

Bishop's Report to Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod Council/Assembly, September 2020

In 2016 I outlined five key points of focus that I, as your bishop, would attend to. The focus points were to be 1) present with our leaders and congregations, 2) encourage creative growth, 3) accountability with Latinx/ethnic specific ministries, 4) investment in Briarwood must pay dividends, and 5) name privilege and work for justice. These have and continue to be foci for our work together and often are blending as we move into new areas of challenge and opportunity. Most critically we need to fully grasp the vision that we are #InMissionTogetherto proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, raise up leaders, work for justice, so that we may serve our neighbors boldly



Note: This written report serves as a summary of my video report to the September 2020 Assembly

Siblings in Christ, Grace to you and Peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

2020, it has been said too many times, is unprecedented. It has been a year we were frankly unprepared for and that has challenged us in ways we could not have imagined. So much of our lives has been changed and derailed. We have experienced great losses. At the time of this writing 200,000+ have officially died from Covid-19. In addition to these lives lost we have seen our nation torn apart by sectarian and partisan division, fault lines that already existed along issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration, and others have been magnified. This has been a trying time for us all and one that we have experienced individually and collectively. For as it has been said, we are in the same storm, but not in the same boats.

Despite these challenges our congregations, large and small, rural, urban, and suburban, have responded. Our rostered leaders have stepped up, gone online, learned new skills, and continued to proclaim the gospel, raise up leaders, serve their neighbors, and teach the faith. It has been inspiring to see the adaptability and responsiveness of our communities.

When our lives are unmoored it is important that we focus on our priorities and goals and not be distracted by presenting issues. As outlined above in 2016 I told you I would focus on five key points as your bishop. As we gather online I believe it wise to give you an update on those five key areas and how we continue to do this work #InMissionTogether.

- 1) **Be present with leaders and congregations:** Being present has been different for us in 2020. While I began the year with our typical slate of visitations by mid-March that was changing. Instead being present has meant reaching out to leaders and congregations by phone. Recording worship services and sermons to give respite. Providing online gatherings for weekly prayer/check-in, first call pastors, continuing education, and many hours on zoom. Very similar I believe to how our pastors continue to minister and be present with their communities. As the case counts and protocols allow, I have been able to do some in-person visitation which has been life giving for us all. Despite all these challenges, the proclamation of the gospel has continued.

- 2) **Encourage Creative Growth:** We must be honest about the reality that we as a synod and most of our congregations have been in numerical decline for at least two decades. While a few of our congregations are seeing growth this decline has manifested itself in a variety of ways including decreased worship attendance and financial support for mission and ministry in congregations and synodically. As a result our 2020 budget reflected that decline in mission support. Despite these challenges however we are seeing creative and vital growth happening in many ways in our congregations, often facilitated by synodical involvement and our connections to the ELCA through our DEM Irma Bañales. The four congregations participating in the third year of our Leadership for Faithful Innovation (LFI) program are reporting increased energy and willingness within the community for experimentation and trying new things. Four more congregations are beginning the LEAD Journey (www.waytolead.org) this weekend. Our stewardship team trainings have impacted over 30 congregations and are seeing results. Tracking congregational mission support in 2019 versus the five-year average of giving we see 40+ congregations giving at a higher level than their five average. While overall mission support has declined the number of congregations giving has increased. This is progress in growing the number of communities invested at some level in our shared work. <https://www.ntnl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Congregation-Giving-tracking-and-comparison-5-yr-to-print.pdf>

- 3) **Accountability with our Latinx/Ethnic specific ministries:** Authentic diversity in ministry is critical and a goal of the ELCA and our synod. This involves education and engagement across the synod developing leaders. Our Parish Lay Ministry Academy graduated 11 in January 2020, of which 9 were Latina. Also, in 2020 our Secondary School of Latinx Theological Education is highlighted in the ELCA churchwide assembly video. During the Covid-19 pandemic ELCA grants have supported congregations as well as providing for an online Spanish language bible school involving 40 children and 4 congregations. These are all positive ways in which we engage. We also hold ourselves accountable and we do so also with congregations including Santa Maria, Irving and San Miguel, Fort Worth. Both congregations attempted to leave the ELCA improperly in 2015. When negotiations failed to produce results in 2017 the synod council authorized initiating a lawsuit to reclaim these ministries for ELCA members. In 2019 the courts ruled in our favor for Santa Maria, giving the right to occupy the property to the community of Santa Maria in Exile. We also settled out of court in 2020 with San Miguel in a way that will provide resources for future ministry to the growing Spanish speaking communities. While it is never our desire to have to engage legal processes, it is the responsibility of the bishop and synod council to care for resources entrusted to the synod and hold ourselves mutually accountable.

