

NE Iowa Synod Assembly
Churchwide Address

Bishop Ullestad, members and officers of the synod council, guests and voting members of the assembly,

What a privilege it is for me to join you on this day, as I bring you greetings from our Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, the church wide staff, and my own team, the Global Mission Support and Missionary Sponsorship Team, where I serve as Director for Global Mission Support.

A North Dakota farm girl by upbringing, it has been wonderful to leave the confines of my cube to drive through Iowa's rolling hills. A pastor of this church, I am grateful for this opportunity to be among so many rostered colleagues. A graduate of Concordia College in Moorhead, it resonates so well with me to be on the campus of one of our churches institutions of higher learning. A former missionary, it does this heart good to be with a synod which has mission at the core of its being.

I am grateful for this opportunity today to speak to you about the church's broader mission – both global and in this country.

* * *

“He eats whatever we eat, even in the poorest villages. He'll sleep on the ground with us. He talks with the most vulnerable person. He is simple, down to earth. . . . a lover of Jesus.”

These were the words of Pastor Alfred Chana, presiding pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia. He was speaking about one of us -- ELCA missionary Arden Strasser.

A month ago at this time, Pastor Strasser invited to me to visit the church headquarters of the Zambian Church in Lusaka. In some ways, it was like when a companion synod church leader visits here. We exchanged business cards. We prayed. We asked each other good questions and listened carefully.

But, there were a few differences. A church of 2300, as opposed to our 4.5+ million, the Zambian church has only two “proper buildings,” as Pastor Chana would describe them – buildings with walls. The others are mud brick pillars with thatched roofs. The national church headquarters is three small rooms attached to one of the two “proper buildings.”

It has no electricity. It has no running water. Obviously, no internet. The pit toilets collapsed last summer and so they are digging new trenches.

It’s a humble church, but not one to be pitied. It’s a proud one.

“Have you really slept on the ground?” I asked Pastor Strasser.

“Yes,” he said. “It was ‘the option.’”

“They clearly love you here,” I replied.

“They’ve shown me the love of Christ and freed me to love in new ways,” he responded.

And, then he tells me how.

Shortly after he arrived, a congregational elder in a village had died. The senior pastor took a phone call and learned that family had accused the congregation of “hexing” him to his death. (It later became clear that there had been a feud in the church over who received blankets, oil, soap and salt material, relief aid.)

The family took the hexing accusations to the village chief who pronounced the abolition of all Lutheran congregations in his chiefdom.

The head of the church called Pastor Strasser and implored him to join him as they pled for the innocence of this Lutheran congregation before the chief. Pastor Strasser joined them on the 20 hour trip. Yes, again sleeping on the ground en route. There were no hotels.

When they arrived, the chief was late. After hours of waiting, the chief arrived. All of the church leaders got down on their knees as he entered, bowing and rhythmically clapping their hands, as is the village’s tradition.

Pastor Strasser reflected, “We don’t do this bowing and clapping thing so well where I come from in America.”

That famous reading from Philippians does come to mind does it not: “At the name of **Jesus**, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

“Pastor,” said the leader of the Zambian church. “Pastor, if you really want to help our church, you’ll kneel. Please!”

And, kneel he did.

Perhaps another portion of Paul’s writing to Philippi comes to mind:

“And, taking the form of a **slave**,
being born in **human** likeness,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.”

As this true story goes, the congregation was either acquitted or forgiven. It’s not entirely clear which. But, the pronouncement from the chief was this:

“Knock off any witchcraft, if there is any! And, pay a fine of 4 cows.”

Being a North Dakota farm kid, my next logical question was . . . “Who gave up their cows?”

And, this is where Pastor Strasser’s day-to-day ministry of leadership development comes in. Pastor Strasser, who’s wife is very-well-employed by a

not-for-profit HIV AIDS program in Zambia, could have easily bought those cows for the Zambian church.

But, he is not content with a quick fix, and nor was the church, quite frankly. Pastor Strasser's leadership development has helped this small church flex its muscle. As he puts it, my job as a missionary is to ask "How else can we look at this problem?"

And so he has helped them establish a micro-credit project with ELCA World Hunger support – your World Hunger Support. 1000 adults received \$40 each – a sizeable sum of money in Zambia – and training to strengthen their own livelihood, and – in turn – strengthen stewardship to the church.

Some banded together to form a collective rice farm. In the second year, when the crop failed, they formed a fish marketing business. Others have developed a maize farming and processing business. And, the profits have not only lead to a sustainable livelihood for church members. It has also meant the building of church buildings, parsonages, and helping the church manage its programming in HIV/AIDS ministry.

The church's HIV/AIDS program provides a warm meal each day, a safe place to play, and classroom education, *plus* teacher training, for dozens of neighborhood children – children orphaned because one or both of their parents died of AIDS.

What has it to do with us? I keep having this image of Pastor Strasser kneeling for the chief. It's quite counter-intuitive, wouldn't you say? But, then again . . . this Gospel that we are somehow all called to proclaim in our church and in the North Eastern Iowa Synod is a rather counter-intuitive Gospel. In a Christ who humbles himself on a cross, we find ourselves freed to humbly serve in new ways.

On this day, I am here to say "thank you" and help your synod celebrate the many and exciting ways you have found yourselves freed to serve.

Your synod's mission support in 2010 has helped make it possible for missionaries like Pastor Strasser to walk alongside the emerging Zambian Church. What is mission support? Mission support is the portion of your congregational offerings that you share with your synod and with the church wide organization so that ministry can reach into your communities and around the world.

