Report of the Bishop to the 2016 Montana Synod Assembly

*“O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.*

*Sing to the Lord, bless God’s name; tell of God’s salvation from day to day.”*

It is good to be here with you at the Montana Synod Assembly and Theological Conference. Thank you for coming. Thank you for being a vital part of this church. This Bishop’s Report is a kind of “State of the Synod” report. It’s about what we do together—all of us together.

I am going to start with the Synod Benchmarks. Ladies and gentleman, children and youth—meet the Benchmarks!

Benchmark 1— **Meet the future boldly**. This guides everything that we do. It gives us courage when we are fainthearted. It gives us strength when we are wary. It pushes us forward when we drag our feet. It’s why we are building a new building, and funding experimental ministries through the Mission Venture Capital Fund. It’s why we are looking at new mission start possibilities in Bozeman and Billings and Missoula. It’s why we support faith communities that will never be self-supporting—on the Fort Peck Reservation, the Rocky Boys Reservation, the Montana State Prison. It’s why we are participating in the conversation on the future of the ELCA tomorrow afternoon. Meet the future boldly.

*“O sing to the Lord a new song:”*

Benchmark 2— **Serve the world, especially the poor and those in need**. Serving others is a hallmark of Christianity. As individuals, as congregations, as a Synod, as a wider church we are about serving the world. Congregations across our synod have food banks, furniture giveaways, child care, homeless ministries. Together we support programs we couldn’t support on our own. Our synod gives generously to World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response, so that we can have an impact across the globe. Serve the world, especially the poor and those in need.

*“Sing to the Lord, all the earth.”*

Benchmark 3—**Deepen faith and witness**. This is our bedrock, what differentiates us from the many good people who help others. It is why we do what we do because it is who we are. We take our faith very seriously. Education has always been important to Lutherans. Across the church we have a publishing house that produces books and educational materials for all ages across the board. In our congregations we have Christian education, adult education, vacation Bible School and more. Our synod has 2 educational gems that are not found elsewhere in the whole ELCA. One is the Northern Rockies Institute of Theology (NRIT), creating and supporting continuing theological education and lifelong learning in the Montana Synod for decades. The other is the Lay Pastoral Associates Program, (LPA), training lay people in a variety of ways to serve in congregations in conjunction with the pastor. Deepen faith and witness.

*“Tell of his salvation from day to day.”*

Benchmark 4— **Promote unity.** At the Last Supper, Jesus prayed to his Father that his followers all might be one. We take that prayer seriously. Human brokenness keeps people apart. But the Gospel imperative is to come together. Our church has suffered brokenness in the past. We have come through some difficult times. And we are stronger. We differ in many ways. But at core we are one. We live out that unity in ecumenical coalitions, with shared partnerships in congregations, with full communion partners. Promote unity.

*“Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy.”*

Benchmark 5— **Strengthen congregations.** Much of what synod staff do is in support of congregations, so that they can carry out their ministries in the world. Whether it is working through a call process, consulting in conflict, sharing resources, giving tech help, working on mission statements, answering questions, our task is to strengthen congregations for their mission. Strengthen congregations

*“Worship the Lord in holy splendor.”*

The five benchmarks:

Meet the future boldly.

Serve the world, especially the poor and those in need.

Deepen faith and witness.

Promote unity.

Strengthen congregations.

They guide us in all that we do, together. This Assembly we focus in on the third one, Deepen Faith and Witness. Especially in tomorrow’s sessions in the Theological Conference portion of our time together, we go deeper into our faith and our heritage so that we can go broader. As we study the Reformation in the many ways that are available to us, we learn more not only about our Reformation heritage, but also about the possibilities for our future. We remember our past, and we meet the future boldly.

I’d like to talk with you for just a little while about the Synod as a whole since the last time we met, a year ago.

In this past year we have continued to meet the future boldly. One of the ways we have done that is through our excellent staff. Each staff member—Jason, George, Colter, Susan, Jenny—has been finding ways to meet the future boldly. I’ll single out one—Colter McCarty. In addition to his Administrative Assistant work, Colter goes out to your congregations, your ministries and helps you identify and accomplish what you need technologically. Got tech problems? Send Colter.

On December 1, George Karres led a group of clergy and laity to the Flathead Reservation, where we presented our Apology to the Salish-Kootenai Tribal Council, and engaged in conversation about what a true partnership might look like. We are a long way from solving the problems that our ancestors set in motion, unintentionally in many respects. But we are setting a course for the future that has integrity and humility.

Later in our Assembly, on Sunday morning, we will consider a memorial to the Churchwide Assembly, repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine is not simply an archaic 16th century holdover expressing offensive and racist views. It has been embedded into US law and is still used to deny aboriginal people their rights. You’ll meet Prairie Rose Seminole later today, as well, and learn more about what she is doing as the ELCA’s Director for American Indian and Alaska Native ministries.

