

2018 Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly Report of the Bishop

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***“We Are Church Together: This is Our Neighborhood”
“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Luke 10:27***

Dear friends and members of the congregations and ministries of our Sierra Pacific Synod: Grace and Peace to you from Jesus who is the Christ, Amen.

Over and over in the Bible, and particularly in the Gospels, the word “neighbor” is used to describe those to whom we are called to offer our love and care. Most often, these neighbors are not the first or the easiest people we might imagine offering our support to or choosing to be with in community. Samaritans, aliens, widows and orphans, lepers, tax collectors, and a variety of sinners are lifted up as the very people we are supposed to love in the same way we love ourselves *and* God – with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. I suppose this reminder comes to us in three of the four Gospels because God knows us all too well. God knows how we are more likely to love those whom it is easy for us to love, those who seem most like us, or for those from whom we might expect to get something in return for our love.

This call from the Gospel to love our neighbor also speaks to a part of our sinful nature – our proclivity to exclude others – those whom we fear or who are different from us. There is ample evidence throughout history and, yes, in this time, of those who seek to play off our fear of the “other” – xenophobia – for political or monetary gain. We are encouraged not to

see others as our neighbors, but as those whom we should fear, or exploit for our personal gain. We are given permission to ignore the suffering of many in our neighborhoods who live in fear because of the color of their skin. We choose not to see they are far more likely to die from being killed by a police officer, or to be picked up by immigration agents while dropping their children off at school.

We are told we should fear people fleeing from wars or political persecution or gang violence or who seek a better life who seek asylum at our borders and on our shores. As long as we have food and shelter, we ignore the millions who live without adequate shelter, or food, or potable water, or who are climate refugees. Our life of comfort and ease is often directly related to the lives of others who suffer. What is the work of the church for a time such as this? I pray our time in Assembly as “church together” (and beyond these three days) will be an opportunity for us to explore what it means for us to be “neighbor” to those in our local and global neighborhood.

My first understanding of “our neighborhood” came from living at 306 Barbara Avenue in Solana Beach, then a small, idyllic coastal town of 3,000 people just north of San Diego. Because we moved there when I was three years old, this is really the first place I knew as home. Growing up in that neighborhood helped me appreciate what security, happiness, beauty, friendships, comfort, and hope would mean to me in my youth. It was the neighborhood where my school was located, where my friends lived, where I first learned to ride a bike, where my brother and I sold avocados and lemonade from the trees of our yard.

It was an idyllic time when, even as a five-year-old, I was allowed to walk alone to the Speedee Mart. I would use the proceeds of our Avocado sales to get an Icee or to go to the beach with my brother to spend summer days under the watchful eyes of the lifeguards who knew all of the kids of our neighborhood by name. That meant, of course, we had to be on our best behavior at the beach. If we did anything wrong, it would inevitably get back to our parents. But even this network of watchful eyes provided me with a comfort and security that I was not able to appreciate at the time.

Truth be told, I would not mind having such a network of watchful eyes in place for our eight grandchildren in the communities in which they live, because this is a very different day and age. I wonder, what is the role of the church in providing this “safety net” for ALL of the children who live in our neighborhoods?

My formative years were also a time when our neighbors across the street built a bomb shelter, when we had regular “duck and cover” nuclear attack drills in school, and when Atlas missile launches from Vandenberg Air Force Base would sometimes light up our evening sky. New people moved into our neighborhood as friends moved away, and the “rules” for how my brother and I could roam freely began to change. As I grew older, I began to get a sense from my parents that “our” neighborhood and “our” nation felt less secure. In some ways, that brought about a protective response to try and keep our neighborhood as safe as it had been perceived to be. In other words, mostly white, middle class, and with people of similar political leanings to those of my parents.

The lessons I learned from those changing times that defined “our neighborhood” have taken some time to unlearn. In many ways, I am still unlearning them. I do not believe I am alone on this journey; perhaps you have been on a similar journey if you are of a similar “vintage” to me. Acknowledging how White Privilege, racism, sexism and gender bias, economic injustice, the Doctrine of Discovery, abuse of the environment and the impoverishment of most of the people and lands of the Third World that provided for the ease and comfort of my idyllic upbringing has been a long, painful process. I confess there are times when confronting my complicity in the sufferings of others has seemed so overwhelming that I wished I could simply retreat back into that neighborhood of my youth and pretend I don’t know what I now know.

But denial only deepens my guilt and my complicity and does nothing to address the very real concerns confronting the people of neighborhoods in our country and world *today*. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to name and confront the sin of our own complicity in the suffering of many in today’s world. It must be named. It must be courageously and faithfully transformed into active engagement with the powers of this world that

attempt to seduce us with assurances that are nothing more than “false security and illusory hope.” (From the Rite of Ordination – charge to the newly ordained.) We have allowed ourselves to be seduced by assurances that wealth and power will provide security and happiness, even if our gains come at a cost that is life threatening to most of the rest of the world. We are beguiled to believe the false security of building walls at our borders will keep us safe. We are enticed to an illusory hope that resorting to violence and war will somehow bring about peace.

