

Local Missions

2011 Synod Assembly Keynote Address

June 4, 2011

Thank you Bishop Ullestad. Good morning! Thank you for the privilege of addressing you today.

On May 15th, the 4th Sunday of Easter, the Gospel text was from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John. I would like to lift up verse 12 to you this morning in which Jesus said: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

Our Assembly Theme this year is Strengthening Mission. I was asked to speak about Local Mission. I would like to begin by turning your attention to page 26 of your Assembly binder. There you will see a list of Congregational Anniversaries in 2011. The years listed on that page represent a rich history of mission and ministry. Members of Washington Prairie Lutheran Church and members of East Clermont Lutheran Church, your two congregations are celebrating an incredible 160 years of mission this year.

155 years of mission and ministry for St. John Maxfield; 145 years for Orleans Ridgeway, First in Waterloo, and St. John Crane Creek. I had to chuckle when I went to the St. John Crane Creek website and read this on the home page: “I have a sore throat, Doctor. I ache, I have a fever.” – “Sounds like a virus.” – “Everyone in the office has it.” – “Well then, maybe it’s a staff infection.” Anyone who has seen our church sign knows that I enjoy corny humor.

Among the 140 year anniversaries is St. Paul Postville where I serve. We are only ten years away from another important milestone in our history. Some congregations are celebrating milestone anniversaries this year: Zion Jubilee, St. John Decorah, Immanuel Independence, and St. Peter Eldorado – 150 years of ministry. St. John Arlington – 100 years of ministry. Perhaps as a part of celebrating these important milestones, some of you have put together a booklet of the history of your congregation. St. Paul Postville put such a booklet together 40 years ago for its 100 year anniversary. It is a wonderful work, thanks to the gifts for research and the telling of history of a man by the name of Stan Schroeder. We suffered a great loss at St. Paul and in Postville when Stan passed away last June. He was a reservoir of knowledge and local history. This booklet he helped put together does a wonderful job of celebrating the history of St. Paul Postville. It is entitled “The Past and the Future – a Partnership of Faith.”

The booklet provides a complete history of the building from the very first structure built in 1871, to the “New German Church” completed 20 years later, to major renovations of the church that began just eight months prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The newly renovated church was dedicated on July 19, 1942. The project was completely paid for before the end of World War II. A final major building project to construct new staff offices, a new fellowship hall, and an education wing was completed and dedicated in 1963.

On page 3 of the booklet there is a list of all of the pastors who served St. Paul from 1871 to 1970. We see a familiar name listed as pastor during that anniversary year – Rev. Norman Ullestad. Included within the chronology of the changes to the church building and physical plant is the timeline of the comings and goings of the pastors who served St. Paul Postville for its first 100 years.

While this booklet is a fascinating and detailed account of the history of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Postville, Iowa, the very first time I read it I realized that something was missing... Something was noticeably absent. There is no timeline... no listing... no historical account of the congregation’s mission. As we all know, the church is so very much more than our buildings and our pastors. Both of these are important, but only to the extent that they aid our congregations in gathering for meaningful worship and praise of God, in spreading the Good

News of Jesus Christ, and in doing God's work with our hands. Sadly, only two small entries are included in this booklet to represent the first 100 years of mission outreach by the members of St. Paul Postville. In 1968 the congregation voted to transfer property that had been purchased to construct a Home for the Aging to the Good Samaritan Society so that they could construct such a facility. That same year, a five hundred dollar gift was given by the members of St. Paul to the Iowa Synod of the A.L.C. to aid the churches of Maynard, Oelwein and Charles City because they had sustained a great deal of damage in a tornado outbreak on May 15th.

These were two very important events in the life of this congregation. The Good Samaritan Society Postville Center is still in operation today providing care for the elderly. The tornado outbreak in May 1968 destroyed the recently completed new church building in Maynard, and destroyed 2000 houses in Charles City. But these two items are the only mission related entries mentioned in the 100 year anniversary publication.

Since becoming their pastor, I have learned that St. Paul has always been active in local mission efforts, as I am certain all of your congregations have. But when we think about the history of a congregation we tend to recall a building addition or a favorite pastor. It seems that the memory of mission does not come to mind as readily as buildings and pastors do. I think that this is especially true in congregations that are in the midst of, or recovering from conflict. I know that was true for St. Paul Postville. Congregations in conflict tend to focus inward. Mission is something that is always focused outward.

