

## 2020 Report of THE SOUTH-CENTRAL SYNOD OF WI BISHOP

I first wrote this Report of the Bishop to the Assembly back in early March, to be sent out a month prior to our scheduled May 1&2 Synod Assembly. Seems like another era in history. In that draft I said nothing about a virus we were reading about in China. Now that unseen virus dominates our life; it precludes our gathering, it changes our Assembly plans, it raises huge questions (and some opportunities and learnings!) for the future. As I write this draft, we have just cancelled the plan for a one-day assembly on June 20. This report will go out a month before we enter "Phase 2," when groups up to 50 will be able to gather. We've had good planning folks adapt to current realities. We'll do an assembly when we can.

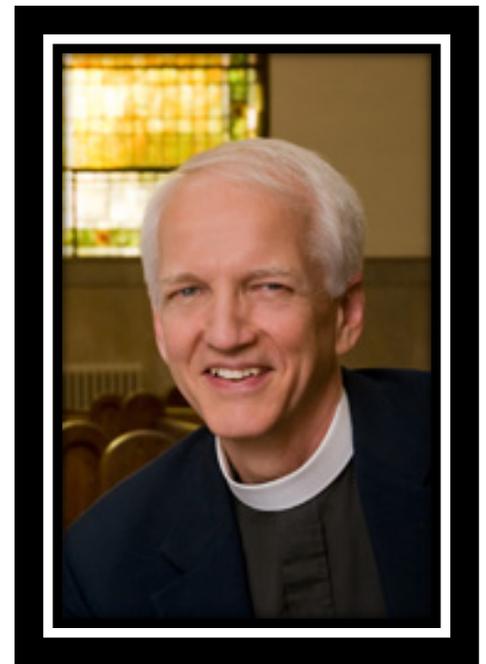
In the meantime, I have indicated that I will continue to serve until we have a new bishop elected. It has been a fascinating tenure so far, and the adventure continues to unfold!

I am glad to have been asked to serve in this way. Most "Report of the Bishop" pieces I've either written myself or read from others become a kind of broad survey of the life and work of the church in that synod. My knowledge of that work is not nearly so broad and deep, given my short time here. This report will be more like the observations of one involved in a relatively short but intense time in the life of this synod... "what I've seen and observed that is worth passing on..." And since I've written many pieces in recent weeks having to do with virus-related aspects of our church life, I'm going to not dwell on that in this report, but rather make other observations.

Some of you know I came with some knowledge of the life of the church in this place. 80% of the congregations of this synod came into the ELCA in 1988 from the former American Lutheran Church (ALC), which I had served as bishop from the fall of 1985 until the merger. And from 1988 to 2002 I served your neighboring synod (Milwaukee), working closely with your first three bishops during that time. And I have known each of the three who have served since that time. In other words, I came with some familiarity of your history.

In the time since I began I have been pleased to have had so many good conversations around the synod, beginning with spending a morning or afternoon with the rostered leaders in each of the twelve conferences last fall, listening to what they had to share about life in this synod, sharing with them what I had come to know of the events leading to this moment in the synod's life. I heard insightful observations about how this synod could build on your constitution's flexibility when it comes to the process of electing a bishop, and with the Bishop Election Task Force, the Synod Council and Executive Committee, we designed a new and, in my judgement, very healthy process leading to the next election. The first step saw over 300 people involved in Town Hall conversations describing life in this synod and describing the qualities to be sought in the bishop we elect. Few other synods have involved so many in laying such a foundation. I have heard from a number of observers around the church that this is likely to be a model for how many other synods throughout the ELCA may choose to do elections in the future.

Now you are poised to elect your seventh bishop; probably no other synod has had such transition. You have been denied the opportunity to build strong and familiar relationships between congregation and synod that is nurtured by longer and more stable leadership, and in the synod and bishop profiles you have made clear that finding a leader who will bring strength in relationships with congregations and leaders is essential. You have done good work! It has been my privilege to work closely with both the Bishop Election Committee and Synod Council as they designed the Bishop Election process, and then



with a very fine Bishop Call Committee which did the (groundbreaking!) work for the synod that congregational call committees routinely do in seeking pastors. And while all this is happening, we continue to trust the promised presence of the Holy Spirit guiding and giving life to the discernment we do along the way.

It has been a privilege to see so many people stepping up to be engaged in so many ways. The Synod Council, the Bishop Election Task Force, the Conference Deans, the Town Hall listening/writing team, the Bishop Call Committee – all giving substantial time for important work. This is a synod which, in my observation, continues to be able to turn to strong and gifted leaders who are quite willing to share their gifts of leadership.

