

This is the first gathering of the rostered leaders of the Montana Synod in Convocation. I thank you for being here, and I look forward to a day of conversation with you. I wanted to have this opportunity to talk with you as rostered leaders, because we do not really have another forum for this conversation. Our time at Chico serves primarily another function. I covet time with you as colleagues to focus very intentionally on the future and health of the church that we love. I cherish this opportunity to be together as leaders of the Montana Synod. I am grateful to the Montana Synod Deans for encouraging me to go ahead and call a convocation, and not simply talk about it. So here we are. Thank you for joining us.

Before we get started with the meat of the day, with your conversations, I want to share with you my vision for our future. And it is hopeful. Because we are a people of hope. We are a people of vision. We are a people of the future.

Yes, the economy has taken a toll on us as individuals, as congregations, as a synod, and as the wide church. And yes the arguments on human sexuality have taken a toll on us. But they are not ultimate. And they do not define us. What is ultimate is God's love for us. What defines us is the cross. And everything else is secondary, tertiary. It's just not that important. What is important is living as if this is all true, living as if Jesus' dying on the cross was for me and for you and for the person out there who, like my friend's daughter in her Sesame Street days, pointed to a cross on a steeple and pronounced, "T." Yes, sweetheart, that is a T. But that T stands for truth. It stands for tangible. It stands for "take and eat." It stands for "Turn back, o man, forswear thy foolish ways." It stands for Trinity, for "Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son." It stands for "Take not thy holy spirit from us." It stands for thirty pieces of silver, ten commandments, twelve apostles. T.

How do we speak to that little child, whose mother grew up Lutheran, but let it lapse? How do we speak to that mother, juggling child-rearing and tenure-seeking, writing with PTA, politics with academics? We offer hope. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." When you make that accounting of that hope, it is not supposed to be in a sealed file. It is not supposed to be confidential. It is public. It is a news flash. Your hope deserves to be broadcast!

In the last year I have worn out 2 sets of tires, had more oil changes than I care to count. I've done official formal consultations in more than 20 congregations, had additional congregational and cluster meetings in almost every corner of the synod. And our synod leads the pack in the number of congregations who have left the ELCA. Churchwide staff and programs have been cut back, and more work has been given to the remaining staff in Synods and Regions. And a massive churchwide staff cut and reorganization will be announced on Monday. In our own Synod we have had to cut our budget for 2011 by 15%. Pastor Allen will be going to Antarctica in November and December to help freeze costs, and as of February 1, he will be working at .6 time. This is a vast amount of change, and it is hard to absorb. Things will have to be different.

But I am not discouraged. I am incredibly hopeful. Because God is faithful. We are finding new ways to do things. And I am asking you, as leaders, to be a part of that. I am asking you, as leaders, to take ownership of the vision of this church, and to join me in moving our church into the future.

I have 4 points:

First, that our congregations will regularly and faithfully pray, read Scripture, participate in word and sacrament as faithful Christians, lifelong learners, seekers hungry for the word. And that they wouldn't keep it to themselves. My mother, who has always avoided Bible studies as overly pious and vapid is now participating in a Bible Study in her congregation for the first time in her life. She's 86. They joined the Lutheran Church because of the adult education. And now, after more than 50 years as a choir member, church council president, actress, WELCA president, candidacy committee member, synodical social ministry committee chair, Director of the ELCA Commission for Women, she is in her first Bible Study. It's never too late.

A week ago, the ELCA Bishops and Vice Presidents were meeting, and we had a special evening to honor the Fund for Leaders in Mission. This fund, started a decade ago, now has 20 million dollars in it, and it is helping pay for seminary costs. We have our own Montana Synod Scholarship within that fund, and we are now diverting half of every offering for ordinations or installations to that fund, to try to help pay for seminary for a Montana Synod student. The major donors were there, and the token gift that Bishop Hanson gave to each was a Lutheran Study Bible. The next morning one of those donors ran into Bishop Hanson and said that he had been up most of the night with the amazing Lutheran Study Bible. He just couldn't put it down!

Prayer, scripture reading, word and sacrament—these are foundational for us. We know how to do these! These are vehicles for sharing hope! And you, as the leaders, are in a position to make a difference. You are a position to start up Bible Studies, encourage prayer groups and prayer chains, to make worship the very best it can be. We have a tradition of excellence in preaching and worship in our denomination, and we can honor that. And at the same time, we can be open to all kinds of worship with integrity, that makes sense in the local context, and that exudes hope. That's what we are about, sharing hope!

