

Report of the Bishop, NT-NL Synod Assembly and Council, April 29/30, 2022,



When elected in 2016 I stated I would focus my work in 5 areas. These were...

- 1) To be present with our leaders and congregations,
- 2) Encourage creative growth,
- 3) Foster greater accountability with Latinx/ethnic specific ministries,
- 4) Ensure our investment in Briarwood paid dividends,
- 5) Name privilege and work for justice.

In 2016 we could not have foreseen what the next six years would bring. The levels of polarization in our society, which the Covid-19 pandemic only served to magnify, have created a difficult and challenging space for all our leaders and communities. Yet, in the midst of these challenges these five areas of focus have continued to be a guide and looking back there is much to be grateful for and that we have learned in this time. As such a look back is appropriate...

To be present with our leaders and congregations:

Before 2020 this was a fairly straight forward proposition and I and our synod staff worked hard to be available for our communities. Particularly when there was no presenting crisis that demanded our presence. To get to know our communities and share that knowledge via blogs, social media, and reports. In that we laid a foundation that has been valuable.

In pandemic the groundwork we laid was essential to the new ways in which we then had to be present. In March 2020, the beginning of the pandemic, we hosted a zoom webinar attended by almost 100 of our leaders. This was the first of what would become weekly check-ins and prayer times that extended for over a year and was one of the many new ways we learned to be present.

Going forward continuing to establish this presence is essential but it has changed. While in-person gatherings are ideal our staff and synod leaders have learned to use technology. This enables us to be even more responsive and available. Living into a hybrid future we will continue to value time together in person but we will not forget the lessons we have learned.

Encourage creative growth:

Pre-pandemic we thought that we were being creative and in many ways our communities were. But the pandemic has moved us forward in our creative ways of connecting and given us new opportunities for growth. And despite the pandemic new ministries are being founded. In 2020 and 2021 we as synod participated in the beginning of two new ministries in Collin County. The Table, an outgrowth of Rejoice, Frisco and Kin-Dom, a joint Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist outreach to the LGBTQA+ community.

In the midst of pandemic we also continue to be a leader in the ELCA in lay education. Our Parish Lay Ministry Academy and Secondary School of Latinx Theological education have been models for developing leaders. We have ordained 8 pastors in the past 2 years for ministry in NT-NL. Webinars on stewardship and faithful use of property have led to challenging conversations. We have walked with Bethany, Dallas and Central, Dallas as they have come together for mission. Growth is happening in our midst. In our hybrid future new ways of growing and connecting must be learned as we connect and do discipleship online and in-person.

Foster greater accountability with Latinx/ethnic specific ministries:

One of the most significant accomplishments of our Conferencia Latina over the last six years in the recovery of the community of Santa Maria de Guadalupe, Irving back into fellowship with the ELCA and NT-NL. This community was led astray in 2015 and voted illegally to join the NALC. Bringing this community back, honoring those members who wanted to hold their leaders accountable was essential and a group effort. Our Conferencia Latina leadership, your NT-NL Synodical Administrative team, Pastors Gus Vinajeras and Moises Carrasquillo, DEM Irma Banales, and our synod attorney, Mr. Craig Ongley deserve a great deal of appreciation.

Accountability means that our Conferencia Latina has access to and authority over funds for mission and support for members. It also has meant the ending of Umoja, Dallas when they failed to fulfill expectations. As we look at our context across our territory it is clear the world has come to NT-NL. We are called then to reach out to these communities and do so with clear expectations. In this work your DEM Irma Banales has been a critical partner as has your Bishop's Associate the Rev. Kris Totzke and your NT-NL candidacy committee.

Ensure our investment in Briarwood paid dividends:

Three years ago we last gathered in-person for assembly. In my report that year I spent considerable time discussing the realities that Briarwood was facing. The financial reality was that despite the new leadership center facility in the years 2014-2017 Briarwood consistently finished \$100,000 in the red at the end of each year. Those losses were covered by large donations or by exchanging cash for debt during the Disciplelife Alive (DLA) campaign. Additionally, new programs failed to increase the number of campers sufficiently to justify expense and deferred maintenance on camp facilities was becoming an increasing problem.

It was clear something significant needed to change and in December 2018 we launched a new partnership between synod and Briarwood. Dr. Robert Smith was brought on as director of the Briarwood Leadership Center with the goal of making real the hopes of the DLA campaign as well as bring financial sustainability to Briarwood. In 2019, with the addition of numerous new programs and a strong summer, that future seemed possible. Briarwood finished with net income exceeding expenses, without the previous dependency on large angel gifts, and retreat and camp participation was up. Into the first quarter of 2020 that positive trend continued into March.