When I entered the call process in 2005 I was told that the next pastor at St. Paul would be following the tenures of three pastors in a row who were removed from the roster of the ELCA for disciplinary reasons. Add to that all of the diversity, population changes, and cultural clashes that emerged in Postville over a twenty year period, and I think that it is safe to say that St. Paul was experiencing some conflict. Bishop Ullestad and the Synod staff fully disclosed the challenges and the opportunities that a pastor would find there. During the interview process I discovered that the issues with the previous pastors had divided members of the congregation. Relations with the Synod had become greatly strained. And Mission Support had dropped to \$2500 per year. Faced with this information, I did what any green, First Call, fresh from seminary pastor would do in a situation like this. I sought the guidance of a higher power. I asked my wife Susan what I should do. I also talked to friends, family, seminary professors. And I prayed about it. I asked God what I should do.

I accepted the call for several reasons. First, St. Paul had a great interim in the person of Pastor Allan Hermeier. In the short time he was there Pastor Hermeier reminded the members of St. Paul what they were about. Good interim pastors are worth their weight in gold. Second, the Call Committee followed the call process to the letter and contacted the Synod Office regularly for consultation. Third, my wife Susan grew up in Postville as a member of St. Paul. Because of our visits to her family over the years, I was already familiar with the needs of the town and the congregation. Which leads to the main reason I felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to this call – St. Paul had a long history of mission. Paul's Place, a Friday rec night for middle school kids, has operated for decades. The WELCA group has made thousands of quilts and health kits over the years. Not long before I came, St. Paul's Church Council approved the request of a Mexican congregation to use our facility for their weekly worship services. They still hold worship at St. Paul. I knew that with all of the changes and challenges facing the community of Postville, the mission-minded nature and the ministries of St. Paul Lutheran Church would be as important as ever.

I began serving St. Paul on August 1, 2005. Armed with the advice of seminary professors and experienced pastors that I should wait five to seven years to make any major changes – I began to make major changes immediately. Susan and I worked together to add a second Sunday morning service that was “contemporary.” This meant messing with the service times. That never causes trouble. The congregation agreed to purchase the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal. Susan started a bell choir. Yep. No major changes. From day one I felt that we did not have the luxury of time. So along with the changes we were making, I knew that the people of St. Paul had to be reminded of their history of mission. They needed to once again set their sights outside the walls of the church.

It became obvious that there was a bit of tunnel vision in the way in which members of the congregation viewed the Synod and the ELCA. When a call does not work out, let alone three calls, the perception of the function of the Synod staff narrows to the call process. When the ELCA is tackling something controversial, the perception of the Churchwide organization narrows to a single topic. This narrowing of focus, this tunnel vision damages trust. Many at St. Paul no longer trusted the Synod, nor did they trust the ELCA. And even their participation in the ministries of the Shepherd of the Hills Conference was waning. The best course of action would be to rebuild these relationships and reestablish trust slowly over several years – so I decided we had better do it quickly over just a few months.

While reminding members of St. Paul of their history of mission, it would also be necessary to find ways to educate members about the mission and ministry of the Northeastern Iowa Synod and the ELCA. Help in this area came quickly in the form of two important resources. Just a month and a half after I arrived at St. Paul, Bishop Ullestad and Pastor Nancy Larson came to the Shepherd of the Hills Conference for what has become their every three year Conference Mission Support presentation. Our Bishop, being the master of technology that he is known to be, had a PowerPoint presentation on Mission Support which included a listing of all the many and various ministries of the Northeastern Iowa Synod. At the end of the presentation I did what any green, First Call, Type-B, 45 day experienced pastor would do. I raised my hand and asked the Bishop if I could have a copy of his PowerPoint presentation. Being a master delegator, he responded by saying, “Sure, but I don’t have any idea how to do that. You better talk to Mark Anderson.” Armed with that Mission Support PowerPoint, I began showing the Church Council, our WELCA group, and the rest of the congregation the truth: our Synod is so much more than just a keeper of the call process—just as our congregation is so much more than just a building or a pastor.

The second important resource was the ELCA annual magazine *Making Christ Known*. *Making Christ Known* was this huge, somewhat unwieldy glossy magazine. But it explained who we are as the ELCA, what we do in ministry together, and how we fund it. Being a green, First Call, generally cautious pastor with at least a couple of months of experience now – I ordered 300 of them. We used them as our bulletin cover for all of our services one weekend, so everyone was given one. During the service I lifted up the ministries of the ELCA, and turned people’s attention to the pages that show how Mission Support dollars are spent in doing the mission of the church. We have done this every year since, although the publication was renamed *Stories of Faith in Action* and is now the size of a standard magazine. You were given a copy in your Assembly bag.

