

Evangelical Lutheran Church of America & Conference of Bishops -2017

"Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. John 21"

Almighty and gracious God, what is your preferred future for our church body the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and for this Conference of Bishops? What is your preferred future God?

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Lutheran movement, we will take time in this meeting to dream dreams and imagine how we might serve the Gospel more effectively in this swiftly changing world. I want to look at three key areas. Whose are we? What is God up in the midst of our missional context? What are our vocations as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Conference of Bishops?

As a Conference and as a church body, my prayer is that in 2017 we will have taken advantage of the opportunities inside the challenges of this time in our church body. All across our country we are discovering passionate Lutherans. People are reading scripture in greater numbers, discussing, debating and engaging in study together. People are curious about our church body and how it works in a way that is hard to fathom a few years ago. People are no longer saying, "We all believe the same things." Instead a rich conversation about doctrine, Lutheran Christian identity and about our faith lives has opened up. I welcome this passion and deepened curiosity. We cannot afford to waste this chance to engage people more deeply in sharing and living their faith as we follow Jesus in our time.

As we dream and discuss together our future in Christ as part of this church body, we will find ourselves discussing images that capture what it might look like. Will our root metaphors shift in the days to come? Will we continue to seek to be a "big tent" denomination? Or are there more fruitful images to embrace that will move forward our mission and guide our life together? Will we begin to imagine our denomination as a network, with multiple nodes and servers all contributing to our common life and God's mission? Or will we reclaim the image of a body in motion with many different members from Paul's imagination? How about a pot-luck that captures our longing to receive and share all the gifts of God for our shared work? How about the image of a herd of sheep following a shepherd who keeps tending us and calling us to follow? Let's

notice the images that keep surfacing and listen for a root metaphor that gives life and can function like a razor for our decision making.

Whose are we? Who will we become? The Identity Question

When I dream of 2017, I see our church body's baptized ones and leaders all more deeply rooted in our Christian and Lutheran Christian faith even as we live in a more pluralistic and post-modern culture. **How do we remember who we are with a sense of open-ness to who God is calling us to become?**

We need to find a way to maintain a sense of critical continuity as a denomination and as a Conference of Bishops. We are called to hold on to the best of our past and let go of those things in our structures and our habits which are not serving the Gospel in the present or which are not sustainable. Rather than fall into the sin of dissipation, where we end up exhausted, discouraged or lost, we need to focus on our work of sharing and living out our faith as baptized ones, as the community of Christ.

Christ Followers – Because we are Christ followers. We were called in our baptism, nourished by bread and wine to share and live our faith. We have been called and are sent to proclaim in deeds and words the Gospel we know and through Jesus our crucified and resurrected Lord. **Our church body exists to do the work of sharing faith - a living faith, in our households, congregations, synods, institutions and churchwide and God's world.** The cross of Jesus Christ is the deepest revelation of our gracious God. We gather to learn at his feet, follow him into our Galilees and serve like the early disciples. God's Spirit guides us to proclaim the Gospel and love our neighbors as we have been loved in the many spheres of our life. But the center is Christ Jesus. Our life together is centered in sharing a living faith. Everything else is built on top of that.

Back to the Sources - One of the classic moves of the Lutheran movement calls people back to the sources. Clarity about whose we are and who we have been will set us free to engage in the conversation of who God is calling us to be in this time and in our future.

The Bible - Instead of talking about the Bible, I dream of a church where we live our life in deep conversation with God's gifts to us in scripture. How do we as the Conference of Bishops help people enter scripture, so that the Bible breaks us open and knits us together, instead of being a tool to shut down conversation and engagement? This is not just the "Book of Faith Project." It is a life-long conversation with God using scripture to speak the law and promise to us again and again. I suspect the Conference of Bishops is being called to spend more time teaching about the Bible and the faith we share in the years to come.

In 2017 I imagine a church body where the majority of adults are engaged in daily scripture reading or weekly Bible study. What would it seriously take to get there? We

will continue to work with youth and children, but our future will depend on engaging our adults (particularly young adults) in a deep conversation with scripture and other faith practices as well. God's Living Word works on us.

Engaging our Lutheran Identity – As we approach the 500th anniversary of our Lutheran Reformation we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to engage in the key sources of our Lutheran Reformation and deepen people's understanding of our Lutheran tradition. You can use the tradition to shut down conversation or to turn in on ourselves and get stuck. But our history, our traditions and key texts like the Book of Concord can also serve to open a deep conversation about what it means to be a Lutheran Christian today. We need to seek ways to engage people in our Lutheran sources not to box them in but rather to create a platform for us to proclaim the Good News and invite people into the distinctive insights of our rich tradition. Feeding them in this way will prepare them for engaging in their many callings as they live and share faith.