And speaking of Indian Lutherans, last summer the national gathering of Lutheran Indians was in Oaks, Oklahoma. Loni Whitford Taylor, from Our Saviour’s, Rocky Boy, was elected secretary of the group, and the next national gathering will be at Rocky Boy.

For a couple of years now we have had a challenge grant available to folks who wanted to meet the future boldly with a new idea for ministry. In this last year the Mission Table has been able to grant 4—to a neighborhood outreach plan in Missoula, to the development of a teenage-outreach program at a neighborhood center in Billings, to a bookstore and coffee shop in the Flathead, to a camp youth ministry staff outreach year round to smaller congregations. Congratulations to all of you who have come up with these innovative ideas. Are you intrigued? Speak with someone from FLBC, or First English in Billings, or Faith in Ronan or Prince of Peace in Missoula. Or speak to a member of the Mission Table.

Do you want to know how you can meet the future boldly? Make a will. Seriously. Make a will. Determine how you want your assets to be distributed. Don’t assume. And there are many ministries that would appreciate your including them in your estate—including the Montana Synod. Do you want to know how to make a will, to include a ministry? Talk with Beth Adams from the ELCA Foundation.

Meet the future boldly.

We all work really hard at serving the world, especially the poor and those in need. You do so much in your congregations and communities—feeding, caring, housing, clothing, advocating. Thank you to all of you who give of your time, your resources, your space to share God’s goodness with others. Thank you to the hundreds of quilters across the synod who make thousands of quilts and send them to the world’s neediest places

through Lutheran World Relief. Thank you to Jan Martin who serves as our synod world hunger coordinator—you can go to her workshop tomorrow. And thank you to Jen Asselstine who served as our malaria coordinator, following Ellen Ayres. We made the $15 million goal across the church! Hooray! And remember to keep on giving to ELCA World Hunger as well. Our goal for this next year is $22 million.

The ministries that we support with Synod dollars focus on service—Freedom in Christ Prison Ministry, Intermountain Children’s Services, Lutheran Social Services, Our Saviour’s Rocky Boy, Spirit of Life in Poplar. And many other ministries equip people to serve—like campus ministry, outdoor ministry, the LPA program.

I want to focus this afternoon on our two companion synods. During the last year I had the opportunity to visit both our companion synods and deepen our relationships with our Lutheran sisters and brothers in the global south. The way that we do global mission in the ELCA is through accompaniment. Accompaniment isn’t mission trips where you go and do a project—something concrete—take a picture of it and leave, feeling pretty good about yourself. Accompaniment is walking together with our companion churches, listening to their stories, sharing our own, sisters and brothers in Christ, equals, equally beloved in God’s sight, equally made in the image of God, equally gifted to serve.

Our companion church in Bolivia asked us to send a group of women to visit. So last August 10 of us women from the Montana Synod went to Bolivia to meet with church members there, particularly women. The ten of us had different backgrounds, different life experiences. We were different ages and careers. But what we all had in common was that we were women. And so we sat with women, mothers of the school children, and learned to paint on fabric (and you can see the result in the display room), as we talked about children and families. And on another day we went to the Jessica Crist center on Lake Titicaca and met with Lutheran women from across the country who had come together to share stories of faith and life. And despite the language differences—Spanish, Aymara, Quechua, English—we quickly moved into deep stories of faith and life. We didn’t build any buildings while we were there. We built relationships.

Do you remember that last year's assembly offering went to help with a water project in Bolivia? A church-owned cattle farm needed to find a better way to provide water for the cattle, so that they could be used to support the children's center in Cobija. Well, we raised enough money to fund that project, with enough extra to reconnect the water in the school and church associated with the farm

Our other companion church is the Cape Orange Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa. That church is celebrating 40 years of being an independent church, and the diocese was combining that celebration with a rally focused on themes of the Reformation. They asked us to bring a delegation, and they asked that it include Colter. They were fascinated by the idea that the synod would hire a person to help the congregations with their technology. On that visit we connected with many congregations and groups, including a city-wide choir fest, and a young adult league. We were so impressed by the young adult league as a way to use the talents and energies of young adults in the church. We learned a lot from them, and are excited that they are considering a visit to the Montana Synod in the next couple of years.

More immediately, a pastor from the Cape Orange Diocese, Pastor Edwina Neurieht Letshwiti will be coming to spend 2 months with us in the Montana Synod. She’ll spend September based in Helena, and October based in Billings. We hope that a good number of you will get to meet Pastor Edwina while she is here. We will be looking to raise some funds to help with her trip. For more information, speak with Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger.