Second, that our congregations will have a clear sense of mission. Without mission we have no purpose. We are a noisy gong, or a clanging symbol. We are a social club or a service organization. There's nothing wrong with the Junior League or the Kiwanis. They're just not the church. There's nothing wrong with the historical society or the Boys and Girls Club. They're just not the church.

(In Chicago last week, when our breakfast waitress at the hotel where we were staying was having trouble with figuring out how to bill our oatmeals to the ELCA, ECLA? EALC? --and she wasn't trying to do a primer on schismatic Lutheran

groups—I jokingly said that we were with the ACLU. She brightened up with recognition and relief—those were initials she knew—and wrote down ACLU on each of our tickets until somebody straightened her out. Everybody knows it. It’s just not the church.)

In our congregational constitutions, we all say that we will adopt a mission statement from time to time. That’s a constitutional requirement. Did you know that? Take a look at your constitution. It’s actually pretty interesting. And don’t, I repeat, don’t wait until your congregation is in crisis. Years ago at the beginning of the ELCA, I was elected Synod Secretary, and I volunteered to read the congregational constitutions that were coming in to the office as a result of the merger. One, I remember, had a strange provision in it prohibiting the pastor from stealing from the congregation. When I talked to the committee who had drafted this gem, suggesting that such things were actually pretty much covered by the laws of the state of Montana, they said that may be so, but we have had our problems here. And, indeed, they have. And I can report that they do not have a pastor stealing from them, they do not have a pastor at all, and, having left the ELCA, they are not likely to get a pastor any time soon, especially if they expect a pastor who has been vetted.

Having a clear sense of mission is more than adopting a mission statement and then ignoring it. It is constantly testing and re-testing it. It is not only writing it and saying it, it is living it. A congregation without a mission is a congregation without a reason to be. Sometimes we become complacent. Sometimes we become so preoccupied with maintenance, that we forget our mission. Sometimes we have to be kicked in the butt to remember what we’re here for. We’re here for hope.

I think that what has been happening in our church and in our churches has been a kick in the butt. And it is giving us an opportunity to get rid of excess baggage, kick the dust off our feet, and go forward with hope.

One of the talking points I bring to congregations when we have a Consultation after a first vote to leave the ELCA is “What would you gain by leaving the ELCA?” I used to give them long lists of what they would lose by leaving the ELCA, and I still do that. But I want them to think about my question, “What would you gain by leaving the ELCA?” It’s a genuine question, and nobody every answers it.

Let’s look at your congregation. What would someone gain by joining your congregation? What would someone lose by not being a part of your community? Do people in your congregation have a passion for Jesus? I mean one that is visible to the naked eye, that other people could see and understand? Do people in your congregation want to share their hope with others who may not have that same hope? Has anyone ever demanded an accounting for the hope that is within them? Healthy congregations are congregations with a clear sense of mission, fuelled by hope.

You, as leaders, are in a position to challenge your congregations to work and pray and study and live a clear sense of mission, grounded in hope. You, as leaders are in

a position to work with your congregation to ascertain the needs of the community around them, and to find their unique way to offer hope.

Third, our congregations will have a clear sense of the world outside their doors. That means offering hope on the steps on the building, in the neighborhood, in the community, across the globe. You are doing that, in food pantries and soup kitchens, in quilt gatherings and world hunger offerings. And you are doing that in advocacy for the poor, the oppressed, those without a voice. Are you offering hope to those outside your doors? Find out what those in the community see. One congregation always thought of itself as poor and struggling. But they had a food pantry anyway, and they were surprised to learn that their neighbors thought they were a rich church, because they had enough to share.

When Pastor Peters and the Mission Table did a Virtual Walkabout in the Montana Synod, phoning community leaders in our 12 clusters, they asked a standard series of questions. And the most interesting finding was the answer to the question of what these unchurched or other-churched community folks wanted from the church. They wanted the church to be more involved outside their doors, more involved in community issues and problems and controversies. We can do that. We offer hope.

And you, as leaders, are in a position to help make this happen. You, as leaders, are in a position to listen to your people, both in the congregation and beyond, to help discern where the church weighs in, and if you have any questions about what you are embarking on is legal or ethical, call me. We can afford to take some risks, we who are confident in the love of Christ, who took the ultimate risk for us on the cross. We have an unlimited credit line in the currency of hope.

Last week while I was with the Bishops I read in the paper about a gay college student at Rutgers who was outed and humiliated by his roommate, and jumped off the George Washington bridge. Apparently there has been a rash of such suicides among young gay men, and my daughter sent me a challenge—What are the Bishops going to do about this? I showed it to the Bishop of New Jersey. And they were sending out prayers and talking points and information to all their congregations. It doesn't matter whether you were for or against the churchwide decisions last summer. We are not for humiliation and harassment, and we're not for suicide. We offer hope.