There are many ways it could be done, but I imagine that in 2017 we are celebrating the "Year of the Catechism." Luther wrote it to begin conversations in families and among leaders not end them. We would be inviting households, congregations, institutions, synods and churchwide to find ways to read and receive the gifts of Luther's writings and sermons that center in his work in the Small and Large Catechisms. Another year might be the "Year of the Confessions," where people would be invited into the Augsburg and other confessions. These are not so much programs as foci we would share.

In 2017 after this season of controversy we will either move further away from the historical and confessional writings and traditions or closer. I would argue we need to deepen our own and our church body's conversation with its confessional and biblical sources, so that we can better engage this complex world. Identity becomes more important in times of chaos and swift change. It sets us free to engage in our Triune God's mission for our world when change threatens to swamp us.

I dream of a church body in 2017 that is known for its generous orthodoxy and which has a deep beat of God's grace running through the jazz of its life. If we are to be the Lutheran church body with a generous orthodox theology we need to do work that goes beyond complexifying people's thoughts, but also moves to constructive theological work that our lay people can appreciate and benefit from as they live out their callings. For example even as future social statements expand people's thought, they would also create a catechism like summary that a fifth grade person could understand and find helpful if they did not read the whole study. We do studies so we can share and live our faith in Christ.

Context – What is God up to on our mission field? Who are our neighbors?

Douglas John Hall says the official religion of our country is optimism. One of the dangers of dreaming about the future at this time is that we fail to do our work of lamenting and grieving our current struggle. In seven years the sadness and pain will still be there, but I dream that we will have begun to find ways to serve together with our sisters and brothers in Christ who have left us to form their own church bodies. I dream of the day when my children or grandchildren will find ways to unite the witness of Lutheran Christians. We know “memory is strong, but hope is stronger.”

Will we serve the whole mission field of today? My dream is that in 2017 we will have found ways to respect and build a shared life of baptized ones who come from the cultural right, middle and left. That will take serious work by this conference.

As we are distracted by the issues of our interfamily rugby match, our mission field is swiftly changing. **What is God up to? Where is God calling us to let go? Where is God calling us to deepen our work?** You can find all kinds of lists, but this is the best one I have found naming “Thirteen Trends and Forces Affecting the Future of Faith Formation in a Changing Church and World.” I have shared the document in your file folder to get your mind cooking.

<http://lifelongfaith.com/assets/docs/FF2020-TrendsSummary.pdf> - Please go and see the thirteen below fleshed out in greater detail. ⁱ

“Trend 1. Declining Participation in Christian Churches [JVA - My comments are in brackets - It is not just us.]

Trend 2. Growth in No Religious Affiliation [How do you engage the “None of the above”]

Trend 3. Becoming More “Spiritual” and Less “Religious” [Makes you want to talk about “religion-less Christianity”ⁱⁱⁱ doesn't it.]

Trend 4. Influence of Individualism on Christian Identity and Community Life [I wonder if our global companions have anything to teach us here?]

Trend 5. Increasing Social, Cultural, and Religious Diversity in the U.S. [It looks like this in SW MN.]

Trend 6. Growing Influence of Hispanic/Latino Religious Faith [I am so thankful to have served with a Latino pastor. There are great influences and gifts to receive.]

Trend 7. Identifying a New Stage of Life: “Emerging Adulthood” [Don't tell my kids. I want to have an empty nest.]

Trend 8. The Rise of a Distinctive Post- Boomer Faith and Spirituality [Oh....those boomers having to do it their own way, “spiritual tinkerers.”]

Trend 9. Changing Structures and Patterns of Family Life in the United States [How do our paradigms need to shift to meet the missional needs of households today?]

Trend 10. Rediscovering the Impact of Parents and Families on Faith Practice [

Yes.....parents are the primary teachers and this generation takes parenthood seriously. How do we help them?]

Trend 11. Living in a Digital World [I remember when I was cutting edge. Now I am just dull.]

Trend 12. Educating in New Ways [What is your preferred learning style?]

Trend 13. Increasing Numbers of Adults 65 and Older [We will experience massive aging unlike anything in human history; a problem or blessing? Yes.]”

As we live out our calling as a conference we must be aware of the forces and trends will impact the coming decade of our life together. We have to begin to find space and time to engage these issues as we continue to work through the tension and conflict within our church body these days.

