completing my first year in office as the Vice President of the Synod Council which started in July. Last August was one of my first opportunities to serve in that capacity by attending the Churchwide Assembly held in Milwaukee, WI. Overall it was a wonderful experience and I was honored to be part of the group voting members from the NT-NL. As with other churchwide events I've attended, I connected with wonderful Lutherans from all parts of the country. It was a joy sharing successes and setbacks and hearing the efforts folks take to strengthen and steward to their neighborhoods, communities, and church.

In late summer/early fall, the Synod Offices sent out a survey to congregations to rate how different factors may impact Mission Support. At the fall Synod Council and Conference of Deans Meeting, Bishop Gronberg shared the feedback that was received. This allowed our leaders to understand efforts that have a positive impact on Mission Support and those factors where the impact seems negligible. This helps us see how best to focus limited resources within the Synod.

During that fall Synod Council meeting, we heard that many members of our Hispanic community felt targeted after the tragic shooting in El Paso. Many of the churches in the Latinx conference had taken new security steps in order to feel safer. My own congregation had taken additional security steps as well due to recent church shootings, despite our community not being directly targeted. I was bothered by the fact that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ felt unsafe. In a show of support, I connected with leaders of the Latinx Conference and was able to attend their January meeting to see if Synod leadership could assist them in any way. We had a productive discussion and covered several topics and concerns. I thanked them for their leadership and let them know that we hear them and appreciate their contributions to our Synod.

At the winter Synod Council meeting we were again joined by the Conference of Deans and Mr. Nick Kiger from the ELCA Churchwide staff to discuss Mission Support. Mr. Kiger spoke about executing ministry through a "lens of abundance," or working to let go of our envy and fear of not having enough. He encouraged us to accept that there is enough time, love, wealth, and even air and space to go around. In his presentation, we discussed a variety of ways to view demographics and statistics within our life together, in order to help us focus our connections and resources within the Synod.

An important factor in supporting Mission Support is realizing the connection between the three expressions of the Church: congregations, the Synod, and churchwide. The Synod has made several programs, presentations, and events available to help strengthen that connection. Recently the NT-NL Stewardship Team has made several presentations on the Generosity Project throughout the conferences. The goal of the Generosity Project is to grow a culture of giving among all age groups, as well as practicing generosity locally and globally. We have a generous God and are called to be generous as well. Rather than focusing on “Fund” raising, the project’s focus is on “Faith” raising.

Another ongoing effort is the LEAD (Living Every day As Disciples) initiative that was offered to congregations. As described on their Facebook page: “LEAD believes that everyone and every congregation can grow. LEAD understands growth as a choice that is motivated by the Holy Spirit stirring up communities through the actions of passionate leaders who have heard a call to serve and are responding by growing themselves and others for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. LEAD exists to grow leaders with a deep, bold, consequential faith in Jesus Christ”. There are several NT-NL congregations currently participating in this program. Some of the early feedback from the participants is that the support and accountability from the programming is yielding some impressive results with their ministry.

One youth related event I’d like to mention was the planned second annual ConFest 2020 - Confirmands’ Afternoon with the Bishop. This event was scheduled to be held at King of Glory, Dallas, on March 22, but due to concerns over the COVID-19 virus it had to be cancelled. It would have been a chance for NT-NL Confirmands to get to know the bishop and connect with youth from other congregations, learn about our wider church and how to get involved, worship, and have fun.

As February was coming to an end and word of the COVID-19 virus was spreading across the country and closer to the NT-NL region, Bishop Gronberg posted the first of his many messages and guidance concerning the virus. As announcements, guidance, and restrictions were being conveyed from government officials and the CDC, guidance, assistance, and resources were also being delivered to our congregations from the Synod staff. Mr. Jason O’Neill, our NT-NL Synod ELCA communicator, worked with Bishop Gronberg to set up the “COVID-19 Resources for Congregations” NT-NL website resource page. This was a one stop resource page where congregations could go to find up to date information on dealing with the virus. This site has helped keep our congregations connected, demonstrating the importance of the wider church.

The COVID-19 site includes information passed on from congregations, the Synods (NT-NL and others), and the ELCA Churchwide. It contained:

- guidance from governmental bodies throughout the synod territory
- the practice of Holy Communion in the context of virtual worship
- suggestions on how to stream a worship service online and products to assist in that effort
- ELCA legal counsel concerning the CARES ACT and Paycheck Protection Program passed by Congress
- and even Puppet Ministry discussing the virus.

It has been a connection point where guidance and information can be given and ideas, suggestions, and successes can be shared. It also included Holy Week services shared by the three bishops within the state of Texas.

In addition to the COVID-19 site, Bishop Gronberg connected in conversation individually with many of our worship leaders via zoom: all six of our conferences, our rostered/authorized leaders, the Synod Council, and also established a weekly Thursday prayer time via zoom. Our Director for Evangelical Mission, Pastor Irma Bañales, has attended numerous ELCA Churchwide zoom calls, NT-NL Stewardship Team zoom calls, and made connections with many NT-NL worship leaders via zoom as well. Bishop's Associate Pastor Kris Totzke has also attended numerous ELCA churchwide zoom calls, ELCA Region 4 zoom calls, and is working on a way to help congregations through the call process without the benefit of in-person meetings.

At this time, we haven't been able to meet face-to-face with our congregations, pastors, Synod staff, the ELCA staff, and our friends at Briarwood. However, our spiritual and social interactions have been taking place through various creative and adaptive ways in order to stay connected. Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, websites, phone calls, and both group and individual emails have been heavily used to maintain connection with one another. Through these efforts, spiritual connections, guidance from leaders, social connections, and the exchange of ideas, concerns, suggestions, and solutions allow us to be part of the wider church.

I hope everyone has been able to be a part of at least some of these connections. It's helpful to stay connected in times of disruption and concern, and numerous folks throughout the wider church are using their time and talents in various ways to keep those connections possible. Through your generous financial giving to your church, our NT-NL Mission Support, and to the larger ELCA Churchwide, spiritual and social support has remained available. I applaud and thank all those who are working tirelessly to maintain those connections during this time of physical distancing. We have so many gifts we share throughout the wider church and the size of our donations or congregations does not limit the size of our contributions. In John 6:1-14, we hear how Jesus took the five small loaves of bread and two fish offered from one boy, gave thanks, and then gave it out to feed over 5,000 followers. The boy offered what he had available and it made a difference, just as individuals have made a difference in our community. Again, I thank everyone for your support this past year and I look forward to continuing to share our time, talents, and contributions in whatever means possible as we stay connected In Mission Together.

Blessings,
Tom Blaney
NT-NL Vice President