Maybe that's not the issue in your community. Maybe it is much-deployed guard and reserve units who come home exhausted and changed. Maybe it is native people who despair of ever finding a job or a home. Maybe it is kids who are hooked on drugs. We offer hope. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you."

When I was a teenage growing up in Pennsylvania, the only place I knew about in Montana was Rocky Boy. My congregation in Camp Hill was a mission sponsor of Our Saviour's in Rocky Boy, and I thought if we knew about it all the way in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, it must be a pretty famous place indeed. So when I moved to

Montana I was surprised that nobody seemed to know about it. How strange, I thought, that people in Camp Hill knew all about this ministry to the Reservation, when Lutherans in Montana seemed to be clueless. And then I looked into my heart, and I realized that people in Camp Hill were a lot more interested in the Native Americans in far away Montana than we were in the African Americans across the river in Harrisburg.

Having a clear sense of the world outside our doors does not exclude the world that is 2000 miles away. Nor is it limited to that. God so loved the world. Love your neighbor as yourself. Who is my neighbor? You know this. You are the leaders.

Fourth, our congregations will have a clear sense of the church outside their walls. That means the interdependent entity that is the ELCA. That means your neighboring congregations, the Synod, the ministries of the synod, the ministries of the wider church. It also means the wider church that is the body of Christ in ecumenical expression. I am grateful to all of you who filled out the survey our ecumenical intern compiled. Working together ecumenically is a vital part of the future of the church in Montana and Wyoming.

But right now I want to talk about being a part of the ELCA, the Montana Synod. A lot of congregations in our synod have asked the question in the last year, “What does it mean to be a part of the ELCA?” And, oddly enough, that has been good. When I found myself at yet another Consultation following a first vote, the Synod Council member and Dean who were accompanying me said to me afterwards, “That was really interesting. I wish you would do that in our congregations.” And I was struck with the uber-obvious. We need to be teaching this stuff about how the church operates in our healthy congregations, in our congregations that are staying in the ELCA, not just in our congregations that are leaving. Duh.

Not that we need a pedantic recital of the constitution. I’m no Lowell Almen, and I will confess freely that sometimes when I was reading congregational constitutions 20 years ago, I used them as a cure for insomnia. But constitutions have a very lively and comprehensive statement of faith and of purpose. And they list the duties of a congregation. We are not a federation of congregations who come and go as we please. We have accountabilities to one another. Prayer, mission, benevolence. One of the privileges of being a part of the ELCA is paying benevolence. And that is a responsibility of you as leaders. It is your responsibility to remind, encourage your congregation. And it is your responsibility to remind and encourage your colleagues in congregations who do not participate.

As of the Synod Assembly, we had 50 congregations who had given nothing to the Synod at all. And I found it interesting that most of the floor time on the budget was taken by people from congregations that hadn’t paid a dime. We can do better than that. I’ve started telling congregations who want to see me or John or Dave but don’t want to pay into the synod or the ELCA that they are being subsidized by that smaller congregation up the road. It’s true. And it’s not right.

A couple of weeks ago I had to sit with the Executive Committee of the Montana Synod and cut \$105,000 out of our adopted 2011 budget. Last week I sat with Bishops, and we were asked to help find a way to cut an additional \$3 million from the budget in addition to the massive staff and program cuts slated for Monday. (Phil Wold is leaving now. He's going to be part of a Church Council Conference Call to restructure and cut millions. Pray for him. And for the staff and recipients.)

We'll survive restructuring. And we'll find a new way to be the church. God is faithful. We have hope. But there is really no excuse for the radical drop in benevolence across the church. Yes, times are tough. Yes, some congregations have lost members over the churchwide decisions. But the trend across the country, regardless of position on churchwide decisions, and regardless of the economy, has been for more money to flow into congregations, and less to flow out to the synod and wider church.

You have received a packet of information on mission support. Here We Are. I encourage you to use it. You are an important part of the ELCA, of the Montana Synod, so take that seriously. Bring people to Synod Assembly, look for opportunities to serve on boards and committees, to assist in the ministry of the wider church. Find ways to take seriously our interdependence. Fill out your mission support statement of intent, and take it seriously.

You are the leaders. You have access to information about the wider church. You are in many ways the gatekeepers. Keep the gates open. Let people know about all the good things that are happening in the Montana Synod and in the ELCA. That, too is a part of the constitutional responsibility of a pastor.

These four things are my vision for the Montana Synod. I think that together we can go forward. Because God is faithful, and we have hope.