Synod Assembly

Saturday Summaries

The Synod Assembly began the day by gathering for devotions led by Larry Stappler. During this time, the assembly recognized the LPA candidates who have finished the program this year.

Pr. John Lund, campus pastor at U of M, then spoke the importance of campus ministry. He listed some of the things that students are now doing both in school and out in the world. He stressed the impact that being part of campus ministry discussions and learning opportunities has had on their work and their future plans.

Blaine Thrasher from Luther Seminary greeted the assembly. Luther just graduated their 149th class. They have announced their Jubilee Scholarship which will provide full scholarship for all students who enter the seminary. They need students, they need people to come to the seminaries. The assembly then watched a video highlighting student perspectives at Luther.

Keynote I:

Linda Bobbitt - “Strengthen Congregations: Congregational Vitality”

Linda Bobbitt has been focusing on what are the outcomes in a church community. Not, how many people come and how much money does the church get. She wants us to look at the outcomes: How is Your Life Different Because You Come to Church?

She started doing research and found that a lot of people had been talking about this but no one had looked at the things we put a into our churches and what happens because of the things we put in.

If we don’t know what we are hoping to change, we aren’t going to be able to change it.

What is a vital congregation? Congregations that have life-changing relationships with God, with one another, and with the world. These relationships allow God to do God’s work.

She developed a survey to measure a congregation’s vitality and said that inevitably, when you give this survey to a congregation, you get people in very different places. Some think everything is going great and some think things are not good. At this point, getting people in the same room to talk is interesting. People learn from each other.

The questions from this survey are now on the annual reports for every congregation. Pastors fill them out and they now have the results from the 2016 reports. (Haven’t gotten the results from 2017 yet).

Ms. Bobbitt shared the results from the Montana reports. On a scale of 1-5, some results were:

Clear Mission 3.7

Excited about the future 3.8

Ready to try new things 3.5

Interact with the community 4.2

Positive force in community 4.3

Help people in need 3.9

Deepen relationship with God 4.2

Helping people live out faith in daily life 3.9 (This is the best indicator about how a church is doing.)

Worship nurtures faith 4.4

Equip people to share faith 3.3

When Ms. Bobbitt looks at this, she doesn’t think things are dire, but she does see room to grow. And if we know we have some room to grow, how do we go about it?

Is it about programs? Leadership? She said the foundational building blocks are:

1. Having a sense of “What is our mission” and
2. How is God present in this congregation?

These are the most important factors and they drive the culture you have in your congregation and drive the way you act in your community.

There are seasons within the church, just like in nature. There are cycles in politics, in relationships and within the church. When churches are formed, they begin with establishing their identity and everything looks solid. But ultimately the world around the church changes and there comes a time when the things they always have done aren’t working anymore and, for awhile, the church looks backward, trying to figure out how to fix things. Sometimes churches stay in this place for a long time. Churches that can re-think things, however, can move forward. But that is hard and sometimes this becomes a time of crisis. Ultimately we come to the question, “Shall we continue? And if so, why?”

Asking this question can bring about a brand new way of thinking and this thinking isn’t about “us.” It’s thinking about the other.

Vitality looks different in different season. There is the time for building. And then there is the time of letting go of who you used to be, what you initially built. And once you are free of that, God helps you imagine bringing something new that you couldn’t have imagined before.

Congregations have life cycles and they have seasons. This is normal. The times of letting go are the times when we are most open to what God might have planned for us.

Most of us understand the building time. We understand how to identify our problems and create solutions and implement. But when we get to the point where all our old solutions aren’t working, we don’t know what to do. This is a place we don’t understand. Often we have to go through a process of trying new things. And sometimes this is a long process. (The worst thing that can happen to a congregation at this time is they try something and it’s a success because then they give up on trying new things.) Often we must try a number of new things and continue being open to what God might be trying to say to us.

We can go through a discernment process:

Listen to God – Listen to each other – Listen to the neighbor

What did we hear – Reflect on what we heard

Experiment

Reflect on the Experiment

Listen again (and keep going with this process)

We are in a different time, but we need to remember perspective. This is God’s story and its been going on for a really, really long time.

We have the opportunity to be the generation that finds the new way. This is exciting. God is leading us. God has been leading God’s people throughout all of history and God continues to lead us forward.

