



And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ...Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” – Matthew 14

+Bishop Jon V. Anderson

When we were preparing for the birth of our third child, I came home one day to find a small picture frame with three places for pictures – two pictures already in it. On one side was a picture of our daughter, Laura, and the other had a picture of our son, Sean. In the middle space in the yellow frame was a drawing of a little baby. As I picked it up to look at it, Robyn said, “That is going to be my focal point during the coming labor.” Today is the anniversary of a false labor trip to the hospital, but our daughter, Cate, was born three days later. As Robyn went through the pain of the final days of her pregnancy, labor, heavy contractions, and then the hard work of pushing, she used this image to keep her focus until our new daughter was born. What you focus on really matters.

God’s church is always in labor as God calls us beyond what we have been and to become what God needs us to become to serve the Gospel of Jesus in our time and contexts. Our focal point is the cross. It reminds us of our world, our church’s and our self’s brokenness. Sin turns us in on ourselves. Our alienation from God and one another takes the form of personal sin and communal or structural forms of sin. The cross reminds us God will not leave us there trapped in alienation and brokenness. The cross reminds us to trust in God’s resurrecting grace which always labors to save us.

As we look back through last year, we are grateful for our generous God's presence and guidance through many events (including observing the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation), opportunities, and challenges. We are thankful for the generosity of so many people who gave an offering of themselves to sustain congregations that feed and grow Christ followers. We are thankful for the work we have been able to do because of extra-mile giving toward our **Embrace God's Mission + Equip God's People Funding Initiative**. We are thankful for the completion of our match, setting free our **Ministerial Excellence Fund's** resources to free pastors and equip lay people to live healthier financial lives. I am thankful for the support of our committees and boards that work together to move forward our synod's ministry and mission. I am thankful for the sacrificial service of your synod's staff.

My word for the year is "focus." In addition to the cross, as a synod we are called to remember to focus on the two pillars of the reformation. First is God's undeserved gift of justification that we know in Christ Jesus. God labors to save us as a gift of grace and makes us God's people. The second pillar is vocation. God calls us and sends us as God's children into particular vocations as the baptized, as congregations, as a synod, and as a church body. What are your personal vocations? What are your congregations' vocations? What are our shared vocations as people called to be synod "on the road together"? I give thanks to God for all the ways you offer yourselves in loving response to God's calls.

We have begun something called "The Listening Project 2.0" to evaluate our work together and to dream together about your synod's future as we seek to live our vocations to Embrace God's Mission + Equip God's People. We are gathering in small groups to share our stories about serving God's Story.

One part of that vision is to work together and walk together as God calls us to "**Deepen Congregational Vitality.**" This begins with the faith lives of our people and all the people our congregations have contact with as we serve our local mission fields. We continue to lift up Jesus' call to "go and make disciples." In the past year your synod staff has worked hard to evaluate and redevelop sustainable mission-focused partnerships across our synod. We have used assessment tools to provoke conversations about mission and ministry, engaged in deep listening, and invited communal discernment of God's callings. As a church body, synod, congregations, and individuals, we are called to listen to God, to our neighbors in our community, and one another. We trust God's Holy Spirit will guide and lead us as we act, evaluate, learn, plan, and act again to move forward God's work.

That discernment leads to questions about how we might "**Enhance Local and Global Mission.**" The hard truth is that we cannot do everything, but we can sing a hymn of praise to our gracious God and Lord Jesus with what we do choose to do. First and foremost, we need to encourage people to live out their baptismal calling to be ministers of Christ as they live out the many callings of their lives as children, neighbors, workers, citizens, etc. We also believe one of your synod's callings is to engage physical and spiritual hunger. God calls us to feed people. To address hungers, we need to become more competent at engaging diversity. We will be working with a tool called the Intercultural Development Inventory to help people learn to engage with people who are different than we are. There are differences of economics, education, cultures, race, ethnicity, and spirituality where we can learn to dance more freely to serve the Gospel. God is calling us to develop courage and capacity to work to end racialization and racism. In our culture, we need to become more comfortable loving and understanding people of other faiths. In our increasingly secular culture, we also need to learn how to love and engage people with no explicit faith. Finally, our church body will be having a conversation around its proposed social statement on justice and women.

Finally, we are called to “**Develop Servant Leaders.**” This begins with equipping and encouraging the ministry of all the baptized. All of us are ordained in our baptisms to serve God in our everyday lives. This does not mean serving only in your congregations, but we also need to equip and grow leaders to sustain and enhance the ministry and mission of our communities of Jesus. We live in a time when the decline in people entering seminary, paired with the large number of retirements coming, are creating clergy supply and shortage issues. Proactively, we have been engaging in new work to invite candidates to consider ministry and deepen our synod’s “culture of call.” We also are working to equip people for ministry through a variety of projects made possible by our Funding Initiative and your congregations’ mission support. We are learning as we equip lay preachers, youth ministers, and other folks who can deepen the faith lives of our communities of Jesus and all God’s people. Our ongoing work to develop the gifts and capacities of our current pastors, staff, and elected lay leaders also has to be sustained.

I am grateful for those who have served in our ministry team during the past year. I am thankful for Synod Council members, boards, committee and team members. We are missing the gifts of Caitlin Kodet. Pr. Kirk Meseck and Pr. Ted Kunze left our team of conference ministers to serve in other ways. We are excited to welcome Maggie Berggren, serving on our staff part-time, as well as new conference ministers, Pr. Dwaine Bruns and Pr. Stephen Rasmusson. The synod is more than the staff and governance system. Your synod lives because of the cooperation, support, and collegiality of our rostered ministers and congregations. Thanks for building up your synod.

We also will consider applying for a second Lilly grant to sustain our programs to address the economic challenges of our pastors so that we might also address the economic challenges of our congregations and households more effectively. To fuel change, we need to manage resources of all kinds wisely. Thanks for your and your congregations’ generosity.

Like Jesus encouraged his disciples not to be afraid in the storm, Jesus encourages us not to be afraid of the storms of our lives and our times. God is calling us to get out of the boat...to trust in him more strongly than we fear the storms. Like Peter, we can trust that he will save, lead, and guide us.