We need to give each other permission to experiment and find new models that allow us to share faith in Christ Jesus while engaging these new edges in the mission field of our culture and world. What we cannot afford is to get lost in analysis without moving into action. For example, if our Young Adults in Global Mission has been a great success, how about “Young Adults in Local Mission?” Or, what a program we call “Older Adults in Local Mission?” In a time where we have an abundance of elders, maybe we need to create paths to service for them to share their energy in support of our church body like we have engaged young adults in Global Mission.

What is God calling us to do? What are we called to do in Christ’s name and in God’s larger mission for this country/world? Our Vocations–

One of our vocations is to craft a sustainable future for our church body and for those who serve in it. It is easy to be seduced by purpose greed and mission creepⁱⁱⁱ. But in a world where finances appear to have gone through a reset, our church body will look different in 2017. In a world where we have lost congregations and people due to the current difficulties, we will have to right size our organization. By 2017, I suspect we will...

- + Have some bishops serving synods while also serving in strategic congregations. I prefer this approach to sustainability instead of making bigger synods. Perhaps some places making larger synods or smaller synods would be missionally wise. We need to have a conversation and make conscious decisions by 2017.
- + At the same time I imagine that we will choose to use less of our bishop's time for meetings at churchwide offices or to sustain the current ELCA leadership system. If 30% of our time currently goes into this churchwide work, we will need to reduce this time away to 20-25% so that we can be the missionary or apostolic bishops and teachers we are called to be. If we are honest we need to find ways to make this office more life giving and sustainable.
- + Continue to have a deep conversation about how to deploy our energy between churchwide, synodical, institutional and congregational work. Is the current ratio working? Energy is not just a reference to money, but it includes

money, time and attention. How do we deepen congregational ownership of our larger church body?

- + Lutherans have normally traveled light in their organizational side. While we grieve the loss of capacity in our current budget issues, there are also opportunities for new growth that come when we prune.
- + Work deeply on the question, "How can we steward this church body in ways that also are less energy intense?"

Part of sorting out your vocations is to be clear about your assets. When we focus on what we don't have our stomach fills with acid and we end up discouraged and frustrated.^{iv} When we focus on our assets, we gather energy and notice our many God given gifts.

While our governance documents describe three expressions of our church body, I wonder if part of the answer is to begin seeing our church body as one with five or six expressions?

Households - In 2017 I hope we will be well on the way to adjusting our imagination to see five expressions of our interdependent church body. First, I am persuaded by From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith^v that we need to begin to recognize, empower and support households as the first church as Luther argued. Families and households in biblical times and today take all kinds of forms. Some are made up of friendship groups of single people. Sometimes the household has grandparents and grandchildren sharing space and their lives. Faith is formed in households around tables and in the midst of day to day life. We need to shift our Christian Education and confirmation energy from school models towards our asset of faith practices. We need to equip and encourage people who share households to share their faith and craft good lives of joyful simplicity with room for joyful service to others.

--- This is where I started to edit for time quite a bit in my presentation. ---

My hunch is that deepening our work of inviting people into the deep, ancient practices of the Christian faith will result in the strengthening of this building block of households which lies inside of all that we normally call church. When we talk about loving our neighbors, we need to remember children and their families whatever that household looks like. In our days young adults are overwhelmed with too much work, too much debt and too many pressures. What if our church body became known for loving young adults and their children?

Congregations are where God grows followers of Christ through Word and sacraments. By 2017, I hope our congregations will have had a conversation about how to make their life more than a supermarket of programs. Another asset we have is smaller congregations. These may have the best shot of growing people deep in faith, hope and love, but they will need to see the gifts they have as God' gathers them around

the font and table in preparation to send them back into God's world to serve as light and leaven for this time. There is no right size for congregations, but for our denomination to thrive we will have to develop at synodical or regional levels small and mid-size congregation strategies. God can use congregations of all sizes to share faith and support the baptized in living out that faith. It is not easy or fancy, but a persistent focus on deepening the fellowship, proclamation, faith formation and service of congregations will bear fruit.

Institutions - Another asset is the gift of our variety of institutions, many of whom God has been provoking to reclaim and re-appropriate their faith identity. We need to find ways to invite them deeper in the network, or pot-luck of our church body's life, so that we can receive their gifts and share ours with them as well. They are the ELCA, too. We need to call our educational institutions to help us serve and thrive in a world of pluralism and post-modernity. Our seminaries have made huge changes in the past years to serve the Gospel. They will continue to be transformed as we seek to find ways to create leaders that do not result in pastors indentured to debt.

