

Report of the Bishop of the Northern Illinois Synod, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace be with you, my friends in Christ and beloved of God.

Walking together...Loving Christ, loving all, for the sake of the world. This is the mission statement of the Northern Illinois Synod. In the past year, we have been sharing the stories of ministries across the synod. We have heard stories that have become all the more inspirational in the past few months as our focus has shifted to what we do outside the walls of our buildings. Thank you for all you do as we walk this road of faith together!

In a normal year, I begin working on my annual report to the synod in early March. In a normal year, I wonder how long it will be before we settle into a new normal, whatever that may be. When I left the Rockford office on March 13, I had no idea that I and the synod staff would be working from home for so long. I was optimistic that we would all be returning to our desks in a matter of weeks. I called this synod to prayer for a period of eight weeks. That was the original period prescribed for physical distancing. We have now bumped into July, and we are still feeling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics from other parts of the country tell us that this virus is not done with us yet. Thank you to everyone who joined me in daily prayer. I am still praying, and I trust you are too.

The congregations of the synod have demonstrated their innovative spirits and resiliency in the past few months. Almost all congregations immediately established an online presence as in-person worship became impossible. YouTube, Zoom, and Facebook Live became tools for worship and a means of staying connected. I have been very impressed with, and encouraged by, the work that our pastors, deacons, and Congregation Councils have done in these challenging days. We have learned that online worship is here to stay and is filling a gap that existed before the pandemic. The synod staff will continue to resource congregations as online ministries evolve.

Of course, there have been other challenging times in the life of the church. We were in a long-term challenge prior to COVID-19 capturing our attention and forcing change. The decline of Christianity in North America, shifting patterns of regular worship, and a shrinking population in much of Northern Illinois were already at play. I am convinced, however, that the church will emerge from this current crisis stronger and with a clearer sense of mission. Each congregation should continue to discern where you see God at work and ask how your mission is changing now. I am encouraged by what I see and hear.

At the same time, I am concerned that the current political, racial, and economic divisions that plague our country will impact the way we live together as church. We are a polarized country in so many ways. Even public health has become politicized. It has become increasingly difficult to have the kinds of discussion and debate that we need on topics that relate to loving one's neighbors, the very things that our Lord calls us to do. I have heard the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America described as a purple church, that is a mixture of red and blue politics. That is certainly true in Northern Illinois. How can we make this diversity a strength?

It would be all too easy for us to dwell on what this pandemic has stolen from us. There have been over 500,000 deaths worldwide and over 125,000 deaths in the United States, with totals that increase by the day. Families have been robbed of loved ones. Others who have survived have lost their good health. In our synod, 2020 was to have been a great year of celebration. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is marking the 50/40/10 anniversaries: the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women; the 40th anniversary of the ordination of the first woman of color; and the 10th anniversary of full inclusion of members of the LGBTQIA+ community as rostered ministers. We had exciting plans for the Congregational Resourcing Event, the Rostered Ministers Day of Renewal, and the Synod Assembly. I know that many of you share my disappointment that these events were cancelled and our celebrations are postponed. But we will try to make up for much of it next year.

Your Synod Council made the difficult but sound decision to cancel this year's Synod Assembly. This year's work has been postponed until June of 2021, with anything that cannot wait to be handled by the council. Since we had no election, council and committee members will retain their positions until an election is held next year. If anyone chooses not to serve an additional year, the council will temporarily fill the vacancy.

Lament is certainly an appropriate response to what we have experienced. I am sad that none of our regular big events will take place this year. Recall, Psalm 30:5b: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Just like springtime, we already see signs of new life, new ministries, new opportunities growing in these days. Even though I have been working at home and have not preached in a congregation since March, I feel more connected to our Rostered Ministers than ever before. I have also made use of electronic means to stay connected to lay members of the synod. I also see new needs in communities being met by our congregations, especially in food distribution, mini-pantries, and mask making. I see all of us living into the mission statement that we embraced last year: Walking together...loving Christ, loving all, for the sake of the world.

We are continuing our anti-racism and inclusion work. The Social Ministry Committee, the Diversity- Equity-Inclusion Task Force, and Racial Justice subcommittee are all at work. I will be leading a book study open to anyone in the synod. I believe the church has a voice in tackling this tough issue. The need to understand and work against systemic racism has become even more obvious in recent weeks.

At this year's assembly, I had planned on spending some time talking about our companion relationship with the North Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. A delegation from the synod traveled to Arusha in January. While there, we learned about and visited many of the diocese's ministries including congregations, schools, and hospitals. Bishop Solomon Massangwa and the leaders of the diocese were wonderful hosts and our lives were enriched. I was impressed again by how important their ministries are to the wellbeing of all the people, not just Lutherans. It was humbling for me to be asked to pray with a malaria patient in the hospital while knowing that I was unlikely to get sick because of the medication I was taking to prevent it.

The best part of this trip to Tanzania was to see how the nursing school project has progressed. Our synod raised \$125,000 for the building a new nursing school. We visited the current school site and the new one. By now, the new school is open, and we have made a difference in the name of Christ.

It is rather easy to fall in love with Tanzania. It is a land of contrasts. The beauty of the national parks is incomparable. The people are friendly and welcoming. The church is spirit-filled. We were blessed to be there. You were there with us in your prayers and in our work.

We are currently exploring options related to the synod's need for office space. It became obvious to us when Lutheran Social Services of Illinois sold the building in which our Rockford offices are located that our office space would need to be vacated. The lack of a lease and nearly total lack of maintenance have driven our search. With the executive committee's approval, I decided that we will give up our Rockford office and have the staff continue to work remotely for a period of not less than six months, with the exception of Nancy Corey who will continue to staff our Rock Island office on the campus of Augustana College.

I have often said that anyone who makes predictions about the future of the church is just guessing. I have been amused by countless lists of the top 10 things the church must do to flourish or survive or remain financially sound or.... All it takes is a pandemic to remind us that we are not in as much control as we think we are. Even today, the remainder of 2020 is filled with uncertainties. I must tell you that I am filled with awe at how God is at work. The church is eternal. Congregations may come and go, but the church will go on forever. We have been entrusted with the life and health of the church for the years that we have. Your congregation has work to do. Let us do our best to convey the love of Jesus Christ to the people around us who need to experience it the most. Everything we do as a church should be for the sake of others, not ourselves. Walking together...loving Christ, loving all, for the sake of the world.

I wish to express my appreciation to the officers, executive committee, and the council members for their fine leadership. I also thank the synod staff members who work so diligently to meet the needs of our congregations. Please join me in thanking Pastor Denver Bitner, Ms. June Cain, Pastor Mike Clark, Ms. Nancy Corey, Deacon Cheryl Erdmann, Pastor Gary Erickson (Director of Evangelical Mission), Pastor Pat Esker, Deacon Karin Graddy, Pastor Marilyn Hanson, and Ms. Julie Lewis. I also thank you for your continued support in this call to serve as your bishop. I am deeply grateful.

Respectfully submitted,
Bishop Jeffrey Clements