Covid-19 radically altered the landscape for all retreat and camp programs. In summer 2020 Briarwood made plans to have in-person summer camp only to have to cancel. Online programming for youth was offered with low participation. In 2021 the winter storm caused over \$600,000 worth of damage, largely to the older portions of the campus infrastructure. Delays in insurance and construction meant that only in 2022 are facilities fully back on line.

A great deal of sacrifice, including Dr. Smith taking on interim calls in the synod to remove his salary from the budget, has enabled Briarwood to be financially solvent as of April 2022. Online programming for adults continues to be offered and has generated an audience. Much learning has happened but significant challenges continue. The landscape of youth ministry and camping is changing. As bishop I understand Briarwood to be a significant asset of the synod and one in which we have a great deal of emotional tie. In 2022 programs will be offered as demand warrants as we continue to navigate the uncertainty all our communities are dealing with.

Name privilege and work for justice:

Our society has become more politically and socially fractured than it has been in a generation. The advent of social media, the Covid-19 pandemic, movements for racial and gender justice, global violence, have all become part of our daily lives and they impact our congregations. Pastors have had to navigate a complex and challenging environment in which their words are scrutinized, and assumptions are made about political opinions.

Into this world we are yet called to be a people that “work for justice and peace in all the world.” When we hear the cries of our communities of color for justice in the face of racial violence, we must listen. The Covid-19 pandemic has widened cracks that already existed and has heightened awareness that while we are in this storm together we are not in the same boats. Some have more capacity and resources than others to weather these storms.

As bishop I have endeavored to listen to our communities and to use my office to amplify voices on the margins. This has not always been received positively by every member of our congregations. But by listening and engaging I believe we have made progress. Pre-pandemic we partnered with Texas Impact to take groups to visit the border and discuss immigration. In the fall of 2021 a study group of over 40 individuals participated online in a conversation about race and racism led by Ms. Emma Rodgers from St. John, Dallas. Listening to one another’s stories and recognizing boundaries and barriers in our communities that divide us is important. This is work we must continue.

Moving Forward

At this assembly we will be electing a bishop. I have made my willingness and sense of call to serve another term known. Should I be elected I do not plan to serve beyond a second term. The call of the office of bishop is a challenging one. Additionally I believe transitions in leadership over time can benefit communities by having different voices amplified. Should this assembly choose to re-elect me to a second term I will continue to work in these five areas while also engaging the new challenges and opportunities we face.

In 2021 and 2022 we ***have focused on continually improving our communication and connectivity***. Improving our ability to host online and hybrid meetings, such as our Leadership Convocation in 2021 which was attended by 60 online and 30 in person. We will continue to learn and share these resources with the synod.

Another area in which we will focus is ***stewardship education and development***. A strong wholistic culture of stewardship continues to be an area of focus as we walk with congregations and develop leaders. This includes coaching which is a pivotal part of our work. 8 congregations have now completed or are completing the LEAD Journey or Leadership for Faithful Innovation process. Our synod staff is trained to assist and work with congregations in this work.

Stewardship also includes our work in ***evangelism and our financial lives***. At our 2020 assembly I spoke the truth that for more than two decades now the NT-NL and the ELCA have been in numerical decline. This includes membership as well as mission support giving. While giving have improved towards pre-Covid levels we must be honest about sustainability in the face of continuing decline. New ministries can and will help us to reach new people, but we also

must be faithful in walking with all our congregations as they look at their future. Again, your synod staff is trained and willing to have these conversations with your leadership. Our 2021 synod assembly emphasis on recognizing the grief and loss of change but also looking towards God's Future with hope led by Bishop Mike Girlinghouse was well received. Additionally we are partnering with the Lutheran Foundation of the Southwest for resources in legacy giving.

The past six years have changed you, your context, and the mission field. Your methods have adapted but the proclamation of Jesus Christ, remains the same. We are called to live into God's abundance and share the story of God's love poured out for you and all people. This gospel, into which you have been baptized, then sends you forth into lives of evangelism, stewardship, and justice.

It has been an honor and challenge to serve you as bishop these last 6 years. We have been challenged in ways we cannot possibly have expected. Going forward I know we will continue to be challenged in our work and witness. Ultimately we are promised that this is God's church and we are called to be faithful stewards of that with which we have been entrusted.

I give thanks for your NT-NL Synod staff: Rev. Kris Totzke, Rev. Irma Banales, Rev. Robert Smith, Jeanne Heggen, Jason O'Neill, and Linda Ness that continue to serve our congregations well, facilitate leader transitions, and go about the many tasks that are required to operate our synodical structure. They, as have you, have pivoted and adapted and have done so with good spirits and openness to learning and change. We are grateful for their work and please thank them as you have time.

We move forward into God's future. As we do so know you are constantly in my prayers and I am grateful we are...

#InMissionTogether,



Bishop Erik K.J. Gronberg