

***Formed in the image of God;
Reformed in the cross of Christ;
Transformed by the power of the Spirit.***

Verbal Report to the Assembly 2017
Bishop Bill Gafkjen

Perhaps you have noticed the Trinitarian movement of our trifold assembly theme. It fits with the spirit of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. It was highlighted beautifully in our opening worship yesterday. It also aligns with the concern that many of us have in this anniversary year to reacquaint ourselves with confessional writings that emerged in the years following Martin Luther's tacking some ideas for discussion on the public bulletin board otherwise known as the door of the Wittenburg castle church. For my part, I have been spending more time with Martin Luther's "Small Catechism." In that spirit, portions of Luther's explanation of the three movements of the Apostles' Creed will come together with our assembly theme to shape the comments that I'll share with you over the next few minutes.

We are formed in the image of God.

We believe that God has created us together with all that exists. God has given us and still preserves our body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides...all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life...without any merit or worthiness of ours at all! For all of this we owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

Usually, when we hear or recite these words from Luther, we think individually, we each think about our own body, our own life, and the way God provides for and nourishes us. For the next few minutes, I invite you to also think about the body as Christ's body, the church. Picture all of us together across this territory and the life we share as the ears and eyes, limbs and senses, of Jesus, crucified and risen.

As I move through this first year of my second set of six years as your bishop, I am profoundly aware of the many ways in which our creating, creative God supplies what we need to do what God calls us to do and be...not just for me to serve faithfully as your bishop, but for all of us to work together as followers of Jesus across this territory. I am moved daily to give thanks and praise for God's amazing generosity – often while I am driving to or from a meeting or worship or conversation with you, the leaders, people and faith communities of this synod.

I thank God for sterling staff members who reflect God's generosity in the way they give of themselves. I mentioned each of them in my written report (which I know you have read, studied, and inwardly digested by now), but I want to again name them and thank them, and ask you to thank them, here.

First, are three gracious souls who left your synod staff since last assembly:

Leslie French (part-time Synod Communicator, now serving as Administrative Assistant for King of Glory, Carmel, IN),

Pastor Rudy Mueller (Assistant to the Bishop, now serving as Interim Pastor for Pilgrim, Carmel, IN),
and

Deacon Marilyn Smith (Region 6, now serving as Interim Minister for Risen Lord, Bargersville, IN).

I also thank God that God daily and abundantly provides for this ministry we engage together through your synod staff members, new and continuing, who serve generously and graciously through significant transition and with shifting roles (Please stand and wave so we can thank you):

April Lynch, my administrative assistant and data base manager;

Sylvia Ore, administrative support for Heather Apel and for our financial management;

Carol Webb, administrative support for Nancy Nyland, Jerry O'Neal, and Dan Fugate;

Pastor Heather Apel, whose role will change to Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership (as she lets go of some responsibilities and picks up others, like call process, interim ministry, first call, and other leadership support and development concerns)

Pastor Jerry O'Neal, full time as pastor for Holy Trinity, Muncie, IN, part time Synod Director for Stewardship and Mission Support

Pastor Nancy Nyland, Director for Evangelical Mission

Chris Burnette, Gift Planner for the ELCA Foundation, Southern Ohio Synod, and this synod

Stephanie Dillon, our contracted meeting planner who works with our staff and with venue staff to make sure everything is as it needs to be for the assemblies.

Tom Dearchs, our new Synod Communicator (who also is responsible for office coordination, synod assembly logistics, and synod worship)

Pastor Dan Fugate, our new Assistant to the Bishop for Discipleship (which includes youth, young adult, lifelong faith formation, synod assembly programming, and our relationship with the HKBP, our companion church in Indonesia)

Thanks to Pr Karen Husby, Pr Judy Follis, Tom White, and Linda Witt-Henke for being pinch hitters to provide interim synod ministries in various ways after Rudy Mueller left our staff in January. They've been hitting it out of the ballpark during the time of transition in staffing.

Also among the necessities and nourishment that God abundantly provides for the body of Christ and for our life together across this synod are the members of the synod council, synod committees and teams, and conference deans, including your officers, Vice President Ted Miller, Secretary Judy Bush, and Treasurer Chris Walda. If you are on Synod Council or are a Conference Dean or serve on any synod committee, task force or team, please stand and wave so we can acknowledge you and give thanks to God for you.