These two resources, combined with a renewed emphasis on local mission, and the initiation of the first stewardship program that had been undertaken in years, St. Paul began *Strengthening Mission*. We opened our unused attached parsonage to Helping Services of

Northeast Iowa rent and utility free to allow them to establish a domestic violence program in Postville. We began to reestablish relationships with the other Postville churches which had become strained and distant over many years. We became more actively engaged in the Postville Food Pantry. Mission Support to the Synod increased first to \$7500, then to over \$12,000. And we also noticed that suddenly people wanted to join our church. One man commented that he wanted to join because “a lot is happening in your church.” “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

From my very first days at St. Paul, I had the sense that we could not wait. We could not wait five to seven years to reclaim our history of mission and strengthen our current mission and ministries in the Hometown to the World. Little did I know how right I was. **[clip from “abUSed” video shown]** The documentary “abUSed” by Luis Argueta graphically presents how the immigration raid on May 12, 2008, devastated our town and its people. It challenged our small town in ways that I could never have imagined. Fortunately, two and a half years of the Postville churches working together on building trust and working cooperatively on local mission paid off. St. Paul was able to actively support the efforts of St. Bridget’s Catholic Church to help those who were suffering because of the raid. The local mission efforts of our area churches had strengthened the Postville Food Pantry so that it was able to respond to those who suddenly were without money to buy food. Offers of help and support came immediately from Shepherd of the Hills Conference churches. Two and a half years of working together with Synod staff on building trust and working cooperatively on local mission meant that I was not the least bit surprised when Pastor Mark Anderson called the day after the raid and asked, “How can we help.” I was not the least bit surprised when our Bishop contacted me with the same question. I was not the least bit surprised to discover that because of the trust and cooperation between the staff of the Northeastern Iowa Synod and the staff of the Archdiocese of Dubuque that they immediately began working together to bring people and resources and advocacy to help meet the needs in Postville. I was not the least bit surprised that help came immediately from Luther College when on the day of the raid Pastor David Vasquez and Luz Marie Hernandez arrived to help and remained through the summer. I was not the least bit surprised to receive multiple calls from the ELCA and Lutheran Disaster Response to see how they could help. I was not at all surprised to see hundreds of thousands of dollars, thousands of pounds of food, and numerous volunteers – including many Luther students – pouring in to help our community. “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

In the months and years since the raid and the bankruptcy of AgriProcessors, that help continues. Thanks to Camp EWALU, we brought Day Camp counselors to St. Paul to revitalize our VBS program and to welcome the children who were traumatized by the raid to spend a few hours singing and laughing and playing. Thanks to the Synod, we brought Barnabas Uplift to Postville, and have graduated several Certified Nursing Assistant classes. Thanks in large part to the trust that these partnerships in mission have built, at this year’s Annual Meeting, the members of St. Paul voted overwhelmingly to change from individually pledging Mission Support to the Synod to instead giving a percentage of offerings received.

Strengthening mission locally can and does have far reaching effects beyond your congregation and your community. Networking and partnerships locally have far reaching effects regionally, nationally, and internationally. We are stronger together. By being actively

engaged with the Synod and the ELCA, the reach of our local mission efforts goes well beyond what we can even imagine.

I will close by offering these suggestions of how you can revitalize and energize the sense of mission in your own congregations. First, tell the story of the history of your congregation's local mission efforts. Write it down! Share it with all your members to remind them of what you have done, and to challenge them to do more in the future.

Second, if you do not have a good working relationship with the Synod—build one. It is always easy to find excuses for objecting to or mistrusting the Synod staff. It is much harder, but infinitely more rewarding to obey the 8th Commandment, and do as Martin Luther advised in the Small Catechism—look at what they do “in the best possible light.” You will quickly discover that the Synod staff members are your partners in ministry, not your adversaries. If you do have a good working relationship with the Synod, strengthen it further. Challenge yourselves to increase Mission Support every year. Educate yourselves and your congregation about the ministries of your Synod. A good place to start is the Synod website.

Third, educate yourself and your members about the ministries of the ELCA. If you are withholding your trust, loyalty, and Mission Support to the ELCA because of one or two issues you disagree with, then you are completely discounting a very long history of far-reaching, effective, and Christ-centered mission that happens locally, nationally, and internationally.

Fourth, embrace change. At Wartburg Seminary, Professor Norma Cook-Everest used to say, “If you are not getting into trouble, you are not doing your job.” Amen to that. Look for ways in which you may challenge your congregations to strengthen their local mission efforts.

Fifth, I highly encourage you to attend the Glocal Mission Gathering that is being held right here in Decorah at Decorah Lutheran Church on July 22-23.

Things are still difficult in Postville. The recovery is slow. But at St. Paul we are moving forward in faith, with hope, and with a renewed sense of mission. We know that by strengthening mission locally, at home and in our Synod, we have the opportunity to strengthen the mission of the church nationally and globally. I introduced the Malaria Campaign to the members of St. Paul Postville just two weeks ago, and I would like to close this morning by presenting a check for \$1000 to you Bishop Ullestad representing the first installment of our efforts to help you reach the Synod goal of \$250,000 to the Malaria Campaign. “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” Thank you. And may God continue to bless you in strengthening your local mission.