People are coping with their lives and church is just a break. If this is what church is, we don’t really need it, there are many other places that fill this role in our society. Now church needs to go deeper into community. Creating deeper relationships between people so they become family. And, we cannot forget the spiritual piece. Our relationship with God must be deepened as well. This helps us shift from the “coping with our lives” stage and into a way of looking at the world that doesn’t only focus on ourselves. We see injustice and we see people who have needs and we come to see the world through God’s eyes and, as a place we can act.

If our church and faith is giving us life, we should be sharing this with others.

As a church can we go from a place where people are exploring Christ, to growing in Christ, to becoming close to Christ, to being Christ centered. And, of course, we are always moving back and forth along this continuum. But can we help people be moving toward being Christ centered? This is a place where they say, “My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do.”

What shall we do?

* Learn about how our congregants experience your church. (There are resources to help you do this.
* Work with the synod to go deeper
* Engage your entire congregation (leaders can’t do it alone)
* Trust God and move!

After the keynote, we heard another pop-up about the LPA program in Baker, MT. He said the LPA program has been such an interesting experience. He’s excited about all he’s learned and so excited to be part of the program. He thanked the synod for the program and thanked the churches for supporting. There is so much help and encouragement. “It is a way of worshipping God beyond the pew.”

Keynote II:

Pr. Brenda Smith – ‘Strengthen Congregations: Faith Practices”

Rev. Smith shared a song with the assembly to begin her presentation. “I Know I’ve been Changed.”

Her faith has changed her. People coming to our congregations are looking to see something different about us. Not perfect but different. People want to know, how has your faith changed you?

The five gifts of discipleship are following:

* To live among God’s faithful people
* To hear the Word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper
* To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed
* To serve all people, following the example of Christ
* To strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

Church is where we learn how to practice our faith. We learn how to love, how to forgive, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper. We can use the above list of gifts to facilitate discussion in our congregations. What do these gifts mean for us? Rev. Smith gave the assembly a handout that contained questions about the five gifts.

Rev. Smith shared resources that can help us foster faith practices:

Prayer Ideas

1. Mystery prayer partners
2. Lent and advent prayer teams
3. Prayer teams and prayer workshops
4. Praying with your neighbor at worship

Book of Faith

1. Open Scripture – Have a Bible Conversation ([www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org))
2. Bishop Eaton’s 4 Emphases
3. Connect Bible with things relevant today such as movies and books

Life of Faith Initiative (www.lifeofffaith.info)

1. How are we living our faith in daily life?
2. Do we connect our roles with living out our faith?

Story Matters

This resource combines Book of Faith, Faith Practices and Mission.

Leader’s Guide can be found in the Book of Faith section on the ELCA Website: [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)

Ask people to share their faith during worship

How have you felt God’s presence in your life in the last week?

Tell about a time of forgiveness or reconciliation. How was God involved in that situation?

Milestones Ministry ([www.milestonesministry.org](http://www.milestonesministry.org))

Offers to congregations a one-page handout for each Sunday to foster discussion in the home.

A Refresher on Baptism/Lord’s supper

Do a refresher class/sermon series.

Worship

1. Testimonies
2. Sharing of the peace
3. Connect parts of worship with daily life
4. Sermon note-taking
5. During service choose a hymn and reflect on the words (such as ELW 720)

Hospitality

1. Who is at the door welcoming people?
2. Are children welcome?
3. Updated website and church sign
4. Communion explained
5. Do we call people a visitor or guest?
6. Fellowship hour – activities in church. Can someone show new people where fellowship is and include them?
7. Clean bathrooms, place to change a diaper?

The 3 great listenings:

1. Listening to God
2. Listening to Each Other
3. Listening to the Community (How can our congregation connect our ministry with what you are doing)

Resources on ELCA website:

1. Five Gifts of Discipleship (these are abundant!)
2. Race Conversations
3. Daily Discipleship

After the keynote, the participants were asked to travel to the new synod house for a tour and dedication. This was followed by lunch.

The assembly gathered after lunch with a hymn sing. Then participants chose between a variety of workshops offered throughout the afternoon. All workshops addressed different aspects of strengthening congregations.

The day ended with a banquet held at the Heritage Inn. The banquet included time to announce ordination anniversaries, years in ministry, retirements and other celebrations.