Companion Synod relationships are not only for global awareness. They deepen faith and witness all around. Deepening faith and witness is what we are all about. That’s why we are focusing on the Reformation legacy and promise at this Assembly. Because we think it will deepen our faith and witness. Thanks go to Pr. Tonya Eza and her team who have been preparing materials for you to use in your congregations as you think about the Reformation anniversary. If you aren’t aware of what is available, go to our website, [www.montanasynod.org](http://www.montanasynod.org) and click on the Luther 500 logo. You’ll find resources for kids, and for teens and adults for learning more about the Reformation.

So much of what we do is about deepening faith and witness. Since we last met in assembly, there was an ELCA youth gathering. 30,000 people gathered in Detroit for learning, service, inspiration and fun. Pastor Jason Asselstine organized 2 busloads of Montana Synod folks and created an incredible bonding among the kids on those buses. Others of us got to Detroit other ways—a total of about 250 of us. Building on the momentum, Pastor Asselstine organized a winter snow retreat, and is working on a leadership retreat. We are so pleased that our 2 camps, FLBC and Christikon are working cooperatively to provide a confirmation retreat this summer. Both camps, along with Upper Missouri Ministries in North Dakota, provide life-changing faith experiences for children and teens in our Synod.

Tomorrow morning we will recognize the graduates of the Lay Pastoral Associates Class. Thirty of them have been meeting and working for 2 years to complete their training. We are so proud of them. They serve. And there is a new class starting in the fall. Speak with your pastor, or with Pastor Jason Asselstine, who coordinates the class.

You may notice some bright bookmarks at your places. Each one has a quote, a testimonial from one of our pastors or LPA’s describing what NRIT means to them. NRIT, the Northern Rockies Institute of Theology, provided continuing education and lifelong learning to pastors (who are required to do 50 contact hours annually), LPAs (who are required to do 20) and anyone who wants to learn. NRIT is well-known and admired across the ELCA, and indeed is the only program of its kind. We are incredibly fortunate to have such a resource in our synod. It is not uncommon for a professor who has taught in an NRIT class to contact me with wonder and delight and say, “You have incredible people in the Montana Synod!” And I always agree. Education is important to Lutherans, and it is important to the Montana Synod.

Campus ministry, our outreach to the largest collections of young adults, seeks ways to accompany young adults in their lives and in their faith journeys, as they go through the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Both our public universities and our church and private colleges are places of incredible opportunity and growth for young adults. It is vital that the church be there.

Deepen faith and witness.

Let’s talk about promoting unity in the last year. That covers ecumenical and interfaith endeavors. It also covers efforts at unity in our communities and in our church. The Montana Synod is part of MAC, the Montana Association of Christians, and WAC, the Wyoming Association of Churches. Both associations work ecumenically for justice. We work with our full communion partners in the Montana Synod. This last year we had a shared Convocation with the Episcopal Church, on preaching, which was a great success. And we had a shared pastoral conference at Chico the week after Easter, with both the ELCA and Episcopal Presiding Bishops as speakers. We continue our sharing of pastors with full communion partners, and working together cooperatively. One of the ways that we will be commemorating the actual 500th anniversary of the Reformation next year will be a joint service with the Catholics in the Cathedral in Helena, October 30, 2017. Both Catholic Bishops and I will be there, and we hope to fill the place.

Promoting unity is, in part, a response to the question: “Who is my neighbor?” Whether it is seeking better relationship with the tribes, welcoming refugees of another faith background, seeking calm in the midst of heightened political tensions, there is a role for the church in promoting unity. Not long ago there was an unprecedented fire in our neighboring province to the north, Alberta. As the fire raged and tens of thousands of people were evacuated from Fort McMurray, the synods of Region 1 sent emergency fire money as a show of solidarity with our neighbors. We may be 2 different countries, and we may be 2 different churches, but we are one in Christ.

As this election year unfolds in our states and in our country, I ask for your prayers for civil discourse. And I suggest to you that this is something we have some control over. As churches we cannot and do not endorse candidates. But we can talk issues. And we can be a place where people of good will who have opposing opinions can still come together. I would like to see our churches be models to the rest of society. I would like our churches to be able to say that we have Independents and Democrats and Republicans in our congregation, and we know how to live together as sisters and brothers in Christ. We care deeply about our convictions. But we care even more deeply for each other, for our brothers and sisters in Christ. I would dearly love that.

Promote unity.

And how have we worked at strengthening congregations in the last year? We’ll, just about every day we are doing that as a staff, whether it is answering a question from a treasurer about how to get the remittance form right, to helping a pastor with disability, to working with a call committee, we are working with you to strengthen congregations.

Since our last assembly we have had 5 ordinations, adding to our cadre of new, young leaders in the Montana Synod.  Each year we bring together the pastors and Associates in Ministry in their first 3 year of ministry, for more learning—the kind you don’t get until you are out of seminary. And we give them a change to get to know each other.