Last year, your synod's mission support to the **church wide** ministries was 42.5% of your benevolent sharing. That amounted to \$897,813! I am here to celebrate this with you and to say thank you to you. And, we give thanks for your consideration to maintain a similar commitment in the coming year in spite of on-going economic uncertainties.

The NE Iowa Synod has been a faithful steward of the gifts of God, and a generous steward as well during these challenging financial times.

We, at the church wide offices, have tried to be faithful stewards of limited resources as well. I will be frank and share that 2010 was a challenging year, as we have sought to keep key ministries in place while at the same time reducing spending. In an attempt to keep spending aligned with income, the church wide organization went through a major restructuring of its ministries. As a part of this restructuring, we said farewell to dozens of our colleagues, people who love the ministries of this church and loved serving you. This was hard. Alongside that, however. . . .

I am also here today to tell you that your church is financially stable as we move into 2011 together. We've made the difficult decision we needed to make in order to be well-positioned for growth in mission. I am happy to report that we ended fiscal year 2010 with a favorable balance.

I have great joy in sharing that despite these many changes, the ELCA today is the church it has always been – even as it is always being made new.
Even as it is being made new.

What might this newness look like? At the church wide level, are committed to creating this new future in two very concrete and exciting ways.

The first is called LIFT, an acronym for “Living Into the Future Together.” In March of 2009, the ELCA Church Council authorized the appointment of a task force to ask two key questions of our church: “What is God calling this church to

be and do in the future?” and “What changes are in order to help us respond most faithfully?”

The study design group has made recommendations which recognize the strengths of our Lutheran heritage in this country and the powerful impact of our church today. These recommendations promise to infuse our daily work and ministry together with optimism and hope. I invite you to attend a workshop to learn more about this initiative.

The second concrete way in which we are committed to this new future is this. As I shared a few moments ago, the church wide organization has been realigned to better serve God in mission. We are about supporting your congregations in their mission to be growing centers for evangelical witness. We're about calling all of us into the world together, working to end poverty, strive for justice, and to proclaim the hope of Christ in those places where hope is rarely found.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we hear these words: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but serve one another in love.”

“Freed in Christ to serve” is what we are. “Freed in Christ to serve” is the message our presiding bishop, Bishop Mark Hanson, would like for us to contemplate.

I invite you, now, to hear these words of greeting from our bishop.

Bishop's video greeting:

You are the ELCA. As you are engaged in your communities. As you are engaged in your synod's ministries. As you are doing important work in Haiti. We can't be there without you. We are there together.

Your synod has done some amazing things. In this past year, your synod raised \$210,856.37 in World Hunger dollars in 2010. Two domestic hunger grants were released for ministry in the NE Iowa Synod.

Your mission dollars supporting global mission ensure that 64 international leadership scholarship were given in 2010. International scholarships train leaders to serve in our global companion churches in some of the roles that were once filled by missionaries.

Your support for the Fund for Leaders ensures that 187 pastors in training received approximately \$1 million to ensure that they graduated with lower seminary debt. One of the Fund for Leaders scholarship recipients is from your synod.

Your support of our churches 235 ELCA missionaries is downright exciting because, in addition to supporting them with your general mission support, nearly \$188,357 was raised in the recent past through extra missionary sponsorships. 34 congregations or individuals have made written covenants to support ELCA

missionaries through prayer, communication and financial support. I will share more about this in my time with you this afternoon.

Your participation in the Mission Investment Fund has shown how powerful our web of congregational, synodical, and church wide inter-relatedness is.

How did your synod participate? As of February 28, 2011: investments in the Mission Investment Fund by 132 individuals, 89 congregations and ministries, including the NE Iowa Synod, totaled \$7,763,410.

One congregation in this synod was supported by \$8,143,523 in Mission Investment Fund loans.

Friends in Christ, we are called to do God's work in the world – and as the ELCA, we've achieved things on a scale and scope that we could never do as a single congregation or synod. Standing together, our church – the ELCA – is known as a church that rolls up its sleeves and solves problems. . . . the church that is catalyst, convener and bridge builder!

We're called, and we're calling each other into the world. And you are doing it!

You invest in congregations, both new and renewing, in your own backyard and across the country. I began with a story about what you are doing

through the ELCA across the world. Let me conclude with a story about what you are doing in this country.

Living Stones Lutheran Church in Shelton, WA has the wonderful reputation for both excelling in ministry and wanting its members to SHRINK. Living Stones, housed at the Shelton Correctional Center is one of nine ELCA congregations serving the fastest growing population in the United States: the incarcerated.

People around the ELCA have been captivated by the story shared by Living Stones' pastor, Pastor Eric Wangen-Hoff. Pastor Eric tells of a man who sought him out wanting to be "re-baptized."

Eric recalls. "He believed that, because of his crimes and sins that his baptism was invalid. He had to have it redone. [I still can see the] look of shock, realization, and then relief ... when I told him I would not re-baptize because God does not back down from God's promises even when we fail on ours."

Eric offered him an option: not a "do-over," but a re-affirmation.

Eric continues, "I invited him to walk back to the promises God made to him so many years ago. During worship as I taught and explained what we were doing, we opened the [ceremony] up and 20 guys came forward."

You are the ELCA and you walk with sisters and brothers, down the road, but you also walk with your brothers and sisters across this country and around the world.

* * *

Brothers and sisters in the NE Iowa Synod, we do not do this work alone. We can only do this work because of you and your partnership. I ask that you continue to support the church wide ministries through your prayers, your mission support, your gifts to World Hunger, your missionary sponsorships, and your many other ministries.

I thank you for your gracious welcome, and a wish you a most Spirit-filled assembly.