Churchwide staff and ELCA Council and Conference of Bishops are also part of the provision and nourishment God provides for us; some of each are with us this weekend. God has given us a wide web of partners in this work. We are fed by their partnership and our work is multiplied when we engage it together. Among them, Bp Suzanne Dillahunt (Southern Ohio Synod), Mikka McCracken (ELCA Churchwide, Director for World Hunger ministry), Pastor Vicki Garber (ELCA Church Council...for a little longer, at least).

And I give thanks and praise to our creating, creative God for you, dear sisters and brothers. I thank God – and you – for your amazing generosity in sharing mission support which continues to increase, at least a bit, year by year, nourishing and multiplying the mission and ministry that we do together and spreading it across and far beyond the two states in which we live to bless hundreds, thousands of others that none of us could reach alone.

I also praise God and thank you for your willingness to take risks, to extend beyond familiar habits and comfortable ways of being church, and to entrust yourselves to the promises of God that we will find new, abundant, and lasting life when we follow the way of the cross in giving ourselves away. I am nourished and inspired by your bright witness. Please stand, every one of you, and let's thank and praise God for daily and abundantly providing the nourishment and necessities for this body and our life.

While you're standing, let's sing the Doxology together...

We are also reformed in the cross of Christ.

We believe that Jesus Christ...is our Lord. He has redeemed us...he has purchased and freed us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil...with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that we may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.

These continue to be very difficult and challenging times for many of us, in the world and in our life together as church. We are still trying to figure out how to be God's people in this new day. We can't find solutions to the biggest challenges we face together.

We try to face our fears and embrace new and unfamiliar, even awkward, realities, but the temptation to retreat, to retrench, to resist is often too strong to overcome. We seek certainty and try to find refuge in "isms" of all kinds, political, theological, and churchy (or ecclesial), dogmas that we cling to and fling at each other, in the world and in our life together as church. And all too often we end up yelling at each other across great divides, questioning the motives and morals of others, blaming those who are different from us, as we insist on creating the world – or the church – in our own image.

When James and John, the sons of thunder, expressed something of this posture in requesting to sit on either side of Jesus when he came into power, Jesus said, in essence, "It might be like that among the power brokers in the world, but it shall not be so among you."

We are, after all, re-formed in the cross of Christ.

As our deep Reformation anniversary dialogues with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers have reminded us, this significant anniversary year of the Protestant Reformation is a time to move "from conflict to communion." This is a time to move beyond the shouting, and accusing, and foot-stomping and to refocus on the living gospel, the stunning, reconciling, resurrecting good news that in Christ God has reconciled the world to God's very self and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

This is a time to be recaptured by the good news, re-formed in the cross of Christ, and to share it – and look for it and welcome it – in unexpected places and through every person, especially those who differ or are different from us.

After all, sisters and brothers, our unity is in Christ the Lord, crucified and risen. It's not in any perspective or politics or theology or tradition.

It's no wonder that the ancient apostle Paul said in 1st Peter:

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind... It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit [and be] a blessing.

We have lots of hard work, challenging conversations, difficult decisions ahead of us on this wilderness road we travel together. There are and will be times when the challenges will threaten to rip the fabric of our life together, in local faith communities or across this synod.

But, we are able to walk this way together because Jesus Christ is our Lord. We belong to him, every one of us and all of us, and all of those who are not currently among us. We live under Christ, crucified and risen. We abide in his reign (not ours or anyone else's). And, in the power of the Spirit we seek, together, to serve the crucified and risen Christ, as elder brother Martin put it, in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, entrusting ourselves and others to the power of his resurrection.

And along the way, we are transformed in the power of the Spirit.

We believe that by our own understanding or strength we cannot believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called us through the gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, made us holy, and kept us in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith... This is most certainly true.

Transformation – deep, life-giving change – is the work of the Spirit. And it often begins with a renewal of our own hearts, our own conversion.

Do you recall the very first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses?

Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying "Repent," wanted the entire life of the faithful to be one of repentance.

The transformation of the Spirit begins with repentance, which is a reflection of the transformation of our own hearts, as individuals and as communities of faith. The Spirit turns us away from what is self-centered or inwardly turned, and turns us outward, as individuals and as faith communities, toward the other, toward those who have been excluded or lost or denigrated or harmed or who are desperate for a word of hope.

And in that way, we are transformed to serve God and love neighbor, entrusting ourselves and our world to the promise of new, abundant, and lasting life, the joy on the other side that compelled Jesus to endure the cross...and calls us to follow.

Okay, here it comes, Isaiah 43:19: "I am about to do a new thing, even now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, waters in the desert."

