

BISHOP'S REFLECTIONS: VIRGINIA SYNOD MINISTRY AND MISSION IN 2020

FAITHFUL + BOLD + SERVING

Since, then, we have such a hope [through Christ Jesus] we act with great boldness . . . (2 Cor 2:13)
Because we are saved, called and empowered by God who is FAITHFUL + **BOLD** + SERVING, we are free to be and do likewise!

2020 was a year of remarkable change, loss, and growth for our Synod.

We began the year gathering around the Synod for the E.P.I.C (*Effective Practices for Innovative Congregations*) events, gathering over 250 leaders together at St. Paul, Hampton, Muhlenberg, Harrisonburg, and Christ, Roanoke for conversation and learning. At the time, we did not know that the E.P.I.C events would be among the last large in-person Synodwide gatherings in 2020.

In response to the pandemic, the Synod Office recommended suspending in-person gatherings for a few weeks to help flatten the curve, but sadly what we hoped would be a short pause quickly became an extended time of physical distancing that continues today.

While the pandemic may have paused indoor worship, the creativity, boldness, and faithfulness which emerged in 2020 was remarkable. In a matter of weeks, congregations embraced digital ministry and began offering worship online, opening the door to new ministry opportunities. We hope to help expand digital ministry in our congregations and Synod in the years ahead.

The Virginia Synod and the Churchwide organization provided grants for feeding ministries and technology. Congregations and individuals from around the Synod provided Wifi for Minnick School Students and Bibles for our newest congregation, Micah Street Church in Fredericksburg. Synod Assembly was cancelled, but Power in the Spirit, Youth Events, and the Gathering of the Ministerium moved online. Even though we were not in the same physical space, we were the church together.

While 2020 has left me feeling more generally constrained than anytime I can recall, I have realized that we have the freedom to be bold in our witness to the Gospel. As I look around the Synod, I see remarkable creativity and faithfulness.

- ✓ COVID-19 has dominated our lives and changed our world in many ways. The Office of the Bishop has consistently made recommendations to the Synod and applied those standards to our Staff to gather **ONLY** when necessary and always as safely as possible. Currently we are urging congregations to maintain digital gatherings *only* as this most deadly wave of the coronavirus sweeps over our nation. **HOLD ON** dear Synod! Stay vigilant in your commitment to love your neighbor and care for those most vulnerable in our communities. I believe that after a few more months of vigilance to stay safe and protect others we will safely gather again in-person!
- ✓ The political and social divisions in our country have also been present in our congregations. As a church, the ELCA clearly teaches that abuses of power anywhere must be named and resisted by the church. Even as we speak against injustice, I am proud of our rostered and lay leaders who have insisted our differences need not divide us, but lead us to follow Jesus as we listen and learn from one another.

- ✓ We have commemorated the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the ELCA; the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color and 10th anniversary and full inclusion of our rostered LGBTQIA+ siblings. We are a much stronger, more capable church because of these long overdue actions. Our Synod is richly blessed and committed to greater diversity and justice.
- ✓ 2020 has offered many opportunities for growth in our awareness of the painful injustice racism, sexism and prejudice inflict on us and our siblings. I am proud of our ELCA and Synod for calling all of us to greater understanding and bold action to end racism and injustice.
- ✓ The ELCA has reshaped the Churchwide ministry and mission based on the conviction that members, congregations, synods and the churchwide organization can best work together... focused on proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus in a church that is Welcoming, Thriving and Sustainable. The goal is, “to activate each of us so that more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love.”
- ✓ Our mission partner institutions and agencies all faced remarkable and troubling challenges in 2020. We pray for the important ministry they provide.
- ✓ We are served by remarkably gifted and dedicated servant-leaders in the Office of the Bishop! I give thanks to God for these partners in ministry and mission every day!

Many things about this year have led to significant restrictions and losses we will continue to grieve. With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and a lot of hard work, however, we have also found ways in every corner of our Synod and Church to reinvent or reform our ministry and mission to meet the challenges of these remarkable times. Exciting ministry is taking place from the smallest parish to the churchwide offices.

We, in the Office of the Bishop, treasure your partnership in the ministry and mission we share in the Virginia Synod. Thank you for your continued support, wise counsel, and ongoing prayers.

No doubt we have much left to do to be a more FAITHFUL + BOLD + SERVING church, but I’m proud of our accomplishments and commitment to faithfully follow Jesus and lead the way in the Virginia Synod.

In Christ, though restricted in many ways, we are *free indeed!* May our Lord continue to bless all in this new year.

Peace!

Bishop Bob Humphrey
Virginia Synod, ELCA