

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ;

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your synod vice-president. It's been an interesting year; a time filled with mixed emotions and conflicting opinions. Yet, in the midst of it all, I also think this is a critical time to ask, "What is God calling this church to do and to be?"

Your synod council did not spend a great deal of time looking at our differences and disagreements. Instead, we decided to lead with the Bible and Not the binder. We focused our attention on the mission of this church and we asked ourselves: What if the EaND Synod experienced a grassroots mobilization of passionate Jesus-communities who are witnesses of the Resurrection for the sake of the world? What would happen if Bishop Rindy could spend most of his time looking for new mission opportunities? What if every pastor was a mission developer, every congregation a mission outpost, and every baptized member a missionary? What if they would say about us like they said of Peter and John; "And they were amazed at the boldness of their speech, for they were uneducated men?" What if we, like Peter and John as recorded in the 4th Chapter of Acts, would say, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard?" We love to tell the story of Jesus and His love.

Our first step in looking at this vision was to identify what passionate Jesus-communities might look like and to ask ourselves about our own passionate Christianity. Perhaps the best biblical description of passionate Christianity is recorded in the Gospel of Luke, when the disciples were on the road to Emmaus. As you recall this post-resurrection story, on this 7 mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, the disciples unknowingly encounter Jesus who asks what they're talking about. So they tell Jesus about their ditched hopes; they'd been hoping for a redeemer of Israel but he'd been crucified and now, some of the women were telling them that the tomb was empty, that angels had told them He was alive, and although they verified the tomb was empty, they didn't find him. Now it was late when they got to Emmaus and they ask this stranger to stay with them, to share a meal together. And when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, they recognized Him and He vanished from their sight. But they were so excited about this Jesus-sighting that they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem; a 7- mile run in the middle of the night without the advantages of streetlights, at a time of day when danger was probably at its highest. They didn't wait until the time was "right", they didn't have multiple committee meetings to make the decision, they didn't ask if there was enough money in the budget. They got up and AT ONCE returned. They couldn't wait to tell the story. Now that's passionate Christianity.

So what would a passionate Jesus-community look like? It would be a church that focused on its mission rather than the maintenance of the building. It would be a Book of Faith church with active bible study. It would be a church where the primary teachers of the faith would be the parents. It would be a group of people regularly gathered together actively engaged in worship. It would be a church more concerned with discipleship than membership. It would be a church where hospitality and invitation abounds. It would be a church where the goal of stewardship is not about raising enough money to pay the bills, but whose stewardship ministry is focused on helping people grow in their relationship with Jesus through the use of the time, talents, and finances that God entrusted to them; a direct quote from Chick Lane's book, Ask, Thank, Tell. Is your church a passionate Jesus-community? Are you a passionate follower of Christ?

We looked at the strengths and weakness of this synod which might help or hinder our ability to pursue this vision and came up with the following: Under the strength column, we listed strong leadership. Bishop Bill and his associates Terry and, since September, Kari, have done a superb job of keeping us focused on mission in the midst of mixed emotions regarding decisions made at the 2009 Churchwide assembly. We also have excellent synod staff in Jean, Kristi, Pat, Julie and Julie. There is a sense of hospitality and helpfulness in the synod office. We have a well-stocked and well managed resource center. We have 2 strong Bible camps, active Campus ministries, Oak Grove High School and the readiness of Lutheran Social Services in any type of disaster. Another strength was in being Lutheran; a denomination that allows for and encourages both male and female clergy and lay involvement. We are a synod with 230 congregations already positioned throughout our defined territory. The list continued with comments about the Synod's endowment fund, its scholarships, loan repayment program, its pastor's pension equity program, rural internships and leadership development. Many council members identified the tagline of the ELCA "God's Work our Hands" as a constant reminder that we are here for mission. Finally, we have the promise of Christ to be with us always. It's easy to talk about our strengths.

Weaknesses were not difficult to identify but harder to admit. We often have survival mentality; the church is often identified by the building and the building becomes an end rather than a means. We have an aging membership and live in an area of declining rural population. The people in the pews are not well connected and frequently uninformed about the work of the synod or the greater church. Many of our members give less than 2% of their income. Conversations regarding tithing and financial stewardship are often non-existent. Sometimes our traditionalism gets in the way of progress. And when our worship is dull and attendance and giving are down, we want to blame somebody...and we point the finger at the pastor in stead of ourselves.

We looked at those things that seem to threaten our vision of mobilizing passionate Jesus communities. Fear of change, uncertainty of our future, lack of trust and a general suspiciousness of church-wide activity seemed to top the list. We tend to hold on to things we don't like about the ELCA and don't often talk about the impact the ELCA has around the world. We recognized that church attendance and church involvement are not seen as a priority in our culture. Time availability for volunteerism is limited. We could stop there and get buried in our hopelessness for this church...sort of like the disciples on that road to Emmaus who thought their hope for Israel's redemption died with Jesus on the cross. But then they had a Jesus sighting and a renewal of spirit. We have Jesus sightings too; those ah-ha moments when you recognize God's presence; that He had a hand in it. Maybe it was through the hands of one someone else; maybe it was through your own hands. You might have been a Jesus-sighting for someone yesterday in the middle of our Mission Blitz.

It's time to focus on the opportunities on the horizon. This is the time to develop strong lay leadership and re-develop our sense of what it means to be a missionary in your own community. It's time to develop your own sense of passionate Christianity. How do you do that? Pastor William Shield suggests that there is no magic formula. Hope and faith are needed. And in the words of that well-loved hymn, our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Our hope is in Christ and his promise. And our faith begins with the Word of God. Faith is strengthened by being disciplined in Word and prayer; it strengthens our relationship with Christ. It's time to build up the discipleship, to rekindle our own passionate spirit. It's time to tell the story; to the young, to the old, to those who've never heard it before and to those who know it best. God bless you on your journey.