- 4) **Investment in Briarwood must Pay Dividends:** NT-NL has made a significant investment in Briarwood over many years including most recently the DiscipleLife Alive campaign. These investments have paid in leadership development among our rostered, lay, and young adult leaders. The online spring gala in 2020 spoke to how Briarwood has been a pivotal place of faith development for many in NT-NL. However, as I documented at our 2019 assembly and are presented in more detail at <https://www.ntnl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Briarwood-Summary-Financials-2011-2019.pdf> Briarwood has

historically struggled financially. The dedication of the leadership center in 2015 was intended to help these finances but as the results show from 2015-2018 Briarwood continued to have negative financial results. In 2019 we entered into a new partnership with NT-NL and Briarwood to more fully develop the Leadership Center and as you can see from the results 2019 showed marked improvement (20% increase in hosted retreat revenue, decreased debt payments, strong stable fundraising) and positive financial results. 2020 followed this positive trend until the Covid-19 pandemic and the cancellation of events and summer camp. We were able to keep staff working and the summer staff pivoted well to produce excellent summer programming online.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGYszFYL1379GL9--qNcLyA> However, with little revenue coming in staff have, since summer, been reduced and remaining staff have taken on additional roles to help see Briarwood through this time. Some events are now being able to be held again on-site. Staff is partnering with both our NT-NL youth leaders and young adult leaders to develop more programming for this challenging time. But the future is unpredictable. As a result I have engaged the synod council in conversation about what is next for Briarwood and how we can continue to make sure our investments show dividends for the development of leaders, providing continued education for lay and ordained, and equip faith formation in NT-NL.

- 5) **Name Privilege and Work for Justice:** The Covid-19 crisis has exposed ever more the cracks in our society. Issues of justice, race, access to education and healthcare, immigration, gender, policing, sexuality, political division and more cannot simply be ignored and overlooked. As a church that speaks both Law and Gospel we understand that it is part of our role to work for justice and peace in the world. Doing that in 2020 has proven exceptionally difficult and our rostered leaders report to me they are seeing conflict and division in new and challenging ways. Yet there are also stories of hope and new understanding as communities listen to each other in new ways, sometime for the first time. I am grateful for the NT-NL Public Witness Team's statement on anti-racism that will be presented to the synod council and assembly this weekend.
- <https://www.ntnl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NTNL-PWT-Statement-2020.pdf> This statement is not up for a vote or adoption by the synod at this time but instead is presented to you, the entire NT-NL synod, to consider how we will respond. Resources are being developed by this team sharing words from siblings of color about their experience of racism and from white siblings of their desire to do anti-racism work. In the coming months and years, I pray NT-NL congregations will continue to take on these challenging conversations. For us to truly share the gospel, to be Evangelical Lutherans, we must examine ourselves and our systems for ways in which racism and privilege prevent the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for all.

As you can see from this report we have been making progress in each of these areas through the last year. But there is still significant work to be done. In addition to that work I pray that 2020-2021 will be renewed interest and investment in our partner synod relationship with the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone. In 2020 we were to have brought young people from the ELCSL to NT-NL for the first leg of a young adult exchange tour. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic made that impossible. We have however continued to support our partners in the ELCSL in prayer and financially. In response to the pandemic Bishop

Momoh sent a plan for education, supplies, and food support for communities the ELCSL has been tasked by the government to support. Because of their response to the Ebola crisis the ELCSL is seen as a trustworthy partner by communities, the Sierra Leone Government, and international aid groups. Through generous support from NT-NL communities and individuals we were able to send two \$10,000 grants to the ELCSL for this work and have received detailed reports from Bishop Momoh about the effectiveness of these programs. More information about this will be shared in the coming months and donations may be sent to the NT-NL office noted ELCSL. We are grateful for our partnership with the ELCSL in building up people and leaders.

2020 has been and will continue to be a great challenge. I would be remiss to not thank publicly your synod staff for the way in which they have also stepped up. Particularly gratitude goes to Jason O'Neill our synod communicator. In this time Jason has stepped forward to learn new skills, connect us in new ways, and has been the primary lead on this online assembly. In so doing he and all your synod staff demonstrate learning leadership.

It is my prayer that in 2021 we will be able to gather for an assembly in person again. To celebrate and worship together as synod giving thanks for all God has and is doing for and through us. Regardless, I know our mission and ministry continue and for that, and for you, I give thanks. You are daily in my prayers.

In Christ,
Bishop Erik K.J. Gronberg, PhD