Now let me turn to some other impressions, “reporting” on what I have come to observe about life in this synod.

- **Division** We live in a society increasingly divided, polarized even, seeming to be less tolerant and embracing of people and viewpoints unlike our own. I often hear a bit of this kind of division reflected as people describe the synod as being “Madison” and “non-Madison,” liberal urban folks and conservative rural folks. Given the reality of this terrain, it’s understandable. But my impression has also been that this can be a bit overblown, and that there are significant shared tendencies across the synod. Both my conversations and, more recently, reading the annual ministry reports rostered leaders send in, I read of a desire to reach out to more than the traditional Lutheran crowd and an excitement over ecumenical and community service involvements in communities across the synod. Are these feelings liberal or conservative? Those two boxes don’t describe all reality, and are not mutually exclusive of common ground that can be embraced broadly.
- **The question of the future.** The trends are unmistakable, and felt widely. Average worship attendance in our congregations is just over half of what it was 30 years ago, same as for virtually any other slice of church life you’d take in this country and beyond. Many congregations face the pressure of adjusting ministry to smaller capacity, whether in how much pastoral staff they can afford, maintaining older buildings, or stellar members aging and dying off. But the church of Christ has, for 2,000 years, seen many such phases. The robust “church as the center of a community’s life” has been in place here for awhile, but it hasn’t always been so. We are now entering a time that one writer called “Holy Experimentation.” While we resist letting go of what has been, it might be we are entering a time of holy adventure in discovering how new things can happen. We are, after all, the church of the Reformation; we should look forward to seeing what new reforming the future may hold. The Spirit does not walk away from the church because of the changing winds of culture.
- **Support of mission beyond the congregation.** In the 1960’s the average congregation sent over 20% of its offerings to mission work of the church beyond itself. In 1988 in this synod, that number was 14%, with nearly 7% going to the denomination’s work. In 2018 just over 7% went beyond the congregation, 3% to the denomination. Not only does this diminish what we do in countries around the world, but it lessens the ability of the synod to be a presence in supporting and equipping the leaders and congregations in this place. Our synod staff is one of the smallest per-capita in the ELCA. The life of all of us can be strengthened if we can bolster our common mission through strong financial support.
- **The challenge and opportunity of Diversity.** The ELCA is the “whitest” major denomination in the country, a result of our northern European and upper Midwest ancestry. Our synod’s membership of persons of color historically hovered in the 1%-2% range in both 1988 and 2008; in 2018 that became 6%. This synod established a Racial Equity team in 2015, demonstrated in the election of 2018 its readiness to have persons of color in leadership, and named in the Synod Profile a desire of congregations to learn how to be more diverse in their welcome and life. Breaking out of past patterns is hard work, but I’m encouraged by how many seem ready to become that kind of church.
- **Freedom to work together.** The LEAD event in this synod is the largest synod event other than the assembly itself, a powerful recognition that we have a hunger to learn and be equipped in ministry and we have many skilled resource people in our midst that have learnings to share with others. The 2020

event became a victim of the virus, but some of the same equipping opportunities will happen through scheduling of webinars in coming months. We are church together when we do this! I've not been involved in the work of many of the other groups within the synod, but each glimpse illustrates people with a passion for places where our church life intersects with the life of the world around us. Disaster relief, refugee resettlement, Reconciling in Christ, Youth and Family, Holy Land, a number of others... the list is long, reflected elsewhere in this guidebook. In each case, people working together to make good things happen.

- Always keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing. That's a phrase I heard often from a former colleague. In the Town Hall conversations it was enormously impressive that we so consistently heard clarity about what is it that is at the very center of our lives: that if we aren't about the business of lifting up the invitation to a personal and community faith journey with the God we meet in Jesus Christ, nothing else we do as church has real life. There was much discussion about what our communities need from us as the church, but always at the center was the center: the God of the Universe who has been revealed among us in Jesus, whose Spirit walks with us still. I was gratified that people had a sense that this faith perspective can be life-giving in a world pulled between the very narrow certainty and judgmentalism of a dominant strain of conservative Christianity so prevalent today, and the secular giving up on faith altogether, also dominant in our society. We have a God of grace and welcome, who calls us to a walk of faithful service to all of God's creation.

I could write more. I probably will in the time I continue to serve you. I am full of thanks for this invitation to serve. I thank the staff who welcomed and serve with me, the Council and Deans and others who include me in their leadership of this synod. I am thankful for the gracious support I receive from so many of you during this time of transition.

I have confidence in the future – in you as a synod – and in the God who walks with us into it.

Solo deo Gloria!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Rogness". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter Rogness  
INTERIM BISHOP