Why does God promise this? Why does God's Spirit transform us? Isaiah 43:20 gives a hint: So that "the people whom I formed for myself...might declare my praise."

Formed in God's image, we are reformed in the cross of Christ, and transformed in the power of the Spirit **to declare God's praise**. This transformation that we pray for and work toward is not tinkering for tinkering's sake. Not so any of us can get our way. Not even so we or our institutions or communities will survive.

God's Spirit works God's way in us so that God will have effective witnesses to God's goodness and grace in this troubled, often graceless world. God needs a people to declare God's praise. That would include those of us marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Spirit.

Many new things are rising among us, sisters and brothers, as we walk in the Spirit's way of transformation and new life, with our eyes fixed on the cross of Christ. I'd like to finish up by highlighting three synodical transformations that are emerging and one local:

Connect: A growing cadre of congregations (21) whose leaders are making the significant, multi-year commitments to learning with other congregations about how the Spirit works transformation and then leading their congregations in welcoming deep and adaptive change for the sake of the gospel.

Change in deans' role toward and stronger, clearer focus on empowering, equipping, and encouraging the rostered leaders in their conferences. These are difficult and challenging days for rostered ministers. We need to keep finding ways to support and accompany one another and to hold each other accountable to the good news of Jesus. This change in the role of deans will help us to do that. In fact, this change is a concrete result of our Holy Conversations process and multiple and deep conversations among deans, synod council, synod staff and others for the better part of the last three years.

This change will also give us time, a year and more, of discernment about other parts of the conference system and how we tend to relationships among congregations and the relationships between congregations and other local ministries with the synod council and the office of the bishop...for the sake of the gospel.

LHS@CTS: The emerging Lutheran House of Studies at Christian Theological Seminary way to provide solid theological education and formation that is close to home and rooted in this territory for the whole spectrum of leadership, lay worship leaders, synodically authorized ministers, candidates for rostered ministry (including those in Theological Education for Emerging Ministries), and all members of congregations across the synod. In complementarity and partnership with our ELCA seminaries and for the sake of the gospel. CTS's soon to be interim president, Bill Kincaid, and Pastor Rob Saler, who has been a key leader in establishing the LHS, are here with us to talk in more detail with you about this exciting new thing God is doing among us for the sake of the good news of Jesus.

New Hope, Monticello, IN: In the midst of struggle and concern about their future as a congregation, these good folks have realized that in some ways their building has become more burden than blessing. After a strong vote to stay together as a congregation, they are now in deep discernment about what it means to be a church without walls...that they may continue to be a people who keep singing God's praise.

In his book, **Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective**, Roman Catholic Cardinal Walter Kasper references the story about Martin Luther's alleged assertion that "If I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant a little apple tree today." Cardinal Kasper then shares some thoughts about ecumenical relationships. What he says also applies to the Spirit's work of transformation, so I have replaced references to ecumenism with "transformation" in this quote:

On November 1, 2009, I was allowed to plant a little linden tree in the newly erected Luther garden in Wittenberg. [By the way, we also have an Indiana-Kentucky Synod tree in that same garden.] As a return gift, the Lutherans planted, during the term of my successor, a small olive tree at the Roman Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls.

Whoever plants a sapling has hope, but also needs patience. The sapling must, for a start, grow deeply and establish deep roots so that it can withstand unfavorable storms. We also have to go ad fontes [back to the sources] and ad radices [back to the roots]. Spiritual [transformation] requires joint reading of Scripture and common prayer.

On the other hand, the sapling must grow tall and stretch heavenwards to the light. We cannot make [transformation] nor engineer or violently force [transformation]. [Transformation] is a gift of God's Holy Spirit. We ought not think too little of his power, or throw in the towel too soon and give up hope before its time. God's Spirit, which has begun the work of [transformation], will also lead it to its conclusion, a [transformation] not as we want it to be, but rather as [God] wants it.

Finally, the sapling must grow broadly so that the birds of heaven can nest in its branches (see Matt 13: 32), that is, so that all [people] can find a place under it and in its shade. We must allow [transformation] in the form of a great, reconciled diversity, [multi-dimensional], and...open for all people of goodwill [that we may] give common witness to God and [God's] mercy. [Cardinal Walter Kasper, **Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective**, Kindle loc. 611]

Sisters and brothers, we are that sapling, planted and nourished by God's Spirit, and growing broad branches to provide cool and hospitable shade for all people in witness to the forming, reforming, transforming God whose praise we sing.

Thank you for your partnership and companionship on this amazing journey, sisters and brothers. And thanks be to God.