After seven years of watching the ways our theologians are impacting our life together, I would propose that we spend more proactive time with all of our seminary theologians so that they know our work and lives and we can learn more from them about their studies. What if for a series of years we convened a gathering of our theologians throughout this church with the Conference of Bishops for a time of building relationships and deepening our work of sharing and living faith? There are many other institutions that have gifts to serve the network of our church as we seek to serve God's mission for this world.

Synods - It is easy for bishops to think synods are the most important part of our church body. These regional gatherings of God's people focus on ways to preparing leaders, nurturing congregations to share faith by proclaiming in words and action our shared Lord. We need to continue to ask, "Who does what best in our church body?" I wonder how synods will reform and shift in function by 2017? I wonder how we could spend more time sharing best practices and doing experiments to serve more effectively and faithfully?

Churchwide - It is all about sharing a living faith. I suspect that churchwide ministry will experience the steepest change in the next seven years. Unless we can find ways to bring attention and ownership to our shared work, that work will continue to lose support. There is hard work to do in continuing to right size churchwide staff to serve the current context. The decision to deploy EOCM staff in our synod has been one of the best wins of the past year. It has made me wonder how we shift the work so that people have more of a sense of participation and engagement? If our churchwide staff continues to shrink, how will we build networks of people and systems to carry the work that we need to do across our country to share a living faith in Jesus Christ? How do we manage down in size with integrity and missional focus?

World wide – Actually there is a sixth expression of our church body, it is all our people living out their vocations in their every day life. Justified by grace, set free for service of God and love of their neighbor they are as much the church body as the congregation or any other expression. Living and sharing faith, they live out their vocations, work for justice, love their neighbors especially those on the margins.

I have not addressed at all a lot of extremely important stuff, but this is just the beginning of our conversation and work.

Our deployed churchwide staff member deployed into our midst as the Director for Evangelical Mission Pr. Larry Strenge wrote this email to me this week....."I just got off the phone with Pastor Jay Graves from Big Bend/Milan. The congregation he serves is doing some remodeling so they had to remove the pews from the Sanctuary on Thursday night. An 80 year old said as they stood in the doorway looking at the wood floor in the Sanctuary, "We ought to have a dance in here. It looks like a dance floor." Someone else said, "That's a good idea."

One of the other leaders in the congregation said, "Let's make it happen." Two of them went home and contacted bands and set it up for Sunday night...that's right just 3 days later! Jay's wife made up some flyers on the computer and hung them in a couple of places. They sent out emails and put it on Facebook. On Sunday morning they called the local radio station which makes "Church announcements" and made an announcement that they were having a "barn dance" that night (Sunday). And they announced it on Sunday morning to the members.

Sunday night came. 100 people showed up! 30 from the congregation and 70...yes, 70...from the community!!! Pastor Jay said, "Many of them were unchurched and dechurched hippies from the 60s who live in the area."

How did they prepare for this "evangelism?" Pastor Jay said that for the past 2 years he's been preaching that they are on the edge of something, ready to give birth. He said, "This helped to lay the groundwork." Maybe it is like St Paul saying, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (1 Corinthians 3:6)

This church was living out "Permission giving" as a model of evangelism. (Evangelism is faith sharing...Evangelism is Jesus coming to people). They were living out the Holy Spirit's prompting--an 80 year old man had an idea....a dream perhaps?—Acts 2:17 see below)

What will become of this? What seeds did the Holy Spirit plant in these 30 members (disciples) and the 70 who were drawn? No one knows for sure. Maybe it will be a "one time event" that brought 100 people together to share in community and have some fun together in a world that so often is divided by positions. This is for certain: Pastor Jay now has 70 "leads" to call upon and with each one he has a common story to tell. Pastor Jay said, "We now have a place to start the conversation and then to go deeper into faith questions."

Are people complaining? "No," said Pastor Jay. Why? Because not only does the congregation now have \$1000 in their budget--the money raised at the dance--- but they have something else: They see they can reach out with the love of Jesus and invite the 'stranger' into God's house. Pastor Jay said you should have seen all the "welcoming" that was going on in that place as people felt the joy of "welcoming the stranger" into this place.

Old men dream dreams....oh, yes they do in God's amazing giving Church!

"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Acts 2:17

Peter Drucker's five questions to remember.

1. What is our mission?
2. Who is our customer?
3. What does the customer value?
4. What are our results?
5. What is our plan?

ⁱ www.lifelongfaith.com

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ⁱⁱⁱ Bob Sitze

^{iv} Bob Sitze - The Great Permission – Acid or Assets -
http://archive.elca.org/stewardship/gp_resources.html

^v David Anderson - From The Great Omission to Vibrant Faith – Vibrant Faith Publishing 2009 -
http://www.thegreatomission.org/great_omission_detail.php