Our LPAs help strengthen congregations, by providing pulpit supply and all kinds of other ways to assist congregations. The sky is the limit.

Part of our DEM George Karres’ portfolio is to assist congregations with stewardship. He also offers congregations a comprehensive ministry review. Speak with him if you are interested.

The Synod is made up of the congregations. We are stronger together than we are apart. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. We are one synod out of 65 that make up the ELCA. This summer the ELCA will meet in Assembly in New Orleans, and the 11 people elected here last year will serve as our voting members. . On Sunday we will bless them and send them forth with prayers. This year, for the first time, there will be a concurrent event for others who may with wish to be at the Assembly, but are not voting members. The Grace Gathering will give you opportunity to hear several keynote speakers and participate in a day of service as well. Later tonight we’ll hear from John Lohrmann, from the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod, who serves on the Church Council on our behalf.

Being part of the larger church expands our understanding and it expands our scope.A large part of our synod budget—40%--is passed on to the wider church, so we can accomplish things together we could never do alone. Together we can support seminaries and colleges, start new congregations in fast-growing areas, advocate for justice, train evangelists, send young adults in global mission, assist congregations in ways that we could not do alone. We may send 40% of our income to the wider church, but we also receive back. George Karres’ salary is paid entirely by that money. Hunger grants come back to our synod, as do campus ministry grants, grants for new and renewing congregations, and training, advice and consultation. Together as the ELCA we help other parts of the church to grow and thrive, and we are helped by other parts of the church to grow and thrive. Several years ago when I attended the Metro DC Synod Assembly, I thanked them for their ministry serving Oromo people, and said they were doing that on our behalf in a way that we could not. And then I told them that we were serving Chippewa and Cree people on their behalf, in a way they could not. We’re in this together.

There is a campaign going on in the ELCA, and we are designating our offering from the assembly this year to the campaign for the ELCA. The campaign's goal over all is to raise $ 200 million over 5 years. Please join me in giving generously.

I started with meeting the future boldly, and that’s how I want to end. In 1975, the Rocky Mountain District built a building that was just perfect for its needs. It’s not 1975 any more, and the building is a long way from being perfect for the synod’s needs in 2016, to say nothing of the future. Most of you know this. We’ve told you that we have the land and the building design—we’ve got the detailed drawings for a building that is on one level, is environmentally responsible and uses local materials, a building that has flexible space, expandable space, and is tech friendly. We’ve told you that we are raising money- $1.1 million, with a tithe to the Mission Venture Capital Fund. And many of your congregations have participated with creative and fun fundraisers. And many of you have given personally as well. Thank you. Because it is not about me, and it is not about the staff. It is about all of us in the Synod. It is our House, the Synod House.

And now I have an announcement. The first is that we have sold our building, our perfectly 1975 building. We didn’t think it would sell so fast, so we put it on the market in plenty of time so that we would not have 2 buildings at once. Little did we know that the perfect buyer would come along in 2 weeks, and so when our staff return from the Assembly we’ll be putting everything in boxes and moving to New Hope for a year. That’s the first announcement.

The second announcement is that we are going to have the Mission Builders come next summer to build this house. Mission Builders are ELCA volunteers who come and build. Our Redeemers in Helena has used them, FLBC has used them, Bethel in Great Falls has used them. Sue Ost, our Treasurer, is a Mission Builder and travels every summer to another site. So we are very excited that the Mission Builders are coming to assist us. And the second part of it is that we are going to assist the Mission Builders. We are? Yes, we are. And I mean we, all of us. You’ll be hearing more tomorrow from Arne Bergland who will be explaining how we will be inviting congregations from across the synod to come and help the Mission Builders for a week or more to build this house, our house, our very very very fine house. Together.

Finally, I want to thank our staff **:** Susan Hedahl, Executive Assistant, who has been on the staff since 2001, who is also an LPA and a quilter; Colter McCarty,Administrator of Information Technology, who started with us part time, and has been with us full time since August, who is also an AIM candidate, and a youth director in his congregation; Jason Asselstine , Associate to the Bishop, who commutes from Choteau, where he builds and rebuilds things, and does fun things with his wife and kids; George Karres, Director for Evangelical Mission, who roasts his own coffee beans and sings in the choir at his congregation when he is not on the road; Jenny Kunka, NRIT Director, whose also serves as a freelance writer with articles appearing in the Great Falls Tribune.

Working with these fantastic, loyal, competent, hardworking, faithful colleagues, as well as the many volunteers on the Synod Council and the boards and committees—they make it work. And I thank God for them, even as I thank God for you. Please join me in thanking our staff and volunteers.