Do we trust the redeeming love of Jesus will transform our hearts and minds and souls and strength to be church together and serve as we have been called to serve – to truly love God and others as we love ourselves? Christ’s words, “You *shall* love” declare not only a command, but a future reality we are called to fulfill. That time is now. For such a time as this we are called to be church together for the sake of the world. We are called to look faithfully and fearlessly at the needs of those around us. With the encouragement of the Spirit of Christ, we are called to imagine with boldness a response that demonstrates how God’s love in Christ shines even more brightly in the darkest and most fearful of times. This is what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we often speak of doing God’s work with our hands. Every three years, high school youth from all over the country gather in places like New Orleans, or Detroit, or Houston (where about 250 of our synod’s youth and their adult sponsors will be in June) to go to work in the neighborhoods of the cities where we are gathered. Many of our congregations offer the chance for their youth to go on “urban plunge” trips in our cities or to build houses in Mexico or other places. These experiences are transformative for our youth. Perhaps your life was transformed by attending a youth gathering or an urban immersion experience in your formative years. Mine was. But it is not only youth and young adults whose lives are changed through such service. It is all of us! In September of each year, on “God’s Work, Our Hands” weekend (God’s Work Our Hands Resources), we call youth and adults in our congregations and ministries to consider how they will immerse themselves in the communities they serve through work projects and acts of charity.

In some places, these experiences have prompted ongoing connections and relationships between congregational members and the people of the neighborhoods where many of our congregations have been offering a witness to Christ for 50, 60, 70 years or more. Sometimes, these are the first substantive connections that have been made between congregations and neighborhoods in many years. Neighborhoods which have changed much in these years. Neighborhoods that are in many cases much more diverse in their makeup than our congregations are. Neighborhoods with youth and young adults and people who could add much to the depth and strength of our witness and service. Can we, will we, change our willingness and ability to see people we have overlooked or seldom noticed? Can we, will we offer an open door, a “welcome mat” to our neighbors that is more than offering service one weekend per year to the people Jesus described in Matthew 25 as those in whom we are called to see the very presence of Christ? People Jesus calls us to love in the same way we are called to love God – with all our heart and our soul and our strength.

In the backdrop of all these questions about our work and witness, a good number of our 192 congregations in northern Nevada and northern California are facing serious questions about the sustainability of their ministries. As our synod staff have visited with you, we have heard your concerns and your hopes for the future of the ministries you have loved and served for many years. In the last 40 years or so, most of our congregations have become smaller and older, with fewer resources of people and money and time to offer programs and ministries that were once a part of a vital witness that drew people into a walk with Christ. Some of our congregations are no longer able to support the full-time call of a pastor to serve with them. During this same period, we have become what the Pew Research Group calls “The Whitest denomination in America.” I do not believe these two trends are unrelated.

I believe the decline of our denomination is due largely to our lack of agility to reflect the diversity of the amazing mission field – our neighborhood – where God has placed us. I also believe our calling now is to trust that God trusts us with this great challenge – to overcome our

fears and our failings to be the present and future fulfillment of Christ's command to us – "love your neighbor as yourself." Institutional racism and a lack of cultural competence and humility have been tantamount to putting out an "unwelcome mat" by the door of our sanctuaries. Sanctuaries where people are longing to experience Christ's welcoming embrace, an embrace that we are called to offer. No easy work, this, but then, nothing worth doing is ever easy.

Quite honestly, this hard work may be a way for us to finally admit that without the transforming love of Christ, we cannot do this ourselves. We need the Spirit's nudge, empowerment, gifts and graces to do the hard work of seeing our neighbors and neighborhoods as Christ sees all of us – in love and mercy and grace. It reminds me of the words of the Hymn "Spirit of Gentleness:"

*Spirit, spirit of gentleness. Blow through the wilderness, calling and free.
Spirit, spirit of restlessness. Stir me from placidness. Wind, wind on the sea.
You call from tomorrow, You break ancient schemes,
From the bondage of sorrow The captives dream dreams;
Our women see visions, Our men clear their eyes.
With bold new decisions Your people arise.*

Recently, I heard Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary speak to the Rocky Mountain Synod as they gathered in Assembly. At one point during her talk on the theme "For the Life of the World," she asked this question: "What if being a neighbor means taking a stand? To advocate, to seek justice and peace – even if it means we are being called into controversy?" (Keynote Address, Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly, May 4, 2018) It's a similar question I have been wrestling with in my call to serve you, even before I was elected ten years ago to serve as your bishop. I have sometimes been asked what I would do to help congregations that are "dying." My response has been this:

"If you're asking me to "fix" these congregations, that's not our policy or practice – the Lutheran Church doesn't invest bishops with that kind of

authority. But what I can do is to encourage you to go out into your neighborhood and community, to seek out people and leaders of the community you serve and ask one question, “If you could tell a church to do one thing that would make a difference in our community, what would it be?” Then, take all the answers you receive and pick the hardest one – because it’s likely that’s where the Holy Spirit is hiding, waiting to encourage you in this challenging work. Let it be known that you are a congregation that is willing to risk everything to love and serve your neighbors, or to die trying. That’s a witness I’m thinking more people would want to know something about.”

I hope and pray we will continue to answer the call to be church together — willing to risk our very existence for the sake of our neighbors, knowing that this might well stir up some controversy as we advocate for peace and justice in Christ’s name. May the Spirit of the living Christ empower us to love, and be loved, by our neighbors.

Thank you for the privilege of serving with you as the bishop of our Sierra Pacific Synod. Blessings in your lives and ministries!

